

THE APOSTOLIC AMEN CORNER

Sermon, August 1, 2021

Texts: Ephesians 6:1-10; selections from John 6

The Amen Corner is the nickname given to the difficult golfing terrain of holes 11, 12 and 13 at Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, coined by Sports Illustrated writer Herbert Wind after Arnold Palmer played those holes in almost miraculous fashion in a 1958 tournament. The Amen Corner is also a well-known 1954 play by James Baldwin. It is also a street in London near St. Paul's Cathedral, and in some churches it is an area of pews typically occupied by ardent and vocal worshipers. Informally, an "Amen Corner" defines a group of people that give unwavering support to a leader, a policy or political party. Today we will look at the Apostolic Amen Corner, the small band of faithful disciples who stayed with Jesus after thousands had more or less given up and left.

If you have been around here awhile, you are familiar with the little responsive "liturgy" initially taught us by the late Rev. Dr. Tyler Johnson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Newport for over thirty years, who after his retirement worshipped with us frequently and supplied our pulpit on occasion. We slightly amended this liturgy by adding another line approximately nine years ago.

"God is good." "ALL THE TIME." "All the time." "GOD IS GOOD." "Amen?" "I'M IN!"

If you are new here and have not heard this little liturgy ... well, today I'm opting to do a slightly **AMEN**-ded summer sermon rerun to inform any new to our congregation in recent years (*as well as those who may have missed those Sundays in 2012 and 2018*), so you can be "In with the 'I'M IN' crowd" here (*that's a bit of a pun on Dobie Gray's "I'm In with the In Crowd" hit of 1963¹, which increasingly fewer of us here this morning may recognize!*).

There are a few Biblical words that defy exact translation, so much so that translators over the centuries have, for the most part, left the words untranslated and have simply put in the phonetic spelling ... two words in particular are the words "Hallelujah" and "Amen." In some translations, "Hallelujah" is translated as "Praise the Lord;" as it is thought to come from the root Hebrew word (*"Hallel"*) "to praise" and the first syllable of God's holy name (*"Jahweh"*). I'm told, however, this isn't an entirely accurate translation; no one is absolutely certain what "Hallelujah" means ... so again, in many Bibles it is left untranslated and spelled out phonetically. The Hebrew "Amen" has also remained largely untranslated down through the centuries ... you pick up a German, French, English, Swahili, Japanese or Rhode Islandese Bible and you will find the phonetic spelling of the Hebrew "Amen." Various translations for "Amen" have been, "So be it", or "So it is," or "It is true," or "Let it BE true." Well, if you were here in 2012 and 2018, you may remember my favorite translation of Amen was an insight shared by the president of Cedarville University nine years ago ... at Dr. Brown's opening chapel talk in Steve's first week of college in 2012, he suggested: "**AMEN**" MEANS "I'M IN." Think of it ... usually when you say "Amen," what are you doing? You're closing a prayer, yes, but sometimes you're agreeing with a point, giving an affirming response, confirming what's been said with personal passion and commitment: when you say "Amen," you are saying "I'm in!" *"I agree! I'm in!" "Amen, yes; I'm in!" (As my daughter Hannah helpfully suggested at the time, think of it as saying 'Amen' with a Southern drawl.)* Since that Sunday in 2012, we added something to the Rev. Johnson's response: "God is good." "ALL THE TIME." "All the time." "GOD IS GOOD." "Amen?" "I'M IN!"

There are a few times when the translators *have* translated the word "Amen." One translation of "Amen" is found some *fifty* times in the Gospels, spoken by Jesus. Rather than using "Amen" as a response, He *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 connotation is that when preceding a statement with Amen (*and doubly so when He repeats "Amen"*), Jesus is asserting: *"Get this! This is important! I'm in with this! What I am about to say is really and unambiguously TRUE. This is how it is!"*

Amen! I'm in! I'm ready to suit up, as Paul admonishes in our Epistle reading. *"Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand..."* The one who says Amen wants to take a stand and say unapologetically, *"I am a Christian."* I want to put on my armor and stand for the Cause and my Captain, because "I'm in!" I'm ready to get my helmet of salvation on my head and my breastplate of righteousness in place and my belt of truth firmly buckled and hold up my shield of faith, and I want to get good with understanding and using the word of God (*which Paul calls the sword of the Spirit*), because "I'm in!"

There's more than a sermon in itself here, but think of the intentional imagery of Paul: I need to get my **helmet of salvation** on; in short, I need to make sure my head is protected, that my *"head is on straight"*, with the knowledge of what God's holiness and salvation and grace is all about, that I am called to **protect** my brain and to use it well in His service. I also need to get my **breastplate of righteousness** in place ... that's the part of the armor that covers the heart, which implies that my heart needs to be right, it needs to be kept safe, for a righteous and guarded heart is a strong protection! Frederick Douglass once said, *"The life of the nation is secure only when the nation is*

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF7KU50IY34>

honest, truthful and virtuous." And a nation is only as honest, truthful and virtuous as the people who are in it and who represent it in office. He then added: "*The antidote to strife is virtue.*" That is worth a sermon in itself, but not now.

Yes, I fail and I stumble and I sin, but I need to deal with it and get my heart right and my head on straight with God through grace and I need to do all I can to live virtuously, righteously ... with my belt of Truth firmly buckled so my pants don't fall down and trip me up! I know half-fallen pants seem to be a fad these days, which I CAN'T STAND ... **Man up!** Pull up your pants, put on that Belt and buckle it tight! Truth is **so** central to our faith; make sure it has a firmly buckled grasp of our core holding *everything* in place and keeping us from looking like buffoonish clowns! (*This, too, is a sermon in itself, but when we start playing fast and loose with the truth, when truth is compromised or ignored, everything falls down or falls apart and we really do become foolish!.*) Then carry the **shield** of a tempered and tested faith, and then learn to "wield" ... i.e., learn to understand, know, use and apply ... the word of God, which is the Sword of the Spirit! Then lace up your Gospel shoes, "shoes" that enable you to walk with faith in a world that so desperately needs to see someone genuinely and truthfully and sincerely walking this faith, and all the while doing this continue to *pray pray pray!* Pray like it all depends on God, but work like it all depends on you! **AMEN?** (*'I'm in!*)

In our Gospel reading we read selected verses from John 6, especially the closing verses. I omitted the feeding of the five thousand which we looked at last week in Mark's gospel. This hungry crowd got fed by Jesus, they all received a miraculous, tangible blessing from His gracious hands.. In Verse 15 John tells us they were ready to come and make Him king; at long last here was somebody who can take care of their hunger, somebody who will meet their needs. But Jesus doesn't go with this agenda. There's a sermon in itself here, but He runs away from this agenda, off into a mountain, because simply feeding human appetites and satisfying desires isn't what His kingship is all about! The crowd eventually finds him back in Capernaum and say, "*Rabbi, when did you get here?*" Jesus responds by saying, "*You are looking for Me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill.*" In verse 32, Jesus says, "*My Father gives the true bread from heaven.*" Apparently not fully understanding His implications, the crowd responds, "*Sir, give us this bread.*" Then, Jesus cuts to the chase and says, "*I AM the Bread of Life.*"

From here to the end of the chapter, it becomes clear these are not the words the crowd wanted to hear. They want Jesus to provide for their needs. They want Jesus to satisfy their appetites. But Jesus says there is a whole lot more to all of this than just meeting our temporary hungers. He is not the bread giver; He *is* the Bread. He is not the means to an end, He *is* the end. He is not our Savior because we have use for Him in our lives. He is our Savior because in His sacrificial love we find salvation; in Him alone our deepest needs are met. Then He goes on to speak hard things; at first blush He even seemed to be talking about eating His body and drinking His blood. Some are probably thinking, "*What is this?*" Apparently, many of them really weren't interested in trying to figure out what He was really saying. Perhaps, though, there were some who did begin to understand the gravity of what He was saying. From the vantage point of history we know the price of salvation was His broken body and shed blood; He *will* give His very flesh and blood to save others. The more insightful ones may be thinking, "*What, then, will He ask of us in return? Where will He ask us to go? What will He ask us to give? What will this grace demand of us? It all just sounds too much.*"

At the end of the chapter we find the crowd was gone. So much for "effective church growth strategy;" a congregation of well over five thousand has dwindled to a small handful of twelve or so committed stalwarts. Many of the fickle followers had turned away; they were no longer going to follow Jesus ... probably because He would not give them what they wanted, or perhaps they didn't understand what He was talking about, or maybe because it all seemed too hard, and/or too confusing, or too demanding; so, they left. Jesus then turned to those who remained, and said, "*Will you go also?*" In what is one of his shining moments, Peter replies, "*Lord, to whom would we go? We've come to believe that you are the Holy One of God. We have come to believe that You alone have the words of life*" And there it is. Peter is saying, "Amen." "**LORD, WE'RE STILL IN!**" They are "in", no matter what ... the apostolic Amen Corner.

As a pastor, I can appreciate Peter's response. Over the years I've seen many people come and go in their journeys of faith and levels of commitment to Jesus Christ and His church. We have a fairly full sanctuary this morning, but if all the people who have wandered in and out of these doors over the past twenty-thirty years were here this morning, we might have a crowd numbering in the thousands as well! I've seen people who come for six months, a year or longer and then for whatever reasons fail to return. I've watched people bring their children to Sunday School and even church, but then drift away as the children leave school. I've seen members of our youth programs graduate from high school and disappear, only sometimes returning when they have children of their own (*and probably realizing they need HELP with this awesome, intimidating task of parenting!*). I have seen people who have spent ten, twenty even thirty years in the church, who have some disagreement with another member or with me as the pastor, or they'll have some loss or crisis or tragic event happen in their lives, and are never seen again. But I've also been privileged ... very privileged ... to see many people, like many of you here this morning filling this sanctuary on a beautiful summer day, who are "in" for the long haul, no matter what.

What a treasure, what a blessing, what an encouragement to me and to others are those of you who are still "in," in for the long term, as followers of Jesus Christ. You have a special kind of faith, a faith that says "**Amen.**" A faith that says, "I'm in." I'm *still* in. Because you have learned: "God is good." "ALL THE TIME." "All the time." "GOD IS GOOD." "Amen?" "I'M IN!"