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THAT POST-SERMON “AMEN” / THAT AFTER-SERMON SILENCE

1 You’ve come across it often, in almost every parish of North American Lutheran Christendom. The last sentence of the sermon dies away in the ether. The preacher breathes a quiet “Amen”, and hustles about her business, shuffling her sermon manuscript pages, and searching for the page number for the Hymn of the Day. Worshippers perhaps breathe a sigh of relief and hustle about their business of finding their page numbers.

2 Wrong!

3 “What’s wrong?” I hear you ask. Here’s what’s wrong: That after-sermon “Amen” does not belong to the preacher. It belongs *to the people*. They are affirming what the preacher has just proclaimed!

4 And that post-sermon period of silence for reflection – see the rubric, page 103 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* – has been short-circuited.

5 I have never – “What, never?” “No, never!” – attended worship in a North American Lutheran church where a) that post-sermon “Amen” was honoured as the peoples’ affirmation of the preacher’s message. Or b) Where that silence for reflection was honoured. These two items remain high on my list of Lutheran ritual embarrassments.

6 Consider: Cannot worship leaders train their people – and themselves! – to observe these ritual niceties? It could lead to a more vital experience of worship, if the people were taught to affirm the preacher’s message with a vigorous “Amen”. And if the preacher himself learned to shut up at that moment! And if all – worship leaders and people in the pew – were taught to observe a significant moment of silence for reflection at the conclusion of the sermon.

7 My advice: Try this in your setting. The preacher concludes his sermon with a stirring word of challenge, or of gracious promise. Then he simply bows his head, standing where he is, not moving a muscle. (If he so much as attempts to arrange the pages of his sermon manuscript, the moment is lost, in my experience.) Then the people breathe – or perhaps even shout! – a vigorous “Amen”, affirming what has just been said.

8 (If you have ever attended worship in an African American congregation, you know how exhilarating it can be when the people help the preacher preach by such affirmations – even as verbal interruptions in the middle of her message! Marvelous!)

9 Then – the preacher still standing stock still at the ambo, not twitching a muscle – a long moment of silence ensues. To worshippers unaccustomed to silence in worship, even thirty seconds will feel like three minutes! But – trust me – as people become used to it, they will soon enough clamour for longer silences. Fuller opportunity to reflect on the preacher’s message, the Bible readings, even the hymns! Do not deny your people this treasure!

10 Remember from your childhood Martin Luther’s stirring translation of the Hebrew (Aramaic?) “Amen” at the conclusion of his explanation to the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism (page 1164, *ELWorship*)?

11 In the version I learned as a child it was “Yes, yes, it shall be so!”. In the more modern translation of Luther’s German, it is “Yes, yes, it is going to come about just like this.” Wonderful!

12 And note: Nowhere in *ELWorship* is the post-sermon “Amen” so much as mentioned. I feel it’s still a worthy idea. BUT ONLY if it’s understood as THE PEOPLES’ RESPONSE to the sermon. Not the preacher signalling she’s finished!

13 Until a congregation becomes familiar with silence, perhaps it’s best if, after the people’s “Amen”, the preacher were to make a simple announcement: “Let’s pause a moment for some silent reflection on what you’ve heard – in the sermon, in the Bible readings, or even in the texts or tunes of a hymn.” This kind of announcement helps assure worshippers that the preacher has not suddenly fallen ill, with this unexpected moment of silence. In any case, the preacher remains at the ambo, stock still, for the duration of the silence.

14 The preacher is thus the gate-keeper, the one who determines how long the silence will last. When the preacher moves from the ambo, only then does the parish musician begin the introduction to the Hymn of the Day.

15 Well. End of rant. But do remember, faithful reader, and do teach your people two things. 1) That “Amen” at the end of the day’s sermon does not belong to the preacher: (“Hey folks, it’s all over!”) It does indeed belong *to the people*, as an exhilarating affirmation of what the preacher has preached!

16 And do remember too to teach your people: 2) OBSERVE THAT SILENCE for reflection after the sermon. There are few enough moments in our lives when we’re all encouraged to remain silent, to hush our busy-ness – even the pastor/preacher – and to be open to the quiet suasion of the Holy Spirit. Make the most of it!

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