

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands – Rev. Cheryl Raine
Sunday, October 20, 2019

First Reading is 1 Chronicles 29:10-13

¹⁰ Then David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. ¹¹ Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹² Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³ And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

Second Reading is Matthew 6:5-15

⁵ “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Message is entitled, “A Final Word: Amen!”

For the last six weeks we have walked through Jesus’ instructions to the disciples about prayer, which included the Lord’s prayer. As I share one last sermon on Jesus’ instructions, my counsel would be these two thoughts: be attentive and be authentic. That is, make sure you are paying attention to what you pray and this is directly related to our practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday. Pay attention as you pray and see if God has a word for you each time you pray. With an attentive spirit, we can listen deeply with our hearts and lives, even as we pray with words, asking what’s stirring within me as I pray? How might God be calling me to enact these particular words on this particular day. How might God be calling us as a community to enact the communal words we pray together?

Authenticity is critical as well. Do not try to make nice prayers, when your spirit is disillusioned or distraught. Pray as the psalmists did, trusting that God wants our truth and not some platitude. Trust that the Holy One who created the ever-expanding universe as well as each miniscule molecule of life can grasp the full range of our emotional experiences as we journey through the peaks and valleys of this mystery we call life. The mystery we call God is always ready to hear our prayers and to engage us relationally. So, “Do not be afraid,” as the God messengers often said. Pray with authenticity and attentiveness.

As we turn our focus to the prayer that Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, did you notice something in particular from the reading this morning? Did a phrase that often seems rote draw your attention? Was there a particular phrase of the Lord’s Prayer that instantly had more meaning today than before, because of time we have spent with this prayer?

I know that the phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread,” has a richer meaning because of this study. The “aha” came during the class on this phrase because the author of the study reiterated that we cannot feed ourselves. At first that sounds strange, because I can feed myself. I have financial resources that make that possible. I do not have to skip a meal, unless I want to do so intentionally. Yet, the study author, John C. Purdy, reminds us that it is God who has given us the seeds that grow into produce through the gift of soil, nutrients, water and sun. It is God who has knit together living creatures and given them the breath of life. Without these God given gifts those of us who eat living creatures would not have food. Purdy reminds us over and over again that we cannot feed ourselves and if we are attentive to what we pray and reflect for even a moment, we begin to realize the miracle that there is food in our pantries and refrigerators. And with this realization, I also am compelled to consider the pronoun “us.” I have to ask myself how can I contribute to the daily sustenance for others and not just me. What word or phrase has taken on a deeper meaning for you?

As we turn to the final phrase of what we know as the Lord’s Prayer, you might have noticed, as I read from the Gospel of Matthew one last time, that something was missing from the text! The final phrase of the Lord’s Prayer, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen!” is not in the text!

Have you ever wondered why? Well, none of the earliest biblical manuscripts include this doxology in the text. We also know that our earliest church theologians did not refer to this doxology either. Scholars suggest that when the prayer began to be used in public worship in the 4th century that the doxology was added. The phrase added was a common pattern for a Jewish benediction, which sounds a bit like David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles:

“Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, **the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; ... yours is the kingdom, O LORD...** In your hand are power and might.”

The doxology we pray acknowledges God’s kingdom, power, and glory. Adding this doxology reminds the one who prays of God’s presence and power as they endeavor to live a life of faith.

Yet, how is the doxology applicable for our daily lives? Author Frank Thomas writes, “The doxology is an affirmation of faith that with God’s help we will prevail in the end, despite the most brutal and honest facts and assessments of our current reality. No matter how evil ‘evil’ is **God alone is the kingdom, God alone is the power, and God alone is the glory.**”

The sentence, “No matter how evil ‘evil’ is God alone is the kingdom, power, and glory,” is attributed to Admiral Jim Stockdale. Jim was the highest-ranking U.S. military officer in the Hanoi prison during the Vietnam War. He was imprisoned for eight years, tortured many times,

and lived without prisoner's rights, no set release date and no certainty as to whether he would ever see his family again. He fought an internal war with his captors and their attempts to use prisoners for propaganda. At one point, he even disfigured his face so that he could not be put on video as an example of a "well-treated" prisoner. Stockdale also exchanged secret intelligence information with his wife through their letters, even though discovery of his actions would mean torture and perhaps even death.

When he was finally released, he was asked how he survived and he responded, "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, that, in retrospect, I would not trade." He continued saying, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end with the need to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

When I look at my own history, I don't have an experience like Admiral Jim Stockdale. Yet, I remember a very challenging year in my life, which I have spoken about before. I was a foreign exchange student in South Africa. The brutal facts were I was only 16 years old and I was 18,000 miles away from home. I was only months into a year-long stay and I was miserable in the family that hosted me. The mother and I had a strained relationship from the very beginning. I never seemed to do anything right for her. I was always seen as an intrusion, never fully being received into the family. I was even selectively excluded from some family events. The adult in the organization responsible for looking after me was going through a divorce and not available either. I felt extremely isolated and lonely, with no one to turn to. I didn't want my parents to know and so I entrusted my misery to God. I never lost faith that I would prevail in the end because God was with me. In retrospect, I know that that experience was a defining moment in my life and I would never trade it. It was long, it was difficult, it was lonely and isolating, but I know that my South African experience shaped who I have become.

When did you in the face of difficulties trust that in the end you would prevail, because God was with you? Thomas writes, "This is the affirmation of thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory – it is faith that we will prevail in the end **because of who God is.**" No matter what happens in our lives, God is the kingdom and the power and the glory. No matter what happens in our lives we belong to God, we can prevail to the end whatever it may be, for as Apostle Paul said, "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." This is an incredibly important lesson, for if we lose hope in the end of the story, then we will be swallowed up by temptations and trials. If we lose hope in the end of the story, that God is the kingdom, the power and the glory, then we will fall into the hands of the evil one.

So, when we pray "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever," we declare our commitment to hold fast to the end of the story. A job loss will not be the end of the story. A broken relationship will not be the end of the story. Financial hardship will not be the end of the story. Relinquishing our driver's license will not be the end of the story. Feelings of isolation or loneliness will not be the end of the story. A debilitating illness will not be the end of the story. The death a loved one will not be the end of the story. You fill in the blank for the brutally honest facts that you are facing in your own life. None of these facts need be the end of the story.

What Admiral Stockdale went through, in retrospect, blessed him, for he knew in the midst of his captivity that he was a beloved child of God. Stockdale entrusted his life, whether he lived or died, to God alone, who he knew to be the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. This affirmation is like an exclamation mark on the prayer. This doxology reminds us that nothing, and I mean nothing, can overcome the end of the story that we know most fully through Christ Jesus!

Now there is one more word that we add to the Lord's Prayer that is also not found in the biblical text. The word is "Amen!" We may often think that "Amen" just signals that a prayer is over and we should lift our heads and unfold our hands. Yet, its Jewish root is so much more meaningful. Amen is actually an adjective that literally means firm, true, sound, or reliable. It means, "It shall be so" or "Let it be." To say "Amen" is to say, "I tell you that what has just been prayed is true." To say "Amen" is to say, "We believe what we just prayed." To say Amen is to say, "What we just prayed will be done." Saying "Amen" affirms the worshippers' commitment to do what was just prayed. That is, "Amen" is a vow, a commitment!

So when we pray, "Amen," we are not just finishing a prayer. We are giving our assent to everything we have just prayed. We are committing ourselves to establishing God's kingdom and doing his will, to give and forgive, to resist evil in this world this day and in the days to come. When we say "Amen," we are committing to be partners with God in bringing heaven on earth, as we align our will to God's will.

The question for us today, as we conclude this series, is whether or not we are living the vow we make every time we pray. Does our "Amen," have meaning? Are we partnering with God? Is earth more like heaven because you and I are alive? Are we working towards helping all people have access to daily sustenance? Have we forgiven those who have sinned against us? By God's grace are we resisting the temptations of powers and principalities of our world? And do we really believe that nothing can overcome the end of the story that we know in Jesus Christ? Does our "Amen," have meaning?

Remember my counsel? I suggest "Amen" invites us to be attentive and authentic as we pray. May it be so. Amen.