

Are the bells only for Christians?

Our congregation, Christ the King Lutheran, and Temple Emanu-El in Houston were established immediately following World War II. They are connected by Rice Boulevard, which leads into a shopping area called Rice Village. Christ the King is the gateway to the village and the only house of worship in this large commercial area. The church's bells are beloved by people working in and visiting Rice Village. They hear joyful peals before and after worship services. They also know what it means when the largest bell tolls solemnly at the beginning of a funeral. Each toll represents a year in the life of the deceased.

Not far from the church, Ben Klinger, a member of Temple Emanu-El, owned a variety store—a favorite place for many to visit because of his warm, helpful presence. After 52 years of work Ben died, and I received a call from one of his employees, a Presbyterian. “Does your church ring the bells only for Christians when they die?” she wondered.

“Are you talking about Ben?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, explaining that Ben's daughter was hoping our bell could toll for her father.

I immediately recalled poet John Donne's words:

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

It tolls for thee.

A volunteer tolled the bell that day, sounding out the number of years that Ben had lived his life as a child of the covenant. Miles away at the Jewish cemetery the rabbi opened the service with an announcement that village Christ the King's church bell was tolling in Ben's honor. A ripple of astonished glances flowed across the cemetery pavilion.

Later I was invited to preach at a Sabbath service at Temple Emanu-El. I shared the story of Ben and the bell. Then I segued into a presentation on the “Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community,” issued 20 years ago to repudiate Martin Luther's anti-Jewish writings, to express regret for their historical consequences, and reclaim the desire to live in “love and respect for Jewish people.” The assembly was shocked at the statement's forthrightness and admission of guilt.

The following Monday our receptionist buzzed my office to say a woman from Emanu-El was there without an appointment. She insisted on seeing me. I gulped and waited for her to arrive. In walked an elderly woman who thanked me for speaking at their Friday service. She was surprised by the ELCA's declaration, she said, adding, “You didn't tell the whole story.”

I waited. Then she shared her story: “I would not be here today if it had not been for the Lutherans. I would not have heard you speak.” Lutheran neighbors in her community had helped sneak her out of Germany to safety in England. “You should have also told that part of the story,” she added. “I appreciate the official apology, but I am here to say to you as a Lutheran minister, ‘Thank you.’”

We both wept.