

AMEN: Assent, Appropriation, Action
A Sermon preached at Christ Lutheran Church / Waterloo / Ontario
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost / August 10, 2014

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I have to tell you a funny story about my recent move. Most of you know that I have moved from Village on the Green to Luther Village, where I have had to downsize considerably. Anyhow, my daughter Sarah was with me when we went looking for a smaller sofa – actually more of a love seat.

We found exactly what I was looking for at *Ikea*. It was just the right size and even made up into a full sized double bed, like a futon, when you opened it. And it was very cheap, in both senses of that word.

I said to Sarah, “This is terrific. But it's so inexpensive. Do you think it will fall apart?”

Sarah said, “Dad, *you're* going to fall apart before this will.”

I thought that was a very pastoral response. Hah!

Well, I'm not going to address the Bible readings for today, but instead our worship. Worship has been my chief interest for fifty years.

And I'll take a survey. What's the one word in a language not English that we have used over and over in our worship for centuries?

It could be Hosanna: That's Hebrew for “Save lord!” It could be Alleluia. That's Hebrew for “Praise to our God.”

It's Amen that I'm thinking of. It's also Hebrew. What does it mean? From your catechism: “So be it!” or even “It shall be so.” There's a great definition by Martin Luther on page 1164 in your hymnal.

I'm going to suggest that that Amen has three meanings or implications for your life today. Those three meanings are printed out in your bulletin today as the title of my sermon. Assent, Appropriation, and Action. Let's take them one by one.

Assent. That's the first meaning of that word Amen in our worship. You are simply assenting to what had been said. When Janet prays for peace, and you

respond “Amen”, you're assenting to it. You're saying yes to peace. When Janet prays for justice, and you say Amen, you're affirming justice. When the pastor pronounces a Blessing at the end of the service, and you say Amen, you're saying Yes to that blessing. It shall be so.

Incidentally, for the same reason, that Amen at the end of the preacher's sermon belongs to you, not to the preacher. If I were a parish pastor again, I'd teach my people to say “Amen” firmly and vigorously at the end of my sermon. You'd better check with Pastor James before you do that here, though. He might be startled.

I've told you before, in my sermon here after Christmas, that Christian people are called upon by their faith to say Yes in many circumstances. (We're called upon by our faith to say no sometimes, too. But that's another sermon.)

Right now I'm suggesting that your Christian faith asks you to say Yes in a wide variety of circumstances: Yes to people, yes to places, yes to institutions, to causes, to movements that ask for your support, your affirmation, your defence.

At Christmas I gave the example of my wife and me saying Yes to that splendid old farmhouse we owned on Albert Street. We saved it from the wrecking ball and put it on the registry of Historic Homes in Ontario. Remember?

So that's first. Your Amen in our worship represents an affirmation. You are saying Yes to what has just been spoken.

The second meaning of that “Amen” at the end of a prayer is this: Appropriation. I've put that word in the Sunday bulletin as well.

When you say “Amen” at the end of a prayer or a sermon, what you're doing is, you're saying “Yes”, you're saying “I assent to this” or “I affirm this.” That's my first point.

But you're also saying this: “I am appropriating your experience, Janet or Paul, as my own.” I'm stepping inside your life for a moment, and I'm living with you, in you. I'm standing with you on this issue. You are my sister, my brother.

Now most Christians don't make enough of this aspect of their lives, in my view. As I have experienced it, Roman Catholics are better than most Protestants in this respect: in teaching their people that they're bound together in a network of human solidarity that is ultimately a good thing, not a bad thing.

We live in and through each other, I'm arguing here. "No man is an island, entire of itself..." says the great English poet John Donne. "Do not send to ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee..." We're bound together as brothers and sisters in this human life. It's a tragic mistake to assume we're each solid, solitary individuals, who live and die to ourselves.

That kind of fierce individualism is pathological for life in community. It's sick. Read the first couple chapters of the book of Acts in the Bible for a record of the first Christian community living together and sharing with each other.

The fact is, we belong together. When I am wounded, you bleed. When you prosper, I am blessed. That's the way God made us. And it's a good thing, not a bad thing.

Let me give you a very homely illustration: taxes.

Taxes are one way for a compassionate society to ensure that we know this truth, and live by it. I pay my taxes to serve you. You pay your taxes to serve me. That's OK. It's more than OK: It's actually Christ-like. It's part of the meaning of that word "atonement". Christ's life and death and ministry serves -- not himself, but me. You.

Here's an example:

In the Summer of 2001, in August on a blistering hot day, I went swimming in the Moses Springer Park outdoor pool to cool off. Right there, I had a heart attack in the water -- I didn't even finish one length of the pool, and had this terrible angina.

The pool guards knew exactly what to do. They pulled me out of the water, called 911, and in minutes I was in Grand River Hospital where they had the chance to take some tests.

The heart attack didn't kill me, you'll be glad to know. In fact it didn't even do any damage. But it gave them the opportunity to take some tests: X-rays, echo test, sonar test, electro-cardiogram tests -- on fancy machines that *your* taxes paid for. Within a day I was in Toronto -- Toronto General Hospital -- and under the knife of the finest cardio surgeon in Canada -- again, his salary coming from *your* taxes.

And he saved my life. He opened up my chest from neck to belly button and there was the biggest aortic aneurism he had ever seen, in his own words. An

enormous bubble in my aorta. Bigger than a big grapefruit. So big he couldn't even see my heart when he opened me up. It was ready to burst.

Now today, I have a scar that runs from my collarbone to my navel. But I'm alive. And I have *you* to thank. For paying *your* taxes that made it all possible. I think if I had had that heart attack in the United States, I would not be alive today.

So thanks. Thank you for paying your taxes that support a fabulously successful universal medical system. Every civilized country in the world – except the USA – has such a system, paid for out of citizen's taxes. It's simply part of the price people in a civilized societies are willing to pay for a type of social safety net.

When I am wounded, you bleed. When you prosper, I am blessed.

“Am I my brother's keeper?” Who says that in the Bible? That's right. Cain, just after he's killed his brother Abel. God asks him: “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain knows very well where his brother is. He's dead. He's just killed him. “I don't know.” says Cain in a cold-blooded lie. “Am I my brother's keeper?”

Well, yes. You are. That's the second lesson of your “Amen” at the end of a prayer. You're acknowledging that you belong together in a network of human solidarity that is meant to keep human life human. We'd all be solitary, lonely individuals without that sense of mutually appropriating at least a portion of each other's lives. Perhaps we'd be dead.

Here's the last meaning of that word “Amen” in our worship. It's in your bulletin too. Action.

When Janet prays a prayer on your behalf, and you respond with “Amen”, what you are doing is committing yourself to action. When Janet prays for justice in our world and in our community, and you say “Amen!”, you're saying, “That goes for me too. I endorse that. I want justice too. And I'm willing to act for justice.”

And when Janet prays for peace, and you say “Amen!” you're doing the same thing. You're putting your money where your mouth is. You're saying “I'm willing to act for peace.”

Now that's heavy. It's scary. It won't be easy. It's going to cost you something.

Let's take a little exercise in imagination. Suppose a visitor comes to earth from Outer Space, and observes the Christian churches praying for peace. “These

people really want peace,” I hear this visitor say. “They're praying for peace all the time: in their homes, in their hearts, every Sunday in every church.”

But then this visitor from Outer Space looks around her. (I'll make it a her although it could be a he.) She sees Christians in their daily lives, serving not Jesus their Lord, the Prince of Peace, but instead, their Emperor.

The Emperor says, “There's an enemy out there” and runs up the flag, and Christians are among the first to grab a gun. The Emperor says I need your taxes to help pay for these terrible weapons, and Christians shell out without any protest. The Emperor says I need people to work in the factories that supply these monstrous weapons to my military, and Christians give no thought to how those terrible weapons will be used.

The visitor from Outer Space has to conclude: These Christians are not at all serious about peace. They don't act for peace. They pray. But their prayers are pretty hollow.

Now let's move from fantasy to history.

There was a remarkable person in our Church's list of commemorations, Martin of Tours. He lived in the Fourth Century, in the earliest days of the Jesus Movement, the earliest days of the Christian Church. Martin Luther's parents named their child Martin after Martin of Tours. You can find his name and his Commemoration Date in our Church's Calendar in the first pages of your hymnal: pages 15, 16, and 17.

Martin of Tours was a Roman legionnaire, an Officer in the Emperor's army, and he became a Christian. He resigned his commission, and became a Conscientious Objector to war – not without accusations of cowardice.

His Date in our Calendar, by a wonderful irony, is November 11, every year.

Almost all Christians were pacifists in those earliest years of our faith – not just pray-ers for peace, but actors for peace. They're followed today by people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. And the Quakers and the Mennonites.

I think it's time today for all Christians to start to listen to them, to let them be our teachers.

I'm preaching to myself here, as well as to you. I don't think I have their

courage. Yet.

Well, that's heavy stuff. It's as heavy as you'll ever hear from me. But I am deadly serious. And Christians today stand under judgement. You stand under judgement. I stand under judgement. We pray. But too often we don't act.

I hear you asking, Will non-violence work in today's world? That's a legitimate question. But it's the second question. The first question is always this: What does the Prince of Peace require of us? That's always the first question. What does my Christian faith require of me?

Assent. Appropriation. Action. That's the meaning of "Amen."

Let me close with another terrific quote from Martin Luther. As I have said before, I wouldn't want to endorse everything Luther said. But he did have a way with words. And this quote is wonderful. I never tire of quoting it.

It's from his *Small Catechism* – you can find it in the back of your hymnal, on page 1163. It's Luther's explanation of the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come." And Luther asks, after the manner of a Catechism, "*Was ist das?*" What does this mean? His answer is terrific. Two parts.

The Kingdom of God, says Luther, comes indeed of itself without our prayer. But we pray in this petition -- in this prayer -- that it may come also to us.

I love that. First, the Gospel. Always the Gospel first. And last. "The Kingdom of God comes indeed of itself without our prayer..." That's Good News indeed. God's Rule and Reign will come of its own inner power. Its coming does not depend on you or me – our lackluster vision of things, our imperfect discipleship, our cowardly obedience. The coming of God's Kingdom depends on its own inner authority. God in Christ has sown a seed, and that seed will bring forth an incredible harvest: thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold. The Kingdom is on the way, with or without us.

But Luther goes on: "...But we pray in this petition that it may come also to us." In us. Through us. By means of us. Where we can have something to do with its coming.

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