

An Amen to the Year Past
Reign of Christ Sunday, November 21, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010
First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Two evenings ago, Sally and I were lucky enough to stumble onto the television broadcast of the movie "The Bucket List" starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. The trailers for the movie about two men told they had but six months to live shows these two characters – and Nicholson and Freeman are, if anything, *characters* – fulfilling some life-long ambitions. I recall thinking how much fun it would be to see this movie as I think of the brief snippets of Nicholson and Freeman skydiving, racing cars on a speedway, and of Nicholson collapsing onto the ground after unloading a large gun on the plains of Tanzania.

The pleasant surprise of the movie was that while there were some incredibly humorous moments, the gist of the movie was actually, and movingly, about relationships, love, hope, commitment, forgiveness, reconciliation, grace, – and peace – the peace we as humans are invited to know in this life time and in that life we will know as eternity.

Frankly, at the end of the movie – and yes, I am a sap when it comes to films that tug on the emotions – amongst my tears, I wanted to say "Amen." No, this liberal reformed theologian who bristles when services are interrupted by "*Amens*" from people in the pews, ... in this instance, I wanted to say "Amen, Amen."

Then I wondered about how many people went to a theater or rented this movie thinking it would only be slapstick and good fun. The first hour – well, I don't want to ruin it for those who have not seen it – but the "fun" part is in the last half of the movie. The first part is not fun. Four decades ago (!), I remember seeing "Oh What a Lovely War," a movie adaptation of a musical about World War I. I recall how people walked out of the theater very early when they discovered the movie was a political and social commentary on the *folly* if not *idiocy* of war. My guess is that most moviegoers wanted to see "war" with its "glorious" blood and weaponry. To be fair, my mother prepared me, a sixteen year old, for what would unfold and so we stayed, but that was also an occasion when one might have been tempted to leave saying "Amen."

What is intriguing about the word "Amen" is that so often people define the word as though it denotes the "end" of something, that it is the conclusion to a thought or idea. Most of us realize - or at least I hope most of us know - that the word means much more than that, that it denotes agreement or approval, if not full support for whatever has just been proclaimed or pronounced. In that sense, the word "Amen," suggests something much different than an *ending* – and may instead underscore that there is more to be said and done on a subject.

To think if not say "Amen" at the end of the musical or film rendering of "Oh What a Lovely War" should mean that from then on a person was going to look at the concept of war differently. Instead of some "glorious" adventure to which young men marched, it would be seen for what it is – brutal, violent and against every theme and motif that comes to us of our

God. Yet “glorious” was *exactly* the attitude with which Europeans proudly marched and paraded their millions of young men in preparation for the disaster and debacle of World War I. It was as though it were some marvelous adventure for which everyone was to be oh, so very proud to participate. In today’s world, the violence in video and computer war games available answers part of the question as to why we live in such a violent culture. How exactly do we expect words like peace, tranquility, fairness and justice to be heard over the din of guns and gunships as they blast their way into our consciousness?

I admit I could have missed the all too vivid portrayals in “The Bucket List” of Morgan Freeman’s and Jack Nicholson’s characters reactions to the chemotherapy, but I *will* add an “Amen” to the possibility that persons seeing those distressing hospital room scenes will cherish good health all the more nor take any day of healthy lives for granted. As to other “Amens” to reminders of how fragile and fleeting is all of human life, I suggest there are always many opportunities to change ones perspective – and to be moved by those instances when we are reminded of the joy that might be ours in the human relationships we hold dear and in the challenges of life and faith we face each and every day. We have the choice to reject despair and instead embrace hope, set aside bitterness and choose instead to seek joy, turn away from what is hate filled for what might instead be infused with love and ... as persons of this nation, we have a special day later this week to stop our harried lives long enough to remember be a people of thanksgiving.

So here we are at the end of a church year, on a Sunday set aside to remember that Christ and His teachings and example are at the center of all that we teach and do. We are ready to put an “Amen” to all that we have accomplished as sisters and brothers of faith in the last twelve months. However, we do that knowing the “Amen” at the end of today’s service will be but a precursor to all that lies ahead in our adventures and life as a congregation of God’s people. We recommit ourselves to the ways of grace, love, hope and peace and seek to know God’s truths that we might accomplish the ministry and mission to which we are called.

Yesterday, when over one hundred and eighty persons gathered here to celebrate the life of John Brown, we ended as we will this morning in a little under a half hour – with that seemingly concluding word “Amen.” But if there was a spirit that swept through this sanctuary in the closing moments as Winnie Brown led the clapping and swaying to Ann Lee’s up beat rendering of “Just a Closer Walk With Thee,” it was that the life and energy of John Brown continues in the memories and lives of his family and friends. Yesterday’s service did not *end* anything.

In a few moments, when we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, we will do so realizing the irony that comes in calling it the “Last Supper,” for while it recalls the *last* time Jesus sat at table with His disciples before his arrest, trial and death, it was not really the *last* of anything crucial. The sacred meal is repeated over and over again and when it concludes with an “Amen,” that is an invitation to bear witness to our faith in all we say and do in the days ahead. Etched on the front of our Communion Table are the words “Do this in remembrance of me.” May it ever be true that to remember is to recommit, to recommit is to look forward to tasks that lie ahead.

Perhaps this one time, the people of God might say, “Amen.”

Amen.