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Sermon Transcript: Confessions and Needs Welcome

So, we're in the book of Joel, chapter 1, and this is verses 1 through 4:

"The word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Pethuel. Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. And what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten."

You'll notice that Joel doesn't open with an announcement. He opens with a question. And he aims it at the oldest people in the room: Has anything like this ever happened before in your lifetime? Did your parents ever tell you anything like it? He wants the congregation to check its own memory before he says one word about God. Then comes the instruction that shapes the entire morning that we're going to have here together. It says, "Tell your children and have them tell theirs." Before there's any theology here, there's a community that talks, that says out loud what happened and refuses to let it go unspoken.

That isn't a metaphor today. What you write on that insert in the confession in just a few minutes, that comes back to this room later—your sentences and the sentences of the person who's three pews from you and anyone who's maybe typing it in from Fairview Heights joining us over Zoom. It's all going to get gathered up and made into a prayer that this whole congregation will say together in a future worship service with one voice. Someone else's pain becomes everybody's confession. That's what Joel means by handing it down.

Then the passage goes in and talks about the four waves: cutting, swarming, hopping, destroying. And scholars have argued about this for centuries: Is this four different species of locust? Or maybe it's the four stages of the locust life cycle? And honestly, it doesn't really matter, because Joel's point survives no matter how you read it. What one left, the next one took. And then the next one took whatever was left from that. And then the next one took whatever was left. The disaster here isn't an event. It's a sequence. It's the fourth thing arriving after you've already had to go through three other things. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. It's that diagnosis that comes after the layoff. It's the second funeral in a year. It's the third criticism on an already too long day that you've had to go through. Joel starts here because he isn't going to pretend about anything.

The Numbing Stops Working (Verses 5–7)

"Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white."

The first people that Joel addresses are the drunkards. And he tells them, "Wake up," and weep.

This isn't mainly a sermon about drinking from Joel. Notice what's happening to them: The wine has been cut off from their mouths. The one thing that kept them from feeling their pain has run out. Joel is naming the moment that the numbing stops working. Whatever it is that lets you not look directly at your own life—the scrolling, the schedule, the second glass, the being needed by other people—whatever it is that lets you not look directly at your own life, Joel says the supply of that distraction has failed. Everyone in the room is awake now, including the people who worked hardest not to be. That isn't cruelty. That's the beginning of honesty. And honesty is where confession starts.

The Machinery of Coming to God (Verses 8–10)

“Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth. The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord. The fields are devastated, the ground mourns for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails.”

Here's the line to hold on to for the next half hour: The grain offering and the drink offering have been cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests are mourning not because they're personally hungry. They're mourning because there's nothing to put on the table, nothing to bring before the Lord. The whole machinery of coming to God with something in your hands has stopped working. And notice what Joel doesn't do here: He never gives us a list of sins. Chapter 1 doesn't itemize anyone's transgressions. What Joel calls for isn't an inventory. It's truthful speech. Tell the truth about what's been eaten.

You have the insert, and I want you to find that in your worship handout today, the confession insert. And look at that paper. It has three separate lines on it. And I want to be clear before you start: It's not a form where you have to fill out every single line. You don't have to fill the whole thing. Any one of these lines by themselves is a complete confession.

The first one says, "Today I confess that I..." That's the one that we're all used to. The thing you did. The thing you said in the car on the way here this morning.

The next one: "I neglected to..." That's the locust line. It may be the truest sentence on the page, because most of what the locusts eat, they eat while nobody is watching. Not one wave of anything came through your house and took your marriage or your friendship or your prayer life in one afternoon. It went in stages. Something got cut, then swarmed, then hopped, then destroyed. And at no point did you decide any of it. You just didn't get to it. Joel's whole chapter is about damage that accumulated below the threshold of anybody's attention. That second line is where you get to say so for your own life.

The third possibility there: "Gracious God, help me." Here's what I love about this piece of paper: It ends exactly where Joel chapter 1 ends. If we look ahead to verse 19, it says, "To you, O Lord, I call." The prophet spends 19 verses describing the ruin that they're experiencing and then does the only thing left to do, which is cry out. As we designed this, we put it at the end because that's where it belongs. If that's the only line that you can write something on this morning, that's the whole chapter of Joel and it's enough.

So, you can use all three or just use the one that's actually true for you. Don't perform. Don't write

down the stuff that you think should be on a confession card, and write it down knowing this: that somebody else in this room is going to say your words back to God on behalf of all of us. So, take the confession insert out. As I said, use all three lines or just one. Write what is true. And when you're done, I want you to fold it in half. And when we have communion, you'll carry it forward with you. Don't sign it. Don't put anyone else's name on it, including your own. We're going to read these—I want you to know that plainly, not to find out who wrote it, but so that we can understand what this congregation is really crying out to God about. And those words will become a prayer confession that we do together in a future week. Anything that we find specific that identifies a person or household, we'll edit out.

And so I invite you now as Matt plays to consider what your confession is, to write it down. You can use the—there's little pencils in the pews. You can—if you don't have a writing utensil, those of you who are online, a link's going to be put in the chat that you can use, or you can just make it something you do privately yourself. But let's take some time to lay out our confession.

The Orchard Tree by Tree (Verses 11–12)

“Be dismayed, you farmers; wail, you vine-dressers, over the wheat and the barley, for the crops of the field are ruined. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple—all the trees of the field are dried up. Surely, joy withers away among the people.”

Look at what Joel names as lost: wheat, barley, grapevines, fig trees, pomegranate, palm, and apple. He walks the orchard tree by tree. Then he says something that makes this chapter ache: Joy has withered away from the people.

Joel won't let us separate the two. He doesn't say the crops failed but everybody's spirit has prevailed. He says the fig tree dried up and so did the gladness. Bodies and souls are one circuit here. Which is exactly why this congregation has spent years asking people what they actually need instead of what they ought to need. "Needs Among Us" works because it takes people at their word about groceries, about utility bills, about cars that won't start. It treats those as spiritual matters because they are. That isn't a program that we bolted onto the gospel. That's Joel 1:11 with a phone number on it so we could reach out and do something about it.

Notice too the last line that you may have just written on the confession insert, "Gracious God, help me," and the line that you're about to write on this Needs Among Us form—it's the same sentence in two different registers. Joel would not have understood: Why did you put that on two separate inserts? For Joel, they belong together. Confessing your need for God's help and reaching out to God for help in your time of need belong together. And so they are together in today's worship.

Now, if we look ahead to verse 14, Joel summons the elders and everyone who lives in the land. Not just the qualified, not just the devout, not just the holier-than-thou folks—everyone. That's the design of what happens next Sunday. Your insert goes to the pastors and the Needs Among Us team this week. And next Sunday, this congregation is handed the chance to answer those needs. The person filling out one today may be the person meeting someone else's need next week. Nobody here is only a giver and nobody here is only a recipient. Joel doesn't sort the assembly that way and neither will we.

So be specific with your needs. Share whatever your needs are, and next week we will do our very best to help you. If you would rather not carry your insert forward, you can hand it to me privately at the door after worship as well. But think about that thing that you need—not the most respectable thing, the actual thing that you need. And remember, these are *your* needs. This is not the time for you to write down what you think somebody else needs. This is the time for you to write down your needs. And if you find yourself in this moment of reflection not able to identify something to write down on that piece of paper, then you praise the Lord God Almighty. Then you give thanks that you get to live such a blessed life that you don't have anything to write down. Thanks be to God. What a blessing to find yourself without a need to put down. Either way, your response is welcome. Let's take time for the Needs Among Us.

Convening a Sacred Assembly (Verses 13–14)

“Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God: grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”

Verse 14 is the instruction that produced this worship service: Declare a fast, call a sacred assembly, summon the elders and everyone who lives in the land to the house of the Lord, and cry out together. Joel isn't describing a worship service. He's convening one.

Now, hold that up against what he just told us: There's nothing left to bring; the offerings are cut off. And still he says, "Come to the house of the Lord." Still he says, "Bring the whole town." So today we dedicate our offerings knowing full well that whatever we have to give isn't adequate to anything. We do it not because our offering is adequate. We do it because the house of the Lord shouldn't be empty, because Joel would rather we come empty-handed than not at all.

Friends, there are many ways to give financially to the ministries of this church. Three of them have fancy QR codes in your worship handout or on the screen. The general fund is that backbone of the ministry of this church that pays salaries and takes care of utilities and pays for materials and the basic operations of everything we do as a ministry and a mission together. Rise Against Hunger is your opportunity specifically to sponsor meals—we will pack 15,000 of them and send them out around the world. The youth golf event lets you invest specifically in passing along this message to the next generation. So give as you can, but we acknowledge that what we give sometimes is not out of plentitude, but sometimes it's out of not having anything to give. And so we give our hearts and we give our efforts.

And so I invite you now to dedicate the offering that you have this week, whether it is through your time, your labors, or your giving of financial resources, with the prayer of dedication that can be found on the screen and also in your handout. Let us pray together:

God, some of us are giving out of plenty and some of us are giving out of not enough. Take it all. Multiply it in hands we will never shake. Use it for the people whose needs are heavy. Amen.

The Bottom of the Ruin (Verses 15–18)

“Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels

under the clouds; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are ruined because the grain has withered. How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are perishing.”

Joel closes his description with the barns: The storehouses are broken down, granaries in ruins, and the seeds are shriveling under the clouds. And then, in a detail that I just can't get past, the animals are moaning. The animals are moaning. The herds wander because there's no pasture. Even the animals are lamenting. This is the bottom. There's no turn here. Joel 1 doesn't resolve. The repayment for the years of the locust is not going to come till chapter 2. Joel makes us sit in this state, and yet still come before the Lord.

So hear what I'm about to invite you to: Joel said two things have been cut off from the house of the Lord—the grain offering and the drink offering. My friends, the bread and the juice. But look at this table. The two things that Joel says are gone are here. But not one grain of it came out of your field. Nobody in this room grew this. It's here. It's been created in its very beginning not by those who fashioned the plates, or who even cut the bread, or those who dedicated this beautiful communion set. It comes from the one who instituted it thousands of years ago for you.

So, you're going to walk up in a moment with both hands full—your confession and your need—and there's a basket at each station as you come down the aisle to put those in. You put them in the basket, and then you receive what you didn't grow.

“To you, O Lord, I cry, for fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flames have burned all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals cry to you because the water courses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.”

As you come forward today, bring your confessions, bring your needs, and give them to God in these baskets. And then receive the signs of grace in communion from God.

Our communion song today is our communal confession and our communal need among us. As we sing together, "Lord, I Need You," you're invited to join in as you feel led. You can just join in on the chorus or whenever you feel led to join in as we sing and come forward, bringing what is right to bring before the Lord and receiving what is far greater in response.

And hear this good news: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. What is in that basket is not yours to carry anymore. It's ours now. Ours together. And in the weeks to come, we will hand it back to God together with one voice.

Thanks be to God. God has promised to hear our cries and respond. And the beautiful and wonderful privilege is that you and I get to be part of that response of grace for one another. We get to participate in the good and wonderful work that our God does. And so tell the children and their children—continue to tell the story of what God's love has done, is doing, and will yet do right here among us. And then come back next Sunday, because that which feels like a burden to one person becomes your joy of participating in helping another. You can be a part of that. Let us return again to the house of the Lord next week and see what God and Joel and one another has for us.

Go now with this blessing: The blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be upon each and every one of you this day and forevermore.

Amen.