

This past Easter Sunday, a pastor of a mega-church in Texas announced that they were working with a non-profit organization called RIP Medical Debt, and that together, they were going to eliminate the medical debt of 4,229 people.

The church personally donated \$100,000 to this cause.

Since the initiative was announced last Sunday, they've raised over \$15.5 million to help eliminate the medical debts of people in the Carrollton, Texas area.

I tell you this story because today's scripture says that there was not a needy person among the disciples of Jesus.

They all sold their possessions, and distributed the money as people needed it, so that nobody suffered.

Now, this might lead us to think that the first communities after Jesus' death and resurrection were some kind of utopian ideals in which everyone lived together harmoniously, there was never any squabbling or disagreements or power struggles.

It sounds like they all sold their possessions, put their money in a big pile and spent in ways that took care of everyone.

It would make sense for you to think that, because that's what today's text makes it sound like.

But the truth is probably more nuanced than that, as it always is.

I think that peacefully living together and sharing all their resources may have been their goal, but I also think that they weren't as good at achieving it as today's story might lead us to believe.

Here's why.

There are 2 stories in the Book of Acts that are immediately after the text that we heard today.

The first story is about a man who did what was right.

He was a Levite man named Joseph, but the disciples named him Barabas.

The story says that he sold a field that belonged to him, then laid the money at the disciples' feet (Acts 4: 36-37).

All was well in the community.

But the next story is about a couple that did not do what was right.

Their names were Ananias and Sapphira.

This is how their story goes... Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property.

But without his wife's knowledge, he kept some of the proceeds for himself and only gave a part of the money he earned to the disciples.

Now, somehow Peter knew that Ananias kept some of the money for himself, and so he asked Ananias,

“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?

While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?

How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?

You did not lie to us but to God!” (Acts 5: 3-4)

After Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died.

Great fear seized all who heard what happened.

Young men then came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. (Acts 5: 5-6, paraphrase)

I think these two stories are in the text to show people examples of how to, and not to, behave.

The story about Ananias and Sapphira is presumably in the Bible because people did keep money for themselves.

And the author of this text might have used some scare tactics to encourage people to obediently give their resources for the good of the group, lest they fall down and die.

Now, at this point you might be thinking that I am going to preach to you all about the benefits of what appears to be something along the lines of socialism,

and that I am going to try to encourage you to sell more of your possessions and give the money to the church.

You would be mistaken.

If you are already so generous as to be inclined to sell your things and give the money to the church, you already know the benefits of doing such a thing, you don't need me to convince you.

If you are not inclined to do that, then no amount of my preaching about it will convince you otherwise, so, no I am not going to spend my time up here making the case as to why we should be a little socialist community.

I am, however, going to remind you that the job of the church is to be a channel for God's power in our world, such that we change people's lives in pragmatic, tangible ways.

We might not be able to pay off everyone's medical debt in our town, but we do what we can on our own scale.

This story reminds us what our priorities need to be.

We are at our best when we are living out God's love through helping and serving each other.

When we do collections for On the Rise or the Wish Tree or the Lowell Transitional Living Center,

when we have the In Gathering, when we volunteer at Rosie's Place,

each Sunday when we have red wagon and collect things for the food pantry,

when we drop off food or flowers for someone who is elderly or who is recovering,

when we collect money for gloves or to help with disaster relief,

when we support the Global Leadership Community in Uganda,

when we spend money from the Deacon's Fund to help pay someone's bills,

when we donate the knitted items that our Crafters for a Cause make,

when our Confirmation class makes disaster cleanup kits to send to Church World Service.

This is when we are at our best.

Now, I don't want to discount our communal worship every Sunday.

This is essential to our life together as well.

This is our foundation, where we are reminded of who we are and whose we are.

It is here that our spirits are filled, our worries are stilled, we are reconnected to our God and each other.

It is in here that we worship, which inspires us to go out there and serve.

We wouldn't be a community that was able to serve others without our worship together, so it is essential to our serving the world.

But.

If we just worshipped, if we didn't serve, we wouldn't be fulfilling our calling as Christians to care for one another, as today's text says.

All that being said, there is still a problem, and that problem is all the things that we, as a church, get distracted by.

The church is not only about black or red hymnals, it's not only organized committees, it's not just about having a well-trained choir or an extensive membership roster.

And, believe it or not, it's not just about fundraisers.

Those things are all elements of our life together, I'd argue some more essential than others, but I hope they're all helping us fulfill our calling of being a channel for God's love and power in this world.

I hope those things help us change lives, help us tell people that they are beloved and that they matter.

If something doesn't serve the purpose of sharing the Gospel message of Jesus Christ by tangibly changing people's lives,

either their emotional, spiritual, or financial states, then I am not sure that we need to be doing that thing.

We are wired for generosity.

I know this because I know that it feels better to give than to receive, which I am sure you all know as well.

Those people who are not generous have become disconnected from their true selves.

We know that seeing someone else thrive or feel better and knowing that something we did contributed to their improvement, that feeling is indescribable.

This is, in part, why I am committed to forming this Community Engagement Group.

The truth is that we have a lot of talent, energy, social connections and resources in our church.

It might not always feel like it, but we do.

And another truth is that we love this community that we are a part of.

I think we could be doing better by the community by identifying what some of our practical needs are, then prayerfully discerning which ones we feel called to respond to.

I want to create more of those opportunities to serve and help others, right here in our town, because if you are driving around, it might not, at first glance, look like the needs are there.

But they are.

And I want us to figure out what they are so we can help bring our community to a place where nobody needs for anything.

I know it's a lofty goal and we'll probably never get there, but we can do that much more to improve the quality of life for those who share our community.

You see, some people are like Ananias and Sapphira, who wanted to keep for themselves.

Some people are convinced that they deserve more, and the more they have the happier they'll be.

Society tells us that what we earn is ours to hoard, and some people buy into that.

However, the writer of the Gospel of Acts got some of his wisdom from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, which says that "When God blesses you in your land, there will be no needy person among you." (15:4)

And that was written in the 7th century BC!

People that long ago knew that we are called to live in community, and to care for one another.

May we, as this community of faith, never waver from our calling to make the world a better, more just and peaceful place for all people.

Amen.