

Introduction:

Why do WE come TOGETHER on Sundays for worship? Why not worship from the comfort of our homes, at a time that might be more convenient than a Sunday morning and in a way that would be most suited to our personal preferences. Why make the effort to gather the kids, to get presentable, to fix our to-go coffee cups, scarf down some breakfast, to trudge out to our cars, potentially to scrape off windshields, get our kids into the cars, try to stop them from fighting, and arrive on time somehow with our hearts and minds in the right place to worship God?

And why do we try so hard to worship with people different than us? Wouldn't it just be easier to be with people of similar socio-economic class, who like the same style of worship, preferred to dress like we expect people to dress in church, believed exactly as we believe, preferred to practice communion like we also prefer, and whose kids were quiet, sat still, and paid attention to everything that happens?

What I'm going to suggest this morning is that worship of God has always been designed to be done in community. Yes, we are all called to make individual decisions to follow Jesus and grow in our own paths of discipleship as Christians, and yes, sometimes this might include private worship. But from the very beginning, when God established worship expectations and practices for His people, it was always understood that worship would be a communal activity. I am going to make five

propositions, from the Bible, which will hopefully convince you of the importance of communal worship; that worshiping God is not just a nice Christian option for extroverts, but that it is essential to what it means to worship God.

1) The Church, at its most basic nature, is the gathering of believers to worship God:

The very word that is most often translated as “church” in fact means “gathering of people.” It has no original reference to a building; it was about the people of God coming together before God. Peter tells us in **1 Peter 2:4-5**, that when we become followers of Jesus, he begins to transform us, not just individually, but as a group so that we together might be a place in which He is worshiped:

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We see glimpses of this compelling vision that Peter gives of worship as God’s people gathered together in both the Old Testament and New Testament.

In Old Testament law, God ordered the seasons for his people according to festivals in which they were called to be together and to remember what God had done for them. These three pilgrimage festivals are outlined in Exodus 23. What makes

them Pilgrimage festivals is that God envisioned and expected the people to come together in a central location, regardless of whether or not they all still lived in the same place. **In Exodus 23:14-17**, God commands:

¹⁴ “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.

¹⁵ “Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt. “No one is to appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶ “Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. “Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field. ¹⁷ “Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign Lord.

Now, obviously the people were supposed to commit themselves to daily, personal worship of God. But there was also something so clearly important about gathering together to worship, to sacrifice, and to remember.

The practice of gathering together to worship continued for those Hebrews who followed after Jesus in the New Testament. In perhaps the most beautiful portrayals of what Christian community could look like, the early church in acts gather every day in order to worship God together.

This is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. In it, we get a clear, beautiful, and exciting vision of what the early church looked like, as well as a possible blueprint for how the

modern church could look in worship. So what were the worship elements for the early Church? Teaching, fellowship food, and praise! They took care of one another, and made sure that no one in their group went hungry. And most exciting of all, new people were joining their group every single day! Imagine the Spirit that was in that church as they worshiped together. The community of Jesus became the center of their lives, and the excitement that each had over what God was doing was extremely attractive to the world around them. God designed Church to be this type of community in worship.

2) God desires all living things to worship Him:

The book of Psalms is the original songbook of the church. It is a collection of poems written to express man's relationship to God and the world; it was sung and chanted by the early church and has since inspired hundreds of songs of praise to God. In Psalm 150, the author calls for all living things to offer their praise to God.

Psalm 150

¹ Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. ² Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. ³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, ⁴ praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, ⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. ⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

God created the world for His pleasure; He designed all life for the purpose of singing His praises. And it's not because of narcissism that God wants our worship. It is because through our worship he can commune with His people, and it is because God is entirely deserving of our worship.

In **Philippians 2:9-11**, Paul tells us even more specifically that God is calling all people, all over the earth, to worship Jesus, and when we do so, we are not only worshiping Jesus but we are also worshiping God through Jesus.

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God sent Jesus his Son to the earth not only to save us, but also so that all people could come to know and worship God together. Therefore, we can answer God's desire that all people join together in worship of Him.

Transition: It's not only God's desire for all peoples to worship Him, but He also tells us that the final reality of the world is that everyone will come before him in worship.
3) At the end of time, all peoples will come before God to worship:

In **Isaiah 2:2-4**, the prophet gives us a vision of what eternity would look like. And in this vision, he sees the mountain of God, and all people across the world coming to this mountain to worship.

²In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. ³Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

I find this to be such a profoundly powerful passage; we live in a time like none other in history, where communication and globalization have made us so much more keenly aware of the world around us. And yet in that awareness, we also come to see the many, many different things that divide us across the globe. Language, ethnicity, tradition, laws, religion, history. And sometimes, in our isolation as American Christians, I think it can be easy to forget that there are believers all over the world, in South America, and Europe, and Africa, and Asia, and there are even believers in those places that we are currently in conflict with: in the Middle East, in Russia, in China. Not only are there believers all over the world, but God wants to give everyone, regardless of where they are born or where they happen to live, the opportunity to come and worship Him.

So we have this incredible vision for the future where all nations come together to worship the one God; all of the sudden, all of those things that divide us will be gone and we will live fully into our true identity as a children and people of God.

Transition: Why, though, does God give Isaiah this vision? What does it mean that we will all worship together someday, when right now we worship in many different churches, with different styles, and different ideas of what it means to be a disciple? This leads us to the fourth proposition:

4) There is one Savior and One Church:

We have one God, father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and this one God has called many different people together to be His One church. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:2-5, that we are to work as hard as possible to make peace with our fellow believers because, regardless of our differences or whether or not we like each other, we have all been called to be a part of one faith.

Ephesians 4:2-5

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

So, how do we worship with people that are different from us? Wouldn't it just be easier to be a part of separate churches? And what if those differences seem insurmountable?

One of my favorite Dr. Seuss books is called "The Butter Battle Book." The book centers around two neighboring groups of people living on opposite side of a wall: the Yooks and the Zooks. These two groups just could not get along because of one major difference: The Yooks, who wear blue clothes, eat their bread with the butter side up, while the Zooks, who wear orange clothes, eat their bread with the butter side down. The conflict starts when a Zook patrolman hits a Yook patrolman with a slingshot. From there, each side begins to build and launch bigger and more dangerous weapons at each other until they each build something equivalent to a nuclear bomb. The book ends with the general on each side watching the other side and waiting to drop their bombs.

Sometimes, I think our differences amount to little more than which side of the bread we butter. And yet, we have allowed those differences to split and divide us into more and more churches and more and more denominations, effectively dividing and destroying the body of Christ. Paul reminds us that we are supposed to be one body, so we should start acting like it. Be humble, be gentle, be patient, and work for the unity of the body. Jesus tells us in John 10:14-16, that He is the good shepherd and that He would lay His life down for His sheep. But he makes a pretty interesting statement in v. 16 about "other" sheep He is drawing in to Himself.

John 10:14-16

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Jesus was saying in this passage that the Israelites were His people and would be saved by God, but that God was also calling for the Gentiles to come to Him, a race of people so fundamentally different than the Israelites and in many ways opposed to the Hebrew Faith. The Jews could not have imagined that they would be in the same boat as Gentiles, and yet Jesus makes it clear that He wants to draw many people into the sheep pen and that under Him there will be one flock and one shepherd, One Church and One God. We worship together because God has called us to be a part of one united flock.

5) We are stronger together than separate:

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

9Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. 11Furthermore, if two lie down together

they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? 12And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes that, essentially, there is strength in numbers. And that is the strength of the church worshipping together, that we can hold up and support one another through the trials and troubles of this life. This truth was never so evident to me than in the unfolding of the events of last Friday's shooting at West Liberty. This terrible act could have driven people apart, divided families, and destroyed the community. Instead, the community has been banding together to support one another, to support the Cole family, and even to support the family of the Shooter, Ely Serna. We do this because we recognize this fundamental truth, that we are stronger in community than we are apart. So, we worship in community because there is strength in that group that we cannot get by ourselves.

Conclusion:

So, let's review. Why do we worship in Community? We worship in community because God designed the church to be communal, because God desires all living things to worship Him, because in eternity we will be worshipping God together, because there is one Church and one God, and because we are stronger together.

Jesus tells us in **Matthew 18:20** "For where two or three gather together in My name, there am I with them."

I don't think that Jesus is saying here that He isn't present with us in our individual discipleship journeys, but rather I think that he is saying here that something special happens when we gather in community.

Menno Simons wrote a powerful hymn titled "We are a People of God's Peace," and in it he describes the way in which the community of Christians worshipping God together serves to bind and strengthen one another, as well as offers an example to the world of the power of Christian community. The first verse goes like this:

We are people of God's peace as a new creation,
Love unites and strengthens us at this celebration.
Sons and daughters of the Lord, serving one another,
A new covenant of peace binds us all together.

Let's join together by God's covenant of peace, and in doing so, worship the one God as one Church, strengthening and lifting one another up; in that way, we can be a shining example to a divided world of the unifying glory of God.