

Sermon Series: *The Lord's Prayer for Today*

V. "Amen"

Matthew 6: 7-13; 2 Corinthians 1:12-22

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"...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him...."

Matthew 6:8b

I can't be exactly sure why, but Chick-Fil-A has often been a place of divine encounter for me. Maybe it's the friendly customer service, but I have a feeling that it has something to do with the atmosphere created by the aroma of waffle fries. Whatever it is, I was not surprised this week to have an interesting conversation with a man seated at the table next to mine as I thought about this sermon. The man saw that I had a Bible opened on the table and asked, "Son, what are you doing?" When I told him I was writing a sermon for a series on prayer, the questions all of the sudden got more intense: "Why do we pray", the man asked. I paused and tried to gather my thoughts, but the answers I gave seemed inadequate, just an eyedropper's worth of water in his query of Grand Canyon size.

I wish I had the chance to do it again, now. I would tell the man that I pray because I am a believer in Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray. But I would also tell him what may be closer to the truth for me personally. I pray because the women and men whose commitment to God and the church I admire most are people of deep prayer. One of these people is a man named Ted Purcell, a retired Baptist minister in North Carolina. Ted summed up his lifelong journey with the meaning of prayer in this way, "I used to think that monks and nuns took the easy way out by joining intentional religious communities and separating themselves from the world. But after fifty years, I am absolutely convinced that it is those prayers that hold the universe together." I pray because I believe that the church at prayer is the church in action.

This week, the final one in our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, we come to the last word of that prayer. Indeed, too, the last word of all our prayers—"Amen." Amen may be the most common word spoken in the Christian service of worship, following all of our prayers and some of our anthems

and hymns. Often the service itself ends with an “amen” whether it comes as part of the benediction or in a powerful choral response. The word comes from Hebrew, the language of much of the Old Testament, and means something like, “So be it”, “Truly”, “Let it be”....or, more colloquially translated, “Right on!” Amen is the final word of the Christian Bible, in Revelation 22.

When we close the Lord’s Prayer, or any prayer, with this little word, we are not only signaling our approval and agreement with what is said in the prayer, we are also testifying before all those gathered around us that these words are true. When we close our prayers with “amen”, we are affirming our belief in the power and presence of God in our gathered midst.

I vividly recall being in the hospital room of an elderly member of my church in North Carolina once with my father. I was about six or seven years old and used to jump at an opportunity to go visiting with my dad after school. This particular person was not able to communicate very well and I remember being amazed by sheer sight the number of machines in the room, with their red and green blinking lights and the whirring noises. My father spoke to the woman for some time, told her about the weather outside and the church service from the week before. She simply nodded her head, breathing with great difficulty. Then my father motioned to me to come over the bedside, and the three of us joined hands, and he prayed. As he closed, he began to speak the words of the Lord’s Prayer. I opened my eyes and saw the woman slowly mouthing those words along with us and then was amazed when we finished and she said, faintly but with conviction, “Amen.” Her body remembered what her memory had forgotten.

We close our prayers with this affirmation because we wish to say to God, yes! We believe the words we have spoken to be true and trustworthy.

You will note, in our text from Matthew, that before teaching the disciples the way that they ought to pray, Jesus tells them how not to pray: do not heap up empty phrases; in other words, the substance of your prayer matters more than its style. God hears all our prayers, even the simple, even the unadorned. God is not partial to eloquence or wordiness. In fact, Jesus even tells the disciples that God knows what we need before we even ask. You might be asking yourself, with my friend at Chick-Fil-A why, then do we pray? If God already knows what we need, why pray?

Some years ago, during the so-called Death of God Movement, a newspaper reporter was interviewing pre-eminent theologian Karl Barth. Barth had written literally thousands of pages of Christian theology, and so the reporter closed the interview with the question, “Professor Barth, do you still pray?” Barth responded, “Not if I am forced to.”¹

When we do pray, we pray not out of compulsion or obligation, but out of worship. God, who is powerful beyond measure and who controls the universe, desires the free and joyful human response of prayer. John Calvin, in his massive tome, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, writes that the reason we pray is so “that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve God.”² In other words, *we are changed* by prayer, not God. *Prayer is something that makes a difference in us.*

Anne Lamott is a creative storyteller and a gifted author. In one chapter of her book, *Traveling Mercies*, she writes about why she makes her son go to church every Sunday against his six-year old will. She writes, “the main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of prayer. They are people in community, who pray, who practice their faith...people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”³

When we pray together and close with a resounding, AMEN, in unison, we are reminded that the light we follow is brighter than our own. We are reminded that we do not belong primarily to the powers at work in this world. Not long ago, I saw a billboard that disturbed me, it was an advertisement for mastercard that simply read, “MasterCard, now you have the whole world in your hands.” For Christians, this is simply not true. It is God who holds the world. First, above all else, we are children of the living God. It is prayer that brings us back, over and over again to this realization.

But it is more than that. Our prayers do not only remind us that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death to God and not to ourselves. When we pray, we are also united to a community of believers that is stronger than we

¹ Daniel Migliore, Theology Lecture at Columbia Seminary, Spring 2006.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.20.3

³ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, p.100.

could ever be on our own. In that sense, all prayer is public prayer. Because whenever we pray we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

When we come to the end of our prayers and speak that ancient word, we are joyfully affirming that God is in our midst. God is here, among us, in this place. This morning we had a powerful and moving reminder of that when we welcomed three new members into the fold of God's grace that is Morningside Presbyterian. William, Meghan, and Jeremy, were just brought forward before us in an ancient custom of the Christian church, at least as ancient as prayer, that practice of the sacrament of Baptism. When they were brought forward, you noticed, they did not walk on their own two feet, they were carried by loving parents. This morning you made promises to these three children of God. Promises to teach them what is true and right. Promises to guide them and protect them. Promises to pray with them and for them.

William, Meghan, and Jeremy do not yet know the word, Amen. They have not memorized the Lord's Prayer nor did they have the faintest idea of what happened to them this morning. This, friends, is the meaning of Christian community; we speak for them words that they are not able to speak yet. We say Amen on their behalf at this time, and then teach them the meaning of the commitment that we have made. When we responded to those questions with, "We do" or "We will," you know, we could have responded with the word, Amen. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "In Christ, every one of God's promises is a "Yes". For this reason it is through him that we say "Amen" to the glory of God."

And so, as we finish this series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer and prepare to begin the season of Lent, be reminded that we do not enter this wilderness period alone. We travel together, hand-in-hand, driven on by the constant rhythm of this prayer that has guided Christians for almost two thousand years.

"In a prison camp in World War II, on a cold, dark evening after a series of beatings, after the hundreds of prisoners of war had been marched before the camp commander and harangued for an hour, the prisoners were returned to their dark barracks and told to be quiet for the rest of the night. But someone, somewhere, in one of the barracks began saying the Lord's Prayer. Some of his fellow prisoners lying next to him began to pray with him. Their prayer was overheard by prisoners in the next building who joined in. One

by one, each set of barracks joined in the prayer until, as the prayer was ending with, “thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,” hundreds of prisoners had joined their voices in a strong, growing, defiant prayer, reaching a thunderous, “Amen!” And then all was silent in the camp, but not before the tables had been turned, the prisoners had thrown off their chains, and a new world had been sighted, signaled, and stated.”⁴

William, Meghan, Jeremy, Sisters, and Brothers, “This is true!”
Amen!

⁴ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.108-109.