

THE POWER POINTS OF LIFE  
"THE POWER TO BELONG"  
ACTS 4:32-35

DR. J. HOWARD OLDS  
April 23, 2006

At the tender age of 11, I stood before a crippled preacher in a tiny country church, professed my faith in Jesus Christ and became a full member of that congregation. My devout mother doubted I was old enough to know what I was doing. A few skeptics seemed sure I was not sincere. That was 49 years ago. I still love Jesus and I still believe the local church is God's best hope for humanity. So on this Sunday that we have set aside for membership and confirmation, I want to talk about the power of belonging.

**BELONGING TO A CHURCH INSPIRES US**

*"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Verse 33).*

If the resurrection of Christ from the dead was incredible, the power of the resurrection demonstrated in the early Church was unimaginable. Who could have guessed it? That little band of early believers had no building, no budget, no band, no marketing plan, but they managed to win the world for Christ. They had no political power, no personal prestige, no great persuasive ability, but none of that mattered. They had a risen Savior. They had victory in Jesus. They had passion in their hearts that could not be denied. They had a commission from Christ that could not be ignored

The fastest going United Methodist Church in America today is named the Church of the Resurrection. For Adam Hamilton and that great congregation in Kansas City, Resurrection is more than a name. It's the name of the game. It's their purpose for being. It's the driving motivation behind every ministry. What started in a funeral home is now bringing thousands of people new life. Our denomination needs to learn something from churches like that.

We are a great institution, but not everybody feels the need to be institutionalized yet. We are a great society of people, but most modern people have more social obligations than they can ever hope to keep. We develop great programs, but church is more than nice things to do. Who needs a risen Savior to conduct a ceramics class or take a ski trip? Anybody can do that. What the Church needs is a fresh vision of a risen Savior. We need the power of the resurrection to touch hearts and transform lives. We need to reclaim our message that "Jesus Saves."

The Church is now the Body of Christ. You are the hands and shoulders, knees

and toes of the risen Christ. That little poem I memorized as a kid is so right:

“Christ has no hands, but our hands to do His work today.  
He has no feet, but our feet to lead others in His way.  
We are the only Bible the careless world will read.  
We are the sinner’s gospel; we are the scoffer’s creed.”

As a little 11-year-old kid, I never thought I could be anything more than a toenail or an eyelash in the body of Christ, but even then I knew I wanted to be whatever God wanted me to be.

### **BELONGING TO A CHURCH UNITES US**

*“And all the believers were one in heart and mind” (Verse 32).*

When the Europeans first migrated to this country, “self-reliant” was the watchword. The pioneer with his axe in one hand and rifle in the other was a national hero. The government gave away sections of land in the West to anyone who would move there to homestead it. Thousands of former city dwellers went West to wander in the wide open spaces where the deer and the buffalo roamed. They built mud huts smack dab in the middle of their newly claimed property. They were free at last, but not really. Pretty soon they came to see their new-found freedom as a prison. They moved their homes to a common corner, where four families, at least, could share their lives and deaths, their joys and sorrows, their abundance and needs. Barbara Streisand was right, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.”

Affluence has led Americans to a new isolationism. Robert Putnum in his book Bowling Alone reports that over the last 25 years, civic club memberships are down 58%. Families eating together have dropped from 50% to 34%. Inviting friends over to your house has dropped 45%. We have quickly become a generation of people who live cocooned lives, tethered to our home entertainment systems, barricaded behind our electronic alarms, isolated from one another even in our own homes.

The Bible says *“It is not good for people to be alone”* (Genesis 2:18). We are created for community. John Wesley said, “If your heart is with my heart in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, take my hand.” Paul said, *“In Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”* (Galatians 3:28). Can you comprehend the radical nature of that statement in the 1<sup>st</sup> century where slavery was rampant, or the 21<sup>st</sup> century where women still struggle for equal rights in the Church?

What makes unity possible? The grace of Jesus Christ! *“And much grace was upon them all”* (Verse 33).

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.  
Where grace abounds, unity is possible.

### **BELONGING HELPS US HELP OTHERS**

*"There were no needy people among them" (verse 34).*

In the church of my childhood, preachers were afraid of this scripture. It sounded like socialism. It reminded people of communism. Preachers liked to remind people that this communal experiment failed and churches throughout the region wound up taking up love offerings for the Mother Church of Jerusalem. Oh, how culture shapes our interpretation of scripture!

Communism says, "What's yours is mine, I'll take it." Koinonia says, "What's mine is God's, let's share it." Sharing here was not a matter of legislation; it was a matter of love and liberty.

From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the Apostles' feet. There was no April 15, deadline on these transfers and it was certainly not considered to be an inheritance tax. If some of you were smart, you would do the same thing with your assets. Let the Church have it before the government takes it.

So the early Church gained a reputation of caring for the needy. In 363 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." Oh, that we might gain such a reputation among the pagans.

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 another. Goodness creates, embraces, and includes to the extent that there was not a needy person among them.

Shortly after I joined that little church of my childhood, a missionary came asking us to give an acre or an animal that some child in Africa might have something to eat and maybe get an education. I didn't have an acre of land. I'd never been out of Kentucky, and certainly didn't know anything about Africa. But I was in the rabbit business. I kept them in cages, fed them morning and night, and sold them for a dollar to any neighbor who would buy one. When the time came to make a pledge, I signed up one of my rabbits for the cause.

Sometimes I think people hesitate to join a church, because they don't want the church to get into their pocketbook. The church can become obsessed with money instead of ministry. The day I offered one of my rabbits to the Lord was one of the happiest days of my life.

For a while at least, 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 make disciples.