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Easter 2B – Apr. 7, 2024

The Power to Belong - Power Points of Life series

Acts 4:32–37

In some churches, before you become a full member, you must publicly make a full profession of faith. It can be a very anxious time, especially if you're young person. The story is told of a young man of 11 who did such a thing. His mother doubted he was old enough to know what he was doing.

A few skeptics seemed sure he was not sincere. However, as they say, the proof was in the pudding, as 49 years later, he is still an active Christian. He still loves Jesus and believes that the local church is God's best hope for humanity.

One of the impacts that belonging to a church can do is inspire you. In Acts 4:33, we hear what the testimony of the disciples accomplished: "With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord." We remember that on Pentecost 3,000 people were added to the church. The resurrection of Jesus was incredible; the power of the resurrection, demonstrated in the early church, was unimaginable.

Who could've guessed it? That little band of believers had no building, no budget, no band or keyboardist. No marketing plan, but they managed to win the world for Christ. They had no political power, personal prestige or great persuasive ability.

None of that mattered because they had one thing: they had the Risen Savior. In their Risen Savior, they had victory. They had such a passion in their hearts that they could not be stopped. They had a commission from Jesus that neither they, nor those who followed them, could be ignored.

Have you never heard of a church beginning in a small place like a funeral home, or even a home, that grows to bring thousands of people to Jesus? We need many more such entrepreneurs in the church. The church has become a great institution. Unfortunately, not everybody feels the need to be institutionalized.

Sometimes, people see the church as a great society. The problem is, we have so many more social obligations than we can ever hope to fulfill. We can develop all sorts of programs, but the church needs to be something more than just a place to do nice things. Very few people need to be taught to do ceramics or take a ski trip by the church.

In this 21st-century, I believe what the church needs is a fresh vision of the Risen Savior. We need the power of the resurrection to touch lives and transform lives. We want to reclaim our viewpoint that Jesus saves. 1. The church is called the Body of Christ, but this body needs the parts to function together.

Perhaps you've heard this quote by St. Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

The little boy, who made his profession at 11, never thought he could be anything more than a toenail or an eyelash in the Body of Christ, but even then, he knew he wanted to be whatever God wanted him to be. In those 49 years, he discovered what God wanted him to be, a pastor.

2. So, what happens when we become part of a church? Belonging to a church unites us. Here's how Acts 4:32 describes it, "And all the believers were one in heart and mind." When people first came to the New World, "self-reliant" was the watchword for them. These pioneers, with ax and rifle in hand, came to claim the land that the national government was giving to those who were willing to move west and homestead a bright new future.

Thousands of former city dwellers went west to wander in the wide, open spaces where the deer and the buffalo roamed. They were an individualistic group. They built their mud huts smack dab in the middle of their newly claimed property. Many of them celebrated being free at last, but they weren't free at last, not really.

Pretty soon they came to see their new found freedom as a prison. They were isolated from each other, so they began to move closer to one another. They would find a corner of where their properties touched and build their houses, perhaps four families together, so they could, at least, share their lives.

They also shared their joys and sorrows; their abundance and needs. Those groups of houses grew into towns and cities, some of them becoming great cities. Perhaps, as Barbra Streisand sang many years ago, we learned that "people, people who need people are the luckiest people in the world."

In the year 2000, Robert Putnam wrote a book, entitled "Bowling Alone." In the book he discussed a radical change that has happened in the United States. For the first 65 to 75 years of the 20th century, the social fabric of America revolved around the social fabric of joining. People joined things like Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions Club, PTA and many other civic organizations, along with the church.

Most of those groups are now in decline. In addition, the number of families eating dinner together each night or inviting friends over have declined also, leading to more decline in our social fabric. We're reverting to our inherent nature, getting and keeping.

In his book, Putnam points to four areas that he believes had the greatest impact on our society to create this situation: pressures of time and money, mobility and sprawl, TV and generational differences. These changes have led to an isolationism. We have become people who live cocooned lives, tethered to entertainment centers, barricaded behind electric alarms and isolated from one another, even in our own homes.

3. The problem is, God did not make us to live in isolation from each other. Very early in the Bible, God declares, "It is not good for a man to be alone." Perhaps, we can rephrase that, "It is not good for people to be alone." We are created for community. Paul said, "In Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for all you who were baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ." Just think how much that must've sounded radical in the first century where slavery was rampant or perhaps in the 21st century, where women and people of color, still struggle for equal rights in society and the church.

4. What makes unity possible? In the church, the answer is always the same, the grace of God. In Acts 4: 33 we hear, "And much grace was upon them all." Where grace abounds, it's no longer about me, where grace abounds, nobody has to be perfect. Where grace abounds, position is eliminated. Where grace abounds, differences are accepted. Where grace abounds, God is glorified. 5 Where grace abounds, unity is not just possible, it is achieved.

As we become part of the church, the Body of Christ, we recognize that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Our inherent nature is to only care about self. Perhaps you remember me talking about getting and keeping in Lent? It's all about it being mine.

Becoming a Christian opens our eyes to the reality that it's about more than me. As Teresa of Avila said, we are the hands and feet of Jesus, helping to accomplish His mission, that all people would come to know Him and His love. We can't do that on our own. We need others to work with to help us accomplish that mission. That's God's plan. We're all part of it.

When I was growing up, and many of you like me, the great bogeyman of the free world was communism. This verse, Acts 4: 44, made many people uncomfortable: "All the believers were together and held everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." I can't tell you how many times I heard pastors saying that was not about being communist, which they were correct, but not quite right way in the way they thought of it.

Communism said, "What's yours is mine, I can take it." But the fellowship of the Body of Christ says, "What's mine is God's, let's share it." Sharing was not a matter of legislation or coercion; it was a matter of love and liberty. When the church in Jerusalem, primarily made up of former Jews, fell

under hard times, it was the churches around them, made up of former gentiles, that came to help them, becoming the hands and feet of Jesus for them.

The interesting thing is, the church gained quite a reputation around helping. In 366 A.D., Pagan Emperor Julian the Apostate hated Christians. He stripped them of their rights and fed their bodies to the lions. But even Julian had to admit, "these godless Galileans, feed not only their poor, but ours as well." Might that we gain such a reputation of caring in our time.

Goodness is more than what we don't do. Goodness is what we do do. Goodness is more than denial. It is delight in helping others. Goodness is more than resisting; it's resourcing the needs of others. 6. Goodness creates and embraces that the needs of all were met in the church.

Soon after that young boy joined his church, a missionary came asking that they might give an acre of land or an animal so that some child in Africa might have something to eat, and maybe get an education.

The little boy didn't have an acre of land, and he didn't know anything about Africa, but he was in the rabbit business. He kept them in cages, and sold them for a dollar to any neighbor who would buy one. The time came to make a pledge. He signed up one of the rabbits for the cause.

At least for a while, the early church was what we aspire to be, a resurrection–powered community of faith, committed to meeting the needs of people. On the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, may we continue to always be disciples who care for those in need, that truly is what being "Everyday disciples – Sharing Christ, Changing lives!" really means. Many times, the lives that are changed are not just those we help, but our own, when we are in Christ!

Count me in: Will you seek a way to help someone that will create unity between you?