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Sermon Transcript: Communal Effervescence

I want to try a little something here. So, I need you all as you are able to go ahead and stand up and face the center of the sanctuary. And those of you who are on Zoom, I want you to join in as well. So, as we do this is that, we've done this before in singing the first verse of Amazing Grace, what I call a capoco style, which is a cappella. So, but I want us to do this together and I want you to be able to see each other while we do this. That's why we're all facing there. So, don't everyone stare at me while you do it because that gets weird quick. All right. So, just I want you to look around and let us sing together. Can we do this?

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Anyone else get the goosebump feel a little bit with that? Go ahead and have a seat. Go ahead and have a seat. There's something about taking a moment and having that kind of intentional thing of doing something together like that. There's actually a fancy phrase for that. It's called communal effervescence. I love it. It sounds like the new ad campaign for Seven Up—communal effervescence—but it's a term that comes from—it's the early 20th century. There was a sociologist, Émile Durkheim, who came up with the phrase, and it's the description of when a group of people come together and express a common thought or participate in a common action. And every time we worship together, we are doing that. We are singing songs together. We are praying familiar words together. We're embracing common ideas together. And that feeling that comes with it that occasionally just hits you in a moment of worship, that's communal effervescence.

I mean, it happens in other places, too. For example, I remember being—it was 10 years ago—I was at a Coldplay concert at Soldier Field in Chicago and in the midst of the concert, you know, we all had these like lighted wrist—you have these bands that would light up to the beat of the music and everybody's wearing this, tens of thousands of people in the stadium. And then they started to play this recording of someone simply singing Amazing Grace, and those tens of thousands of people started to join in, and the feeling of that—the feeling—it just—it was like chills went down our spines, all singing together. That moment of communal effervescence. Sometimes you don't even have to be a part of it, you can just see it and you feel like you're part of something. Like, I could care less about the NBA finals, I really could. I could care less about the New York Knicks—no offense to anyone who's a fan, it's just not my jam—but the other day I watched this video clip of this moment. It's from a couple of games ago and they were way down and they came all the way back, and in the last couple seconds a player from the Knicks—I don't know what his name is because I don't know any of them—took a shot and it bounced off of the rim and it looked like, well, that's it, they lost. And out of nowhere this other player—what's his name? I don't know, I don't care—comes flying out of nowhere and he reaches up and his fingertips just tip the end of the ball and it—and it flies back and goes into the basket and they win the game. And once again, I could care less, but I felt something when I saw that. That's a kind of like communal effervescence by proxy. So, we can even participate in this just by seeing it. And we need this in our world right now. We've lost a lot of our opportunities. We don't participate in things together as groups the way we used to. You can blame COVID, but we were going down this trend even before that. And maybe it's the fault of smartphones. Maybe it's just

the evolution of our culture, a little bit of COVID, whatever. The cocktail of culture that we're dealing with puts us in way too many circumstances that with the rise of anxiety and depression in our society and these changes in our culture, we're not getting our—our quota of communal effervescence in our lives. We're simply not coming together the way we need, the way we feel. It's in our very soulful makeup. I mean, don't get me wrong, I like my alone time, too. But human beings need connection. And the very essence of the good news that God gives us is this idea of being all together, all connected and with God. An ultimate communal effervescence. It's what the good news is about. It's what Jesus taught about the coming of the—"the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." That's the good news—the coming together of what has been separated. It's what we're invited to witness to. It's what Paul tried to write in all of his letters and get those churches doing.

Paul's Reply All: What About Uncle Larry?

But inevitably, there's someone in the crowd that while he's talking about the time is now and the kingdom of heaven coming together and this Jesus brought and he's teaching and preaching all this, and someone in the—with the Thessalonians all of a sudden goes, "Yeah, but what about when you die? What happens then?" And so he's got to answer that question as it comes up. Paul really wants to get back to the message of what we're supposed to be doing in this life. But because they were anticipating the coming of Christ again, these people were like, "Yeah, but my uncle Larry just died. Did he miss it?" And they were really fearful about stuff like this. And I have to imagine that Paul was like, "Oh my gosh, are you kidding me? Okay, okay, okay." So, he responds to them.

In fact, most of your New Testament are not letters that are like the first communication. Most of them are Paul's "reply all" to different communities. Basically, the community sent him the equivalent of an email going, "We got questions. There's problems." And then what Paul wrote back to each of these communities becomes for us 1 and 2 Thessalonians, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians. It becomes—all these books are his replies to their queries, their questions about what's going on. And evidently, one of the big early ones was, "Okay, I hear what you're saying about how we should be living life now, but Jesus is coming back, but Uncle Larry died. So did he miss it? Like is he not going to get to participate because he died too quick?" And so you've gotten this part in Thessalonians where Paul's saying to them, look, look, relax. God's got this. This is not falling out of God's control. And so he—he's trying to describe to them, okay, how's this going to work? And he's like, "I'm telling you there—there's a—as we've been told, there's a resurrection." There's a resurrection. And—and your loved ones who have died, they will be resurrected. And—and—and if—if Jesus was resurrected, then they'll be resurrected and this is an essential part of our beliefs. And then he talks about this, "and we'll be drawn up into the clouds with them." And sometimes we can get caught up in all this. They're just trying to come up with a description to—to relate to something which we cannot fathom in this lifetime. We cannot fully comprehend what the kingdom of heaven is fully like. And that's why Jesus talks about it in metaphors. That's why Jesus emphasizes. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But the idea is that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near and we have a chance to reflect that here in this life. And let me tell you what it looks like when the kingdom of heaven comes together with this earthly realm that we're a part of and—and what that can look like.

Now, we hear this stuff and—and we're not so worried about Uncle Larry. We're used to it. We've been around a while waiting for Jesus to come back. But it does—passages like this do dig up things in us and we can start to wonder, "Wait a minute, so there's this resurrection. So what does that mean?" I had a relative that was cremated. Is that a problem? What if—if we spread ashes, is that a problem? And all of this is to say, are you telling me that the God who made everything out of nothing, you think is going to be thwarted because of where you put your ashes? We don't need to worry about these things, but we do.

And what happens after we die? And we look to the scriptures, and there are some words in there. And this passage talks to us about a—a resurrection that will happen later. And that leads some to think about, "Oh, so basically, you just die and it's nothing then until the resurrection." And they had a term for that. It was called the soul sleep—the belief that when you die, that's it. You're just dead and nothing. And only on the day of the resurrection does the story pick up again. This is a belief that was rejected in the church centuries ago, but it still creeps up sometimes. There's many other witnesses in scripture that tell us that—like, it's not like that. There is—there is a—a separation of—of body and soul that happens in the time of our death. And it's witnessed there. You go—you go to 1 Corinthians 15 and—and Paul goes on and on about this resurrection thing and how it works and how it's different. You can go to—2 Corinthians chapter 5 and he goes—he actually says, "You know, at times I'm just—I—I wish that I could separate from this body to be with the Lord," witnessing to the idea that upon death, that there is this—this—this moment of the soul being unified with God, yes, in a state of waiting for that day of resurrection, waiting for the fullness of what God is intending to bring into this realm. But—but that there is a movement of our soul into a union with God. We see this again in—in Revelation chapter 6. It talks about how that on that great day of the resurrection, that the souls of those who've been slain for the sake of the—of the word are—are there anticipating this coming day of resurrection. So there's many places in scripture that witness like there is definitely something after this life. What exactly is it like? I don't know. We don't know. We have beautiful metaphors and beautiful stories to try to capture some of it. The truth is that when your loved ones have passed away or when you pass away, what is that like? We don't know. But what we do know is that those who have passed away are united with God. And honestly, that's the very best place that any of us could ever be. So, we don't need to worry about them. And when we see death happen, we might be sad and we might be grieving, but we don't need to worry about our loved one, for they're in God's hands, which is the very best place for any of us to be.

The Privilege of Showing God's Love Now

So little did Jesus think we needed to worry about that that he really didn't talk much about that and Paul tried to not talk much about that in his letters in the rest of New Testament. Jesus spent very little time talking about what happens after you die. Jesus wasn't trying to reduce your life to a giant waiting room where you take a test to see if you make it to round two. Jesus spent the bulk of his teaching explaining that the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, is drawing near. And in this moment, we have an opportunity to take that—the way that God intends for us to be, intends for the world to eventually become the fullness, the perfection of that. And we have an opportunity to witness that now. And we should take that again and again. What Jesus teaches is for you to live out bits and pieces of what that perfection might be, to give signs and reassurances to one another that we don't have to wait until a second round. It's here. It's now. And the privilege that you and I get is that we get to use our lives to show other people just how amazing God's love is. We get to use the heartbeats that we have, the breath that we have, the effort that we can do with our hands—we get to use that to show other people what God's beautiful, wonderful love can be like.

And so when we gather together and—and we worship, we're giving each other signs of what that might be like to be unified. And we'll use song and we'll use prayers to do that. And we use the intentions and the ministries and the actions that we do together. I think—I think summer sack lunch program is a—is a witness of that very same thing. The idea that—the people of God come together and in, you know, lickety-split, 45 minutes sometimes, you've got hundreds of sandwiches made that are going to go out into the community the next day. And it's not just one church with—it's churches all around this community being a witness. You know what it looks like in the kingdom of heaven? Kids don't go hungry. And I know that happens in this world, but what we do is a witness to say,

"Yeah, but look at what it looks like when they don't. Look at how we go out there and what it looks like is it looks like sharing of food. It—it looks like people—like, I've heard stories about Rob Thornberry pulling out a soccer ball and kicking it around with the kids on delivery day." It looks like that. That's what the kingdom of heaven looks like. The kingdom of heaven looks like—looks like the celebration we're having on a day like today with—with our high school seniors. The kingdom of heaven is saying to the three of you: you are not alone. And you're going off on another adventure now, but you always have this church family. And when we do that right, it shows you the kingdom of heaven. And if the rest of the witnesses within these people of God, if we do it right, then that one Sunday in the future during college where you actually go to church on a Sunday during college—you wake up and you just are inspired and you wander down the street to the church that's closest to wherever you are and—and you go in those doors—that if the people of God are doing it right, then—then when one of those students walks into that church, they feel welcome and they feel safe and they feel loved. They feel the kingdom of heaven, if we do it right. And it's important that we put forth the effort with the life that we have, the breath that we have, the effort that we have, that we do this witness because this world that's continually separated and isolated and siloed needs that communal effervescence of the people of God loving well. This Needs Among Us program—I love this because this is an opportunity for us right now today. You just put your name down and check a box and you become a significant witness that God's love is invading this world on a regular basis. That God's mercies are here in this lifetime. You don't have to wait for a cookie at the end of the rainbow after you die. Now—now there is love. Now there is mercy. Now there is grace. And you get the privilege to be a part of that. That in someone's story of wondering, "Is—is this—any of this real? Does it mean anything?" you get the privilege, and understand it is a privilege. The privilege to be part of that witness. Someone—someone who just had—someone who just had their mom sent out of the country is going to have clothes and a relationship with the body of Christ that's going to care for them in years to come. Someone who has been fleeing domestic violence and uncertain about how they're going to get through the next day is going to have the people of God come alongside them and say, "Don't forget God is here and we got you." Somebody who's just—just trying to move and—and—and needs help, or someone who's just trying to straighten up what years of—of clutter have just happened through—through working through a disability. And the people of God are going to show up and say, "God's love is real and mercy is here for you." And this may be a small thing today, but it's a big witness in someone's heart. And you—you get the privilege to be a part of this coming together of the kingdom of heaven and the realm of earth. This is what we are called to do by the gospel message. Not simply say, "Well, I think I'm getting into heaven," and then just wait for it. It's to say, "I think heaven's on its way. I think what the gospel tells me is that God has come to be with us, and I want to reflect that and show that and be part of that." What a privilege, what a joy, what a communal effervescence.

To God be the glory. Hallelujah and amen.