

## **Amen and Blessed Be**

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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The news hit us like a ton of bricks. Kevin and I had just returned from a trip to abroad to learn that a good friend in the antiques trade had died. Like many of our friends, he was a Christian, though how devout I can't say. Nonetheless, his funeral service was held at a church where more of the focus was on Jesus and the afterlife than on the deceased. The liturgy included recitation of the Nicene Creed, a statement of belief foundational to orthodox Christianity which affirms, among other things, the divine nature of Jesus and the existence of a Holy Trinity. All of which is fine...my point here is not to criticize those beliefs...I just don't happen to share them.

And so, I simply abstain from recitation of the Creed and don't say, "Amen" at the end of or at any other part of the liturgy I can't, in good conscious, affirm. This had been a practice I engaged in for years when attending religious services without issue. That is, until this particular funeral.

Following the service, another friend came up to me and said he noticed that I hadn't participated in reciting the Creed. I confirmed that I had not and offered my reasons. Curiously, this friend is not particularly religious yet he seemed genuinely offended and fired back, "Couldn't you just pretend...move your lips and say, "Amen" at the end?"

Sooner or later, most UU's end up hearing a story or joke about how UU's are such bad congregational singers because they're too busy reading ahead to see if they agree with the words in the hymnal. I don't do that. I will sing hymns where the theology expressed doesn't reflect my own, in part, because most hymns don't end in "Amen".

Wait...isn't amen just a fancy way of saying, "the end" after a prayer or sermon?

Well, it does often come off as spoken punctuation:  
Period, Exclamation Point, Amen!

Now, anyone who's ever asked what amen means has probably been told it is spoken to express approval or assent to what preceded it be it a prayer, creed, or sermon. But that is only part of it. Amen comes from the Hebrew word amen and is commonly taken to mean "certainly" or "truly."

But as is often the case some of the nuance contained in the original word has been lost in translation. And indeed, amen is more than an expression of approval or assent. It is, to quote one scholar, “response-seeking and self-involving.” Which is to say it both invokes the necessary support (God, for some) to act in favor of what has been prayed, stated, or preached AND accepts the invitation to take one’s part in its fulfillment.

So when my friend asked, “Couldn’t you just pretend...move your lips and say, “Amen” at the end?” The answer was and still is, “No, I can’t.”

Because amen means something.

And rather than explore this through the lens of the Nicene Creed, let’s consider our first reading from Genesis. Chances are, if you grew up in or adjacent to the Christian tradition, you know this story as the basis for why God sent Jesus to save humankind. The gist of the creative myth as commonly preached is this: Human beings didn’t know how good they had it and royally messed things up for humanity by defying God. God got mad and decided to make life hard and humans mortal as punishment for this transgression.

And the congregation said, “Amen” and that first mistake became original sin.

Over and over the congregation said, “Amen” and from that a doctrine of humanity’s inherently corrupt nature was developed.

And the congregation said, “Amen”, and the idea that only those predestined to be saved would enter heaven came into being...and so on and so on.

Each Amen affirming and advancing a narrative of human sinfulness and helplessness over time. A narrative followers carried home after worship. And so today a nation largely shrugs its shoulders at corrupt politicians, predatory capitalism (now we have a trillionaire!) mass shootings, and the countless isms that plague its population chalking it up to “human” nature and belief there’s nothing we can do to change things.

Of course there’s another way to read the myth of the Garden of Eden. In his book, “How Good Do We Have To Be”, the late Rabbi Harold Kushner sums it up this way,

“...the story of the Garden of Eden is not an account of people being punished for having made one mistake, losing Paradise because they were not perfect. It is the story of the first human beings graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being

human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are things such as Good and Evil. They enter a world where they will inevitably make many mistakes, not because they are weak or bad but because the choices they confront will be such difficult ones. But the satisfactions will be equally great. While animals can only be useful and obedient, human beings can be good. The story of the Garden of Eden is not a story of the Fall of Man, but of the emergence of Humankind.”

And in various parts of the world throughout history, some congregations said, “Amen”, to that understanding and liberal religion, including ours, was born.

With each successive amen over the centuries it grew... and reflective of Kushner’s 20th century summation, it did not and still does not always mature or get things right, but it keeps trying.

And the congregation said, “Amen”, unleashing the religious imagination with people like Walt Whitman proclaiming, The sum of all reverence is contained within humanity. And that the divinity of bibles and religion rests not on their distance from, but their origins within, humankind. “I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still. It is not they who give the life – it is you who give the life.” For Whitman God resided in all whom he encountered.

As the Rev. Dana Worsnop observes, “Whitman was intoxicated with the holiness and sacredness of everything. “The sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon it.” His eye did not flinch from poverty, degradation, and suffering, he simply saw the humanity and worth of each person whatever their condition. And he loved us all.”

And the congregation said, “Amen”, and in time gave rise to ideas within our own faith tradition like those of the Rev. John Dietrich who, in his 1927 sermon “Unitarianism and Humanism”, wrote, “ By religion, I mean the knowledge of and duties toward humankind.”

Yet Dietrich’s humanism doesn’t deny or take offense at the idea of or another’s belief in God. It does not bristle at “thoughts and prayers” when sincerely offered in the wake tragedy. But God or no God, it places, “faith in humanity, a knowledge of humankind and our duties toward one another first...” Which is curiously not unlike the theist Rabbi Harold Kushner’s assertion that, “Religion is the voice that says, I will guide you through this minefield of difficult moral choices, sharing with you the insights and experiences of the greatest souls of the past, and I will offer you comfort and forgiveness when you are troubled by the painful choices you made.” Like Dietrich, Kushner sees religion as necessarily

being concerned with exploring, learning, and practicing what it means to be human.

Part of this practice is discerning how to translate our assent to this and other values of our faith into action. How to live our amen, as it were, as individuals and as a community. And if we're ever stuck or unsure of where to look for guidance, one of the best places to look, to my mind, is the memory of those who have gone before us that we hold in our hearts, paying particular attention to the stories you or other people choose to retell about a person...and to ask, what is their legacy?

In this you will find the most reliable guides are those who are remembered as generous in some way... spiritually, materially, and sometimes both, often regardless of means. People like Fred Keefe and his partner Don Gregory, who bequeathed what we today call our Vision Fund. People like Sally Boyd, ex-wife of the Rev. Charles Herrick, who bequeathed part of the sale of her condo which was later used to help fund the parking lot. People like Douglas A. Farmer Jr. whose wish, and Laura French whose design, paired with the donation and labor of others, are responsible for our beautiful memorial garden. More recently SUUS unexpectedly received a bequest from Barbara "Bobbie" Carlson's estate and, as some of you know, Richard Gressley, whose loving and generous spirit I, as many of you here today, had the privilege of knowing first hand, bequeathed a significant portion of his estate to SUUS.

Each of these people knew amen isn't just a word you say at the end of prayer or sermon, it is action you take, a path you forge, a charge you take up to take part in its fulfillment. And for them, that action, path, or charge was, generosity. It is one of many paths we might take, but one whose impact and importance cannot be overestimated to ensure this tradition and community is here for all who seek the balm of this chosen faith. Indeed, what we choose to say "amen" to, and how, shapes its fulfillment.

Thus, it has been my intention during the first three years I have had the privilege of addressing you from this pulpit to speak first and foremost to our humanity and to amplify the voice of our tradition, as expressed in the principles, sources, and values that guide, offer comfort, and forgiveness as we journey together ever evolving in our knowledge of and duties toward humankind. In short, I have striven to offer you something worthy of your amen and look forward to continuing to do so in the years to come as your settled minister.

And what of blessed be, you may be wondering sensing I've reached the conclusion of my sermon without mentioning the second part of its title?

It's quite simple really. For me, "Blessed be", is an expression of my wish that you be blessed whatever your response to my words, mindful of the wisdom of the 6th century Buddhist monk, Bodhidharma who taught, "The essence of the Way is detachment." An indication not of apathy, but of profound trust... that paradise is found not lost in our becoming human.

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