

## LIFE TOGETHER

Acts 1: 6–14

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### THE MOST IMPORTANT INSTRUMENT

I've probably told this story to you before, but it's one of my favorites—and like all good stories, it bears retelling.

John Philip Sousa is known primarily as “The March King” for his military and patriotic music, especially his marches: *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, *The Washington Post*, *Semper Fidelis*, and *The Liberty Bell*. In his own time, however, he was known mostly as a conductor.

Sousa began studying violin and music theory as a small child, and he took to it with unusual enthusiasm. When he was 14, his father enlisted him in the Marine Corps as an apprentice in the Marine Corps Band, where he played cornet. He left the Marines and their band in 1875 at the age of 21 to study conducting. From 1880 until his death, he focused exclusively on conducting and composing. He eventually rejoined the Marine Band and served for 12 years as its director.

After leaving the Marine Band, Sousa organized his own band and toured the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe. It was during this period that he invented the sousaphone—a tuba designed to be carried in a marching band. At the outbreak of World War I, he was commissioned as a lieutenant commander and led the Naval Reserve Band in Illinois. After his service, he returned to conduct the Sousa Band until his death in 1932.

This story allegedly happened at the height of his career. I don't know if it happened exactly this way, but I know that it's true.

A reporter once asked Sousa which instrument in the band was the most important. It was a fair question. Sousa had called the bass drum the heartbeat of the band, he had invented the sousaphone, and he himself was a virtuoso cornet player.

So, the reporter was surprised when Sousa, after a moment's thought, pointed to the director's baton in his hand and said, “This. This is the most important instrument in the band. Without this, it's just noise being played by thirty individuals. This brings all that noise together and turns it into music.”

This morning we ask: **What is the baton that brings Christians together and turns their noisy lives into the music that pleases the ear of God?**

### MAKING UNITY HAPPEN

Rarely does a group of people spontaneously come together as a cohesive unit. Cohesion takes hard work, a shared vision and purpose, lots of practice, and a whole heap of prayer. Even with all that, sometimes it still doesn't happen. But when it does,

there's nothing quite like the feeling of power that comes from knowing you are part of something bigger and more real than you could ever be on your own.

Athletes sometimes experience it. Maybe you're playing shortstop and the ball comes to you. Without thinking, you snag it and toss it to where you instinctively know the second baseman will be. He, in turn, fires it to first for a perfectly executed double play. Or in basketball: a guard leads a fast break, goes up for a lay-up that we can all see is about to be blocked, but instead drops the ball behind his back to the exact spot where he knows—without looking—his teammate will be. The teammate catches it on one bounce and glides in for a slam dunk.

I experienced it myself in football when a play was so well conceived and so well executed that it unfolded perfectly—every player doing exactly what he was supposed to do at exactly the right instant. And in that instant, the runner sees the opening that's there for only a moment and bursts through it into the open field for a touchdown.

Some of us experience it in the arts: when an ensemble of musicians or singers lands on that perfect chord that sends chills up the spine; or when a cast performs a scene so well that they can feel the electric tension running through an absolutely silent audience. Or, conversely, when a scene or song is so powerfully rendered that the audience leaps to its feet with applause and shouts and whistles.

Those of us who have taken the stage to act or sing, or dance have known that rare and glorious moment when conscious thought disappears and you are swept up into something mysteriously, magically, gloriously more than the sum of its parts.

If you've been fortunate enough to experience something like this, you know these are experiences of power—the power of a team to defeat its opponents with complex plays; the power of an orchestra or choir to move an audience to tears; the power of a cast to send people out of a theater deep in conversation about what they've just witnessed.

But this kind of power does not fall spontaneously on a group. It is the result of hours, days, sometimes months of practice and rehearsal. It comes from being together so much that you begin to know what the other is thinking. Strength and power grow out of unity as crops grow from the earth—and the richer and more fertile the unity, the heartier the strength and the broader the power.

Spring training for Major League Baseball began in February this year, with Opening Day on April 2. Teams had roughly five weeks to get together and discover who they were as a team. On Opening Day, they began playing together in the hope that by the mid-season All-Star Game they would have gelled into a unit functioning like a well-oiled machine. (It is no accident that the most successful team in Cincinnati Reds history is still called the "Big Red Machine.")

The lesson from our culture—that there is power in unity—is not unlike the lesson that comes to us in Scripture on this seventh Sunday of Easter.

## UNITY IN SCRIPTURE

Unity and power stand out as recurring motifs in all four of the lectionary readings for this week. You've heard one of them already.

In the Acts passage, the resurrected Christ explains to the disciples that the Holy Spirit, who is coming to accompany and guide them, will also give them power. This power is to be spent in witnessing for Jesus Christ in a series of expanding circles: first Jerusalem, then all Judea, then Samaria, and finally the whole world.

Jesus then ascends into heaven, leaving the disciples standing there, looking up, with two men in white robes beside them. After a moment, the two men—angels, as we are meant to understand—say something like, “Okay, what are you doing just standing here? Let's go. The world isn't going to save itself, you know.”

But before they head out to save the world, they realize they have some homework to do. They need to go out not as individuals but as people shaped by a common experience and tradition. So first, they hunker down and draw strength from their shared life. They return to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, and there they devote themselves to prayer “together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

It is out of this coming together that they will eventually go out into the world to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples. It is out of this unity in prayer that they will find the strength to bear witness—both in places where their message is welcomed and in places where the reaction will be bitter, unwelcoming, even threatening, not unlike our own world.

## SHOWEDUPNESS

When it came to comic books, I was always a Sgt. Rock fan. I was never a big fan of superheroes, so I don't know if this is fact or just my impression—but superheroes, whether they have superpowers like Superman and Spiderman or extraordinary abilities like Batman and Ironman, are basically loners.

Batman has the Batcave. Superman has the Fortress of Solitude. And yes, eventually they let someone in on their secret, but it never relieves them of their essential loneliness. Most of them live lives full of deception so no one will know who they really are.

When they show up to save someone—or something, or the world, or whatever—they almost always show up alone. Sure, there are the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, but those are the exceptions, notable precisely because they fall outside the usual superhero pattern. Aloneness is the predominant mode of superheroes. They function most often by themselves, in secret. That's why they have those elaborate disguises.

Well, folks, let me let you in on a little secret: **you have superpowers, too.** Or rather, you have a superpower. And it is distinct from most others because it does not make you

lonely or alone. You don't have to hide your identity. In fact, it works best when you are exactly who you are.

That superpower is what I call “**showedupness.**”

It is the power to show up when you are needed and to strengthen others with nothing more than your presence.

I started performing in musical theater when I was a junior in high school, in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. On opening night, I wouldn't say I was scared. We had practiced and rehearsed that show within an inch of its life. We knew our lines, our songs, our blocking—everything down to the split second. I was reasonably sure the guy in charge of opening the elevator doors would do so at the right time.

So, I wasn't scared, but I was anxious — filled with nervous energy, feeling like I might explode. Then, absolutely against the rules, I snuck a peek out into the house while the audience was coming in. And there, in the very center of the orchestra section, were four rows—**four rows**—full of people I knew. My parents, aunts, uncles, grandmother, brothers and sisters, and three more rows of people from our church who had come as a group to support us.

And when I saw them, that nervous, jittery energy drained right out of me. It was like a weight lifted from my shoulders.

Finally, mercifully, the lights went down, the orchestra began the overture, and we were off. They laughed, they howled, they whooped and whistled, and with every affirmation from the audience I grew more confident. The show was a triumph—and that triumph belonged to the audience, the orchestra, the tech crew, and the cast together.

My family and church used their superpower, you see. They showed up. And I drew strength from their presence.

How many times in my life have I walked into a place of conflict or crisis expecting the worst, only to find familiar faces—people who had simply decided to show up—and their presence alone began the calming and healing process? How many times have I stood before an unfamiliar audience and sought out the face of my wife, who showed up for me, and drawn reassurance from her presence?

When my brother Ben had open-heart surgery, all four of his siblings, their spouses, and many of their children showed up to sit with his wife and kids. When the nurse called the name “Feldmeyer,” we all stood. She was startled by the size of us. “Oh,” she said, “you're not all going to fit in the consultation room.” So, the doctor spoke to us in the lobby.

If I could tell you the number of times in my ministry when I walked into a place of mourning or fear or despair with nothing—**nothing**—prepared to say, because there was nothing to say, and was thanked months later simply for showing up... you would understand the power of presence.

Unity, corporateness, commonality, community—whatever we call it—is one of the most important core values of the Christian life. We come together to worship, to sing, to study, to eat, to play, to hug, to cry, to simply be together because we are strengthened just by being together.

But that strength is not given to us for its own sake. We are not bodybuilders for Christ. We are not made strong so we can stand in front of a mirror and admire ourselves. The strength that comes from unity is the strength of the long-distance runner.

It is strength **for a purpose**.

We are made strong so that we might be witnesses for Jesus Christ. We are made strong so that we might more effectively spread the good news of God's grace through our words and our behavior—our love, our gentleness, our kindness, our generosity.

The sense of community we are called to in Scripture is often elusive. Our American culture encourages individualism over cooperation. Even in our churches, we sometimes struggle to trust each other enough to invest ourselves in shared ventures. We want to poll the congregation over every decision that costs money. And when we finally become a corporate body, we like that cozy room so much that we hesitate to leave it for mission in the world.

That marvelous sense of community we sometimes discover in church—in the singing of hymns, in a mission project, or in the easy camaraderie around a potluck table—is a gift. But it is not given to us simply to make us feel special. It is given so that we might have the power to care for those who cannot care for themselves, and so we can effectively spread the good news of God's grace as it comes to us in Jesus Christ.

**AMEN**