

Οτι σου εστιν η Βασιλεια,
και η δυναμις,
και η δοξα εις τους αιωνας,
Αμην

“For yours is the Kingdom
And the power
And the glory, into eternity.
Truly.”

(Attested to by various ancient sources)

Whenever my dad led our family in prayer before a meal, he prayed the same prayer every day for decades in that formal kind of Cantonese that I don't understand— except for the ending, “a-moon.” When I was growing up, tradition meant sticking to things comfortable things, even if they didn't fully make sense. As I grew older and more experienced in the Church, I figured being nondenominational meant that I didn't have to bow my knee to tradition anymore because I was a free man, able to pick and choose almost anything I wanted as I constructed my own private Christianity. The hymns we sang were slow and tiresome, so I opted for heavy reverb and drum solos. Prayer meetings were boring, so I skipped all of them. And the Bible? Well *that* was for people who couldn't grasp superior things like science or philosophy. I was arrogant and ignorant in the way I thought that everything and everyone who upheld Christian “traditions” were stiff and backwards.

Times have changed, though, and I've changed with them. The more I learn about the last two thousand years of the people of God trying their best to be faithful to God, I realize how *little* I actually know. I figured going to seminary would cure my ignorance and fill me up with every kind of knowledge, but all it did was make me feel stupider. And, I have to admit, I entertained the thought

that helping to start a church meant we could be free to redefine what being the Church means. But the truth is, we can't define what it means to be Christian without tradition, without God's people thinking superbly about what we believe in and why. Though you may not feel it, we all stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants and we owe them a debt of gratitude every time we reach out for the living God.

The fragment of a verse we have just read is a good example of how the community of God has helped shape the Bible we think we read. Before now, most of us probably haven't questioned why certain things appear in the New Testament and why others don't. We assume scholars know what they're doing when they reject so-called "Gnostic gospels" and "hidden epistles." We tend to think that all the decisions about "what's in and what's out" were made centuries ago by white men in funny hats and long robes. Make no mistake—the canon, or the rule of what's in and what's out—is closed. It would be very unlikely for the Gospel of Thomas or the Epistle of Barnabas to make a sudden appearance in your NIV's. However, this verse that only appears in the margins¹ of some of your English translations gives us an opportunity to look at how the Word of God is as much a product of the people of God as it is a product of God himself.

There are other passages in the New Testament that get the italicized treatment—meaning they don't appear in the earliest manuscripts. One of the most famous stories of Jesus is when an adulterous woman is dragged before him for his judgment.² Yet instead of condemning her to be stoned, the Son of Man stoops and writes on the ground. After that, he stands up and says "*Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" We don't know what Jesus wrote

¹ Earliest attestations include the Didache (early 2nd C), which is "heavily dependent on Matthew". ("*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name; your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us today our bread for the morrow; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but save us from the evil one, for yours is the power and the glory forever.*" -- Did 8:2

² John 8:1-11

on the ground, but what we do know is that the angry crowd slowly dispersed. Jesus looks up when everyone's gone and asks the woman "Has no one condemned you?" She replies "no one". "Then neither do I condemn you," he says. "On your way, and leave your sinful lifestyle." This is a touching story because Jesus is portrayed as nonjudgmental and compassionate—but it's also *not* in the Gospel manuscripts that were written closest to the time of Jesus.

By now, you should be feeling uncomfortable because the question of why we have the Bible we read, the Scriptures we memorize, and the Word we preach has been left unanswered. For now, I'm going to put that question aside for either the discussion after the sermon or for another time and place when we can talk more fully about why we can still have confidence that this still is the Word of God. Today, and as it always is on Sunday mornings, our task isn't to necessarily pick apart a passage for mere academic enjoyment, but to ask the more difficult question of the text: what is the Word of the Lord for us today?

Normally, when I prepare a sermon, I ask this on behalf of the congregation to the text. Yet today, since this particular phrase doesn't occur in the regular form of most modern translations, the question is probably going to be left hanging in our minds. Most of us are so used to praying the Lord's Prayer this way that it doesn't seem right to conclude these comforting phrases with what seems like such an abrupt ending.

Yet there are three related things I'd like to call our attention to.

The first is that no matter what you think about the Bible—whether it's the Word of God or just a book full of irrelevant stories—we all rely on a community to give it to us, translate it, and even interpret it. In the first century, Christians scattered around the cities of the eastern Mediterranean preserved the letters of the church-planter and evangelist Paul. In the fourth century, a nutty old scholar named Jerome was commissioned to translate a new Latin version of the Bible from the

pieces of Greek and Hebrew texts. In the seventeenth century, King James the First of England commissioned another translation that would conform to the theology of the newish Church of England. In 1946, a Bedouin shepherd boy discovered a cave full of scrolls containing two thousand year-old fragments of the Bible. And to this day, we are still busy putting all of this together, modifying what we have with what new information we get.

This has resulted in some people pointing to the process of recovering and translating the Bible saying “see? It can’t be true.” Yet every scholar who works on these scraps of papyrus, shards of broken pottery, and tattered pieces of parchment testifies to the remarkable consistency of what was written two millennia ago to what we now hold in our hands. There are changes, yes, but up until this point, every new piece of information we receive via archaeology and philology tell us again and again that, insofar as we can possibly know a thing, this is indeed the Word of God. The Montreal Canadiens hockey club has this as its motto: “*To you from failing hands we throw the torch. Be yours to hold it high.*” This, I believe, is the way we can helpfully look at our forebears in the faith who suffered so much to give us this text. It is our duty now to hold this torch high so that by its light, others can come to know the living God.

Second, we need to take note of how the community of God has ended its prayer: for *yours* is the Kingdom, *yours* is the power, *yours* is the glory, forever, amen. At the end of the prayer Jesus teaches us to pray is a final confession that we are not in control, nor are we God. When we pray “The Kingdom, the power, and the glory are all yours,” we are praying ourselves away from selfishness and into God-centeredness. You cannot pray the Lord’s Prayer listlessly or dumbly when you pray it honestly and from your heart, because at every turn there is the renewed assertion that you are not God. However, as harsh as that sounds, rejoice that you’re not God—there is a ton of comfort in being free from the burden of responsibility that being God entails.

The third, and perhaps most unfamiliar thing for us to note is how we conclude the Lord's Prayer: "amen."

"Amen" is actually a Hebrew word that has a very wide range of meanings. An ancient Israelite man gathered at the synagogue with other Hebrews would utter this word after someone else had spoken or prayed or pronounced a benediction. When they said it, this is what they meant: *"this is firm. This is certain. This is faithful. This is sure. This is true."* The image that "amen" would evoke in people who said it was that of a mother holding her baby tight—this is secure, this is steadfast, this is constant and this is rock-solid.

Even more, when a Hebrew person would say "amen", it wasn't just a reflexive thing they did to "round off" their personal, private prayer. In fact, "amen" was a word originally used mostly in the context of *public* worship because it was spoken by the people to mean "what has been said, what has been read, what has been prayed—this is true. Let all this come to pass." In essence, when a Hebrew person spoke "amen", they weren't just "rounding off" their prayer with a customary "magic word", but they were agreeing to the point that the substance of what has been said is something *they* would say.

It's worth revisiting this because when we pray, even with written or memorized prayers like the Lord's Prayer, we tend to go to different extremes. Either we think saying "amen" is too childish or oppressive, or we think no prayer heard by God is complete until we say the magic word. Yet the truth is neither of these things: according to Hebrew and early Christian tradition, amen is what we say when we agree to what others are praying or speaking. Saying "amen" is the act of praying along with the community, the people of God.

Whether we like it or not, there is almost nothing that is really private about being Christian. Though we keep some things between us and God; real, living faith can't be confined to a sort of

Sunday morning niceness because everything, including the way we pray, speaks of how we belong to Christ and to each other as the people of God.

Some of us might not like that idea. Some of us might ask “can’t I pray the way I like?” and the answer is yes and no. Yes, honest, heartfelt prayer is always the preferred way to go in any kind of prayer. But no, we can’t just say whatever we like because we need to be taught to pray by Scripture. The way we speak with God needs to be intimately informed by how God reveals himself. If we don’t stick to what God has revealed of himself, we start projecting our ideas of what God is like into our prayer life, and so we end up talking *at* a stranger instead of holding a conversation with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Even more, we can’t just pray the way we like because the community—God’s people—rightfully shapes the way we pray. Even as hearing my dad pray in his low, gravelly voice brings back memories of steamed white rice and thin Chinese soup, we find that as we give our “amen” to the prayers of others, we learn to build relationship by listening to what is foremost on the hearts of others. We start hearing other voices reaching out to God for comfort, for peace, for guidance, or just for companionship—and when we pay attention to these voices, we start having a sense of what God is doing in others. This is important, because when we take the time to look outside ourselves and take an active interest in how God is working in other’s hearts, we start to care for each other in a new way. Most people think “community” is a matter of nice people who say nice things all the time, but that’s not truly a Scriptural notion of community. A real community is one built of people who are hard to get along with, people who don’t get it, people who are lost, and people who are found. When we learn to pray with each other from the deepest places of our spirits, we become a community of God because we start caring for each other’s true selves, our spirits where we each are alone with

God. When we attend to each other in prayer, we attend to each other's lives with God. In other words, when we learn to pray "amen", we engage in the art of the cure of souls.

Different church communities tend to have different emphases. Some are known for their brilliant musical performances. Others are known for famous preachers. It still remains to be seen what some of the defining marks of this congregation will be, but I hope that whatever happens, we hold fast to the idea that we are a community of care. Not simply with words, but with actions, with prayer and with the willingness to extend ourselves in caring about the relationship that defines us as children of God. This is the call of every Christian community, Amen.