

WHEN "AMEN" IS TRANSLATED

Sermon, August 12, 2018

Texts: Isaiah 65:16, Revelation 3:14, Ephesians 4:1-16

As mentioned two weeks ago,¹ the Hebrew word "Amen" has remained largely untranslated down through the centuries ... you pick up a Greek, German, French, English, or Swahili Bible and you will find the phonetic spelling of the Hebrew word "Amen." Various translations over the years for "Amen" have been, "So be it", or "So it is," or "It is true," or "Let it BE true." My favorite definition or translation of 'Amen' is one I learned from the president of Cedarville University six years ago (*where I'll be driving after church today as Hannah returns to school for her senior year!*) at Steve's first week of college: "**AMEN**" MEANS "**I'M IN.**" When you say "Amen," you are saying "I'm in!" Think of it ... usually when you say "Amen," what are you doing? You're closing a heart-felt prayer, OR you are vocally agreeing with a point as a response, a way of confirming what's been said, with personal commitment: "*I agree! Amen, yes; I'm in!*"

There are a few times when translators of the Bible *have* translated the Hebrew word "Amen." One translation of "Amen" is found some fifty times in the Gospels, spoken by Jesus, and His usage of it is rather unique. Rather than using it as a response, Jesus PRECEDES what He says with "Amen." "*Amen, I say to you ...*" or "*Amen, AMEN, I say to you ...*" Our pew Bibles usually translate this as "truly;" (*the KJV says "Verily"*) but the connotation is that Jesus is asserting, and even more intensely when He repeats the 'Amen': "*Get this! What I am about to say is really and unambiguously TRUE. This is how it IS! I am really 'into' this, and you need to be also! Get 'in' with this!*" Another interesting translation is found twice in Isaiah 65:16. As we just read, our pew Bibles translate the original: "*Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth.*" Literally, that phrase in Isaiah translated "the God of truth" in the NIV is in the Hebrew "the God of **Amen.**" Yes, He is the God of Truth, in the sense that He really and truly IS, He IS true, and He is the foundation of all truth, He is the God who really and unambiguously and ultimately ... IS! And this God who IS, is actively "IN!" He's fully involved in and with His creation. He is not some detached impersonal force or spirit; He is actively *in* and involved *with* His creation. As we also read Revelation 3:14 ... a passage we'll look at more fully next week ... Jesus is referred to as, "*the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of creation.*" Jesus is unambiguously equated with God, the God of Amen, the God who ultimately IS. And as He Himself asserted in John 14, He is the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life. The ultimate AMEN.

In our Epistle reading this morning, this Jesus Who is the ultimate Amen is the one Paul encourages us to grow up into. He begins by telling us to "*live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*" Then he defines just how to do that: "*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*" And then verse 15: he exhorts, "*Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.*"

Speak the truth in love. Just as a bit of an aside, it's not always easy to speak the truth in love, is it? And especially with each other. Why is it sometimes hard to speak the truth to the people we love most? Anyone who thinks it's always easy to tell the truth to friends and family, probably doesn't have any friends or family (*or at least any friends or family that care to be around them!*). One reason it is hard to speak the truth to the people we love is that familiarity can blur objectivity. As the old saying goes, "Familiarity breeds contempt." (*Actually, familiarity can also breed contentment, but that's another sermon.*) You might just be too close to the artwork of someone else's life, so close that you can only see the scratches and imperfections. Good art rarely looks good when you are that close. So before you go speaking "truth" to your loved one, you may have to "back off," at least for a bit. In any close relationship, there are times you may have to step back in order to see the big picture, in order to see the artwork BETTER. All of us are works in progress, none of us is a completed work of art this side of heaven ... Jesus Christ is the only truly perfect person who ever existed. At times "backing off" to get perspective and/or to give space can be the best thing to do, at least for a time.

Another reason why it is hard to speak the truth to the people we love is that sometimes we just don't really know what the truth is, or we aren't confident of the truth we profess to believe. In this day and age of pluralism we hear about my truth, your truth, their truth, the therapist's truth, what's-true-for-you-is-not-true-for-me truth, and then, like Pontius Pilate, we are tempted to throw up our hands and ask "*Truth? Truth? What is Truth?*" Pilate was trying to govern a people being torn apart by conflicting claims of truth. The Essenes, the

¹ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/im-in-with-the-in-crowd.pdf>

Pharisees, the Sadducees (*and even the Happy-u-sees*) all had conflicting theological truths. The Romans, the Herodians, and the Zealots all had conflicting political truths. And the way Pilate saw things, none of these truth claims were making any of these groups of people more civil, let alone loving. And in our own society, in our churches and abomina ... er, denominations, we can also grow very weary of the *mytruththeirtruthyourtruth* shouting back and forth of "diversity," and some are tempted to just jettison the whole notion of the Truth altogether, because we think that's the only way we'll ever "just get along." In our hearts, though, we just know that can't work for long. At some point love has to be grounded in a common truth, a common commitment, a common understanding of what is good and right and moral, or the love just will not endure.

I've said this before in years past, but Truth is like a skeleton ... skeletons are frameworks of bones, and bones are *meant* to be rigid, hard, unyielding. Just ask anyone plagued by osteoporosis ... brittle, fragile, un-rigid bones are a detriment to one's overall well being. And Love can be likened to the flesh and muscle that encases the bones. Sometimes we try to create a false dichotomy between Truth and Love, pitting love and truth against each other ... as if you can have Truth, or you can have Love, but you can't have both. You can see this in some churches today (*and I exaggerate for rhetorical purposes; no church is entirely this way or that*). On one end of the scale, you have the "true" churches, where every anatomical bone of truth is exactly in place. Orthodoxy is correct, everybody knows the creeds and confessions and commandments and Bible verses to the letter. They just go around being "right" all the time ... rigid, doctrinaire. Sure, it's all there, it's all true, it's all "right," but it's so rigid ... there's no life, no warmth, no humor; there's no love.

In reaction to this, some say, "*See, bones are a big problem. We don't want bones. Bones are too unyielding, too rigid.*" So at the other end of the spectrum we have the "love" churches, or what one friend of mine calls the "bean bag" churches ... the come-as-you-are and stay-as-you-are "bean bag" theology: "*Come on in, be comfortable, chill out, relax, you're OK, I'm OK, we're all OK ...*" But you know, you sit in bean bags too long, they eventually ruin your posture, making it all the more difficult for you to sit *upright*. The only absolute truth for such people is that no truth should be held too absolutely, because it isn't "loving" to those who disagree. In other words, there are no bones! Since there are no bones, there are no bones to pick with each other. But if there are no bones, no truth, then there's nothing left but a mushy *blob* which finds it impossible to stand for anything. How could you walk, how could you function, if suddenly someone took your bones away? Love without truth does nothing to help people be upright and stand tall.

Howard Hendricks, former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, used to tell his new students at the outset of each academic year, "*God never called us to teach the Bible.*" He would allow that to sink in for a moment, then continue, "*He called us to teach people the Bible.*" His point was that the vital truths of the Scripture are best communicated and apprehended in an atmosphere of loving, nurturing care. Churches are places where people need to love and be loved, where people can nurture and be nurtured, where people can care and be cared for ... a place were people are embraced with the flesh and sinew of love, supported by the strong bones of truth. *Both* are equally important!

TWO QUICK THINGS: **First**, Truth can best be spoken in a committed, loving relationship that says, "I care about you." Love never threatens. **Second**, to speak the truth humbly means that our primary concern isn't so much to convince others of OUR truth, to prevail in OUR argument, but to pursue truthfulness together ... which means in humility, gentleness and patience we are seeking to *grow up together* into the One who is the Truth, as Paul encourages us to do; "... *we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.*" There is the key. Jesus Christ is to be at the Head of all our commitments and relationships. He is higher than us or our opinion. And in Jesus Christ, love and truth hold together.

Our calling is not to prevail in an argument, but to present ourselves with the humility, gentleness and patience of Jesus Christ who is the Truth. If we continually and recklessly alienate people by our bony ... or, *bone-headed* ... truth-telling, we really are not displaying the gracious, patient, reconciling, loving truth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. And if we try to love people by ignoring their need for the Truth, especially the truth of their need for a Savior, our well-intentioned love can actually be cruel. Who wants a doctor who refuses to tell you the truth of your condition out of fear of offending you or hurting your feelings? It is neither loving nor the truth. Jesus wasn't any less loving when He chastised the Pharisees than when He picked up children and placed them on his lap, because in Him love and truth hold together. Our calling is to be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love, speaking the truth in love, as we seek in all things to grow up into Jesus Christ.

The ultimate Amen.