



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – July 12, 2009

Those Who Were Gathered that Could  
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## Psalm 42

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”*

*These things I remember;  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of  
Hermon, from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.*

*I say to God, my rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy  
oppresses me?  
As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

## Luke 5:17-26

*One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.” Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the one who was paralyzed – ‘I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.’” Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen strange things today.”*

“And those who were gathered that could said... Amen.”

Each class that I had with Dr. Emilie Townes at Yale Divinity School began with a prayer and each prayer ended with that phrase. “And those who were gathered that could said... Amen.” The first time I heard it, and the second and third time, I thought that it was another valiant attempt at being more inclusive. Perhaps there was someone in the class with a horrible sore throat, unable to get those two syllables out much less explain the week’s reading assignment. Perhaps that student in the corner of the room, their head hanging down, desperately trying to look like they are studying their notes ever so closely really has given into the temptation of the mid-class nap. Neither was unheard of, dedicated Yalies across all the graduate schools were famous for studying themselves into the ground, into sickness, into poorly timed sleeping habits. Those who

were gathered, cognizant, healthy, awake, would close the prayer, “Amen”, on their behalf.

“Amen” is such a fascinating word in our personal prayers and in our communal worship. It’s a word that we say so often that we hardly ever think about it’s meaning or where it came from or why it happens to be just so prominent in our language of faith. If we look at scripture, we find that it is littered throughout the New Testament and slightly sprinkled in the Old. We find that it ends epistles, highlights prophecies, illuminates the characters of God and Christ, and, of course, closes the Lord’s Prayer. Some scholars have reached the conclusion that “Amen”, coming from the Hebrew noun and then used frequently in the gospel of John, means “truth”. Amen is a final affirmation of all that has come before it, the giving of thanks for a home-cooked meal, the whispered pleas for safe travel, the hopeful yearning for the coming of a Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. These are things that we want to embrace or hold up or cling on to... as “truth”.

“And those who were gathered that could said... Amen.”

I admit that there are some times when I use “Amen” all too easily. If only the Oakland A’s could get some decent offense we might make the playoffs. Amen. Is it too much to ask to get sweet tea north of the Mason-Dixon? Amen! A three-day weekend sure would be nice, and a two-hour lunch break, and one of those swivel-chairs for my desk, one of those ones that have a built-in massager! Amen! This problem is often diagnosed as a case of “classical Amen over-enthusiasm” and is commonly found among groups of first-year Divinity School students.

But on the other end of the spectrum, there have been times where I just can’t say Amen at all. Not because of a sore throat or a lack of sleep but because there have been times when I have been just too tired, too worn out, seen too much, heard too little, felt so scared that I just couldn’t bear to look into the face of all that Christianity promises and exclaim “Truth!” I wonder if you’ve felt that way too. In the uncertainties of health, in the difficulties of the job market, in the struggles of personal relationships, have there been times when your faithful response has NOT been an exclamation of truth but instead

echoed the righteous anger of Job or Christ’s cry of abandonment on the cross? Oh God, why have you forsaken me?

“And those who were gathered that could said... Amen.”

The Lukan tale of Christ’s healing of the paralytic, our reading this morning, is likely a familiar one. Jesus is teaching to a crowd when some men come, carrying the paralytic on his bed. They were hoping to lay the man in front of Jesus, but were caught behind the crowds, unable to get through. The friends, persistent, climb upon the roof of the building in which Jesus was teaching and dig a hole through it, lowering the paralyzed man down, and presenting him to Jesus. There are a number of “preachable” moments here. One could hold up the faith of the paralyzed man or the ability of Christ to again do such miraculous works. Often we skip our way down to the part where Jesus really proves himself to be the Son of Man. “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the one who was paralyzed—“I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.” Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went on his way home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen strange things today.”

I would like to take a different angle today though, instead focusing on the friends, the men who had carried the paralytic on his bed to Jesus, the men who climbed the building to get past the crowd, the men who dug a hole in the roof to lay their friend down in front of this man who was doing miraculous works. The men whose faith Jesus recognized when he then turned to the man on the bed and said “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

The healing moment would never have happened if it weren’t for the friends. It may be a minor point to make but it is a pivotal one. A man, stricken, lying in bed, unable to rise, to walk, to push toward Jesus himself, a man unable to claim “truth”, “Amen” to the miracles of this wandering Nazarene, had those who were able to rise, to walk, to push, to climb, to dig, to lower, claim truth, “Amen” for him.

It was a very sad day for me when, this past year, the writer John Updike passed away. Updike was one of those rare writers who, at his best, could capture the essence of faith in its most ordinary everydayness. In his last collection of short stories released posthumously, there is one particular story entitled “Varieties of Religious Experience”. It is the account of four different protagonists and the reshaping of their faith during the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

One character, Dan Kellogg, is standing on the balcony of a New York City apartment with his granddaughter. He realizes, as he sees the towers fall on the horizon and watches the shifting of expressions on his granddaughter’s face- from confusion, to distress, to terror, the same thing that we all realized. Neither he nor she nor anyone else would ever be able to look at the world in the same way again. And in that moment, he loses God. He is unable to see love, compassion, justice, grace. He is unable to see the truth in it. He is unable to say “Amen”.

Updike gives us another look at Dan Kellogg, six months down the road. He hasn’t reclaimed his faith or forgiven his God. But he has returned to church. “His church pledge needed to be delivered in its weekly envelopes,” Updike writes, “a minor committee (Property Maintenance and Improvement) of which he was a member continued to meet... Dan would have missed the mild-mannered fellowship—the handshakes under the vaulted ceiling, the awkward passing of the peace...He would miss the Sunday-morning congregation, the smell of waxed pews and musty kneeling cushions, the radiators that knocked on winter Sunday mornings after a week of cool disuse, the taste of the wafer in his mouth.” Unable to understand or accept the love of Christ, Dan Kellogg still returned to the body of Christ. There those who were gathered that could said “Amen”.

Generally when we think about the body of Christ in scripture, when we think about the church in Bible studies or see a Sunday night special on the early church on the History channel, shots of archeological digs overdubbed by a voice that sounds like Burt Lancaster, we think about Paul. We think about those early communities that the apostles visited, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, Rome. We

think of their divisions, their rituals, their rules, their theological debates. And this is what we generally learn in seminary too, before going on to Augustine and Aquinas and Teresa of Avila, and watch as the course of history gradually enriches and complicates the whole deal. But perhaps this, early on in the gospels, is something about church too.

What is church? It seems like an easy question. Church is a place of worship, of glorification of God. Church is a place of preaching and teaching the word. Church is a place of proclamation and rejoicing in melodies and harmonies. Church is a place of sacrament, of participation in the Christian story, of remembrance of Christ who died for us. Church is a place of community and care, of mourning and celebration. Church is a place where we can be brought to the truth of Jesus, even if we have to be lifted, carried, and lowered before it, until we can walk to it ourselves.

John Updike also once described America as “this great roughly rectangular country severed from Christ by the breadth of the sea”. For Dan Kellogg, the severance from faith was not simply geographical. For most of us it rarely is. It is more likely that Christ is one diagnosis away, one accident away, one loss away. Between the truth and we who wish to proclaim it is a single moment of the loss of trust, a broken relationship, a *New York Times* headline. The sea, in all its crushing power and ceaseless mystery, seems tame beside the widening chasm of ordinary pain across which Calvary seems just a tiny, graying speck on the horizon.

It is the blessing of the church universal, the Congregational Church of New Canaan included, to bridge that chasm. It is our neighbors and our church family that can sometimes most resemble Luke’s paralytic. It can also, very often, be ourselves. But we have a blessed assurance in this place. We are assured that when we are unable to proclaim “Truth”, that we have friends in these pews, willing to carry us there, despite the crowds that block our way. Past that crowd Christ waits patiently, eternally, for our return to the fold, to the place where our voices of faith resound the loudest. When we are unable to claim it for ourselves, we claim it for one another. “And those who were gathered that could said... **Amen.**”