“Amen!”

Matthew 6:9-15

A sermon preached for Clairlea Park Presbyterian Church by Dr. Kevin Livingston

September 5, 2021

I want to say thanks to Sophia McClarty for reading our Bible passage -it’s the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew's gospel that we've been looking at this summer. One thing Sophia didn't read, however, was the part we say at the end. *“For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.”* You'll notice that those words are in the footnotes in your Bible, but not in the main text, because those words aren’t in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. And so they got relegated to a footnote instead. But actually, those words *“For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen”* is a perfectly good summary of the Lord's Prayer and especially that last word, *“Amen.”* It's a word we say all the time, but I wonder if we know what it means and why we say it? And that's what I'd like to talk about today.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The preacher and writer John Killinger tells a story of a young man who'd been invited to preach and offer prayers at the chapel at Vanderbilt University down in Nashville, Tennessee. Killinger was a professor there and was overseeing the chapel service that day. The young man arrived, but he wasn't alone. With him was a little lady whom he introduced his aunt Susie. Aunt Susie, he explained, was a member of his church, and she had come along as his Amen corner. She sat near the front of the Chapel, right under the pulpit, where she could help with the service. All through his prayers and sermon, she kept up a steady chorus of amens and yes Jesus. Afterward, the young preacher said to Killinger, I hope it was alright that Aunt Susie came with me. I couldn't pray or preach without her.

In more sophisticated circles, Aunt Susie's helping with the service in that way may sound a bit quaint or unusual or even primitive. We aren’t usually quite as expressive as that in our church services. But she was actually reflecting a practice that was central to the worship life of the ancient Jewish people and also to the early Christians too. The Amen was their part of the service. It was the way that God's people were supposed to respond to the words and rituals occuring during the worship service.

The first record we have of the use of Amen in the Bible is in the book of numbers. It's part of a ritual for cursing people who have been condemned for the sin of adultery. After the priest pronounces the curse, the sinner themselves are supposed to say *“Amen, Amen”* (Numbers 5:22). Later in the book of Deuteronomy, the word is again associated with pronouncing a curse. This time, Moses is giving instructions to the people about crossing the Jordan river into the promised land. Once they are there, he says, the Levites, the priestly worship leaders, are to pronounce a curse on anyone who makes an idol out of metal. All the people are to answer and say “Amen” (Deuteronomy 27: 15).

In the Hebrew language, the word Amen means “so be it” or “let it be so.” In its earliest usage it was used as a way of participating in placing a curse on someone who’d violated God’s law. It was the people's part in a time of solemn worship, and it expressed a sense of corporate unity in the action being taken.

And the word “Amen” has continued to be a way for people to agree with what’s being said in worship. It’s a way of saying “I agree with that;” I concur with what’s being said or done or prayed.

In some churches saying “Amen” out loud during worship is a very common practice. In fact, when I was Pastor at Knox Presbyterian Church downtown at Spadina and Harbord, there was one man, one of our dear elders Charles Huggins, who came from the Caribbean, where this was the tradition. And so whenever the person preaching or praying (usually me) said something he particularly agreed with, he would let out a loud “AMEN” from where he sat near the front of the church. *“Amen!”* Sometimes it surprised me, but I always felt deeply encouraged by his outbursts and declarations… And perhaps Mr. Huggins was just trying to encourage me, and believe me, I needed all the encouragement I could get, preaching and praying in that big old sanctuary!

“Amen” is the people’s word.

Later, this little word Amen became a way for God's people to ratify a covenant made between themselves and God. When they made an agreement with the Lord, they would signify it by saying “Amen.” For example, when King David decided to put his son Solomon on the throne of the Jewish nation, he called together a group of leaders and told them what he was planning to do. And one of them responded by saying Amen! *“Amen!... May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, decree that it happen”* (1 Kings 1:36). He was expressing his agreement with the plan and calling on God to accomplish it.

Later on, for the people of Israel, the word Amen gradually evolved into a word to praise and honor God. For example, in the book of First Chronicles, following a long exclamation of praise to God, the writer concludes: *“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Then all the people said “Amen!” and praised the Lord.”* (16:36)

Nehemiah tells us that when the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon and Ezra read to them for the first time from the book of the law, *“Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen.’”* (Nehemiah 8: 6). And as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 72: “*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth! Amen and Amen!”* (72:18-19)

It's no wonder then, that we conclude the Lord's Prayer the way we do: *“for yours is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”* The Amen is the personal exclamation point at the end of our prayer paying tribute to our heavenly Father. It's the worshipper’s signature at the end of our words of praise. It's like the final burst of fireworks at the end of a Canada Day celebration.

And so it's one of the most expressive and powerful little exclamations in the world. And it's powerful because it's the same word in every language! Did you ever think about that? Did you realize it's the one word in the Lord's Prayer that no matter what language we speak, it's the word that we recognize, whether it's in a cathedral in Paris or a tiny hut in rural Africa, whether it’s here in our own congregation or with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Iraq or Vietnam or Mexico or London? In every language, Christians express our sense of joy and unity we feel as we acknowledge God is our heavenly Father by saying the word “Amen.”

But there's one more thing we ought to notice about this little word Amen. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, who gave us the Lord’s Prayer as the model for all our praying, the early Christians always uttered the word “Amen,” the “so be it,” through Jesus himself. Jesus became the guarantor of the prayer. Jesus is the backer, the sponsor, the patron of our prayers, the one through whom and in whom our prayers are heard and answered by our heavenly Father.

When the apostle Paul wrote the early chapters of the book we call Second Corinthians, he was apparently responding to a feeling among some of the people in Corinth that he hadn't been honest with them about some of his travel plans. Listen to how Paul responds to them:

*You may be asking why I changed my plan. Do you think I make my plans carelessly? Do you think I am like people of the world who say “Yes” when they really mean “No”? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you does not waver between “Yes” and “No.” For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does not waver between “Yes” and “No.” He is the one [we]preached to you, and as God’s ultimate “Yes,” he always does what he says. For all of God’s promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding “Yes!” And through Christ, our “Amen” (which means “Yes”) ascends to God for his glory.*

The apostle Paul was using the word “Amen” in a very different way here. Jewish people said “Amen” as a response in worship, as a word of agreement, as an exclamation of praise. And so do we. But here Paul goes farther and says “Amen” with the sense that is much more powerful than any word that we speak in our own names.

In fact, the early Christians went even farther than this, and identified Christ himself as the Amen, as the One causing the prayer to come true.

When the apostle John was inspired to write the Book of Revelation on the island of Patmos, he saw the risen Lord Jesus in a vision. Jesus was clothed in gold. His voice, said John, was *“like the sound of many waters,”* and his face was *“like the sun shining in full strength.”* Jesus told him to write letters to seven of the churches in Asia Minor, and when he came to the seventh church, the church in Laodicea, Jesus commanded him to write: “*This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the beginningof God’s new creation…”* (Rev. 3:14, NLT)

What does Jesus mean by that? It means that each and every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, when we come to the end and speak that little word “Amen,” we need to remember that we do not speak it alone, but through Christ, the Son of the living God. We speak it in and through Jesus, whose resurrection from the dead is the promise that all the things that we pray for in this prayer will be granted.

* We pray for God's Kingdom to come. *Amen!* It is surely coming one day in God’s time.
* We pray for our daily bread. *Amen!* We receive the basics of life that we need through providence of our Lord.
* We pray for forgiveness. *Amen!* We receive God's forgiveness of our sins which was accomplished through Christ’s death on the cross.
* We pray for endurance in times of trial and testing and temptation. *Amen!* Jesus promises to be with us, to give us strength, and to never abandon us or leave us, no matter what happens in our lives.

Our situation is like that of Doctor V.P. Patterson, a retired missionary doctor to China, when he was a young man with no money for an education. The Dean of a medical school called him in and gave him the address of an important businessman in Alabama, a cotton broker, who wanted to help a medical student. Young Patterson went to see him. The man sat behind a big desk in an enormous office with numerous telephones and other signs of wealth. After a brief conversation, the man reached into his desk drawer and took out a check book with fifty checks on it. He went through and signed every one of them. “Here,” he said, “cash one of these blank cheques every month for what you need.”

Only one time, said Doctor Patterson, did the amount of the checks ever vary. That was when there was an explosion in the school laboratory and his only suit of clothes was ruined. The man wrote him a note and asked: “Why was your check greater this time?” Patterson sent him a photograph of the wrecked laboratory and a newspaper account of the explosion, together with a copy of the bill for his new suit. A few days later he received a postcard from the man saying, “I'm sorry I asked.”

Doctor Patterson said: “I could never have become a doctor if it hadn't been for that man. I couldn't get credit that way with anyone else – not even my own family.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer through Jesus as the great Amen, it's like we’re writing a check on one who has already signed for us and whose credit is good. **We are praying through the One who has known us and loved us and given his life for us, and God cannot refuse him, because he is God's beloved Son.**

“Amen.” it's a small word, but an immensely powerful word. The early Christians knew what they were doing when they added it to the Lord's Prayer, because it's more than just a liturgical response. It's a statement of faith and a shout of acclamation. And Aunt Susie knew what she was doing when she encouraged her preacher by shouting “Amen” and “Yes, Jesus.” The Amen means it will be done through Jesus, and that's why we pray the prayer in the first place.

Amen!

1. Today’s sermon and some of the stories used are based on the chapter “Standing in the Kingdom” in the book by John Killinger, *The God Named Hallowed: The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)