

THE DAY THE BELL RANG AGAIN

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John 21: 1 – 19

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For several days it laid in my “read tomorrow” pile – the newsletter from the first congregation I served as pastor, Peace United Church of Christ, Duluth, Minnesota. It is said of Duluth in northern Minnesota on the tip of Lake Superior that in Duluth there are two seasons – nine months of winter and three months of lousy sledding.

When I was called, fresh out of seminary, to that little congregation with the A-frame building overlooking the city, a good Sunday would be 30 people, who bravely sang the hymns accompanied by an organ purchased used from the local roller skating rink. But the congregation grew in numbers and the growth has continued. There is now an enlarged sanctuary and a new organ.

The newsletter I finally read announced that this summer’s project was the repainting of the bell tower. And that soon a date would be set for a fundraising “paint the tower Sunday.”

The bell tower is an open metal structure on the church front lawn, rising up maybe 50 feet. There are three bells in the tower which ring to open worship. The largest and oldest bell originally hung in the steeple belfry of the congregation’s first building. When a new building was finished in 1957, the same year this building was finished, the bell was removed from the old belfry and hung in the tower.

I want to tell you about that oldest bell, and the story of the day when the bell rang again after a long silence...and what one man did when he heard the bell ring again. For like today’s text, the story of the bell and the man is an Easter story....

In 1872, twenty-two German immigrants covenanted to become a church – St. Paul’s German Evangelical Church of Duluth. By 1875 a small frame sanctuary had been completed. Services were in German until 1930 and then German and English on alternating Sundays until 1955.

In 1882, the congregation had raised enough money - \$150, largely from the annual sauerkraut dinner – to construct a belfry on the roof. But there was not enough money for a bell.

Then the pastor, Rev. Ludder, had an idea – an inspiration really. For he said it came to him in prayer. Pastor Ludder wrote a letter to the German Kaiser, Wilhelm, about the congregation’s German roots and the bell problem. And could the Kaiser send the church a no longer used brass cannon that could be recast into a bell, a peace bell? It would be a literal living out of the great Isaiah vision of turning “swords into plowshares.” In this case a cannon into a peace bell.

Well, the congregation commended Pastor Ludder for his active prayer life, but no one really believed the letter would get to the Kaiser, let alone be the solution to the bell-less belfry.

But lo-and-behold, two years later a railroad clerk pounded on the church door one day and announced that there was this large crate, labeled “brass cannon,” shipped from Germany with the address of the church on it. The clerk was quite agitated. After all, what was a church going to do with an 800 pound cannon?

The cannon, which had been used in the Franco-Prussian War, was taken to a foundry, melted, and cast into a bell. And on a glorious Sunday in 1894, the new Peace Bell rang from the belfry to open worship. And after worship the congregation continued the celebration with another sauerkraut dinner – the sauerkraut having been cured in wooden barrels in the church basement.

And the Peace Bell called the people to worship every Sunday...until in 1914, a certain Duke was shot in Sarajevo, precipitating World War I. And anti-German sentiment grew in this country even before American troops entered the fighting. And the little German Evangelical congregation bore the brunt of the hatred in Duluth, even though four young men in the congregation enlisted in the Army.

Windows were broken in the church. Members of the church, especially those with pronounced German accents, were harassed in public. Many merchants refused to sell to members of the congregation. Some members had to buy food for other members to whom grocers would not sell. Children of the church were made outcasts at school and were often chased home by stick-wielding gangs of other children.

A young woman named Elizabeth Uden was severely injured one day when a gang of youth pelted her with rocks while yelling, "Kill a Kraut for Christ!"

Elizabeth was still living when I came to the church. She was by then in her 90's, but the recollection of that terrifying day was still vivid. Until the War ended Elizabeth became a virtual prisoner in her house, afraid to go out.

Then came the Sunday when the congregation, arriving for worship, was met by a mob demanding that the bell be removed, paraded down the main street, and then melted so the brass could be used for cannon shell casings. The leaders of the congregation refused and put their bodies in front of the church door until the police arrived and dispersed the mob. But needless to say the Peace Bell did not ring that morning. And at the close of worship, two church elders – Jacob Woodard and Samuel Klowsowski – climbed the belfry and boarded up the openings. And the bell was silent for almost five years.

And for several months the men of the church took turns keeping watch at night for fear that the mob would return and burn the church.

Then at some point, men from the Congregational Church across town also began to show up to help keep watch, even as women from the Congregational Church brought baked goods to the homes of those in the German Evangelical Church who were the most ostracized.

Ironically, some 40 years later, the two Duluth congregations would become part of a new denomination, the United Church of Christ, formed in 1957 out of a merger between the Congregational-Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches in America.

But it wasn't merger the Duluth Congregational Church had in mind when its members stood with the harassed little congregation of German immigrants. Rather, it was about an Easter oneness in the living Christ – the One who said, "If you love me, then feed my sheep." In this case, the tending of the flock took the form of standing with and literally feeding the ostracized.

Well, the agony of World War I did finally end in 1919. And on a Sunday in July, the congregation of St. Paul's Evangelical arrived to find that the boards had been removed from the belfry. And the Peace Bell rang twelve times to call people to worship.

Elizabeth Uden was there that Sunday the Peace Bell rang again. And she told me an interesting tidbit. She said that as people were leaving church, they looked up to see one of the elders of the church, Holger Jensen, who had climbed into the belfry and was belting out the hymn, Amazing Grace, as if he wanted the whole world to hear.

Elizabeth and everyone else just stood there, looking up, astonished. For Holger Jensen, a Lake Superior fisherman by trade was known as a quiet, shy man, who went out of his way not to call attention to himself. Indeed, Elizabeth said, no one, including Holger's wife, had ever heard him sing before.

But there he was, singing a solo from the belfry, with Mrs. Jensen and the Jensen children, and the rest of the congregation down below wondering what in heaven and earth had gotten into him.

Then after singing a couple more verses, Holger simply climbed down the belfry ladder, took his children by the hand and went home. And Elizabeth Unden told me Holger never talked about it.

So what do you suppose was in Holger's head and heart that day that caused him to sing in that belfry?

Was it that he was simply overwhelmed by the sound of the Peace Bell ringing again? Was it that Holger had experienced that morning the power of an Easter God who brings new life out of the times that feel like death?

Why do you think Holger did what he did on the morning the Bell rang again? What would motivate him to climb that belfry and sing Amazing Grace like he was serenading the angels?

Could it be that he saw Jesus that morning in the faces of a congregation that had endured and faced down the powers of hatred with such faith, hope, and love?

I think about another fisherman – Peter – who also astonished some people one day when he jumped into the Sea of Galilee with his clothes on because he said he saw the risen Jesus waiting for him on the shore.

And I think Peter would have understood why Holger Jensen sang from the belfry that morning. Because sometimes...sometimes...the amazing grace of God is enough to make even shy fishermen throw decorum to the wind.