

Sermon for Good Friday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Years ago, when I was the priest of a small parish in the floodplain of the Mississippi River, I oversaw my first funerals. Now, this was the South, so there were lots of old rituals to liven up the procession of the dead, and one of those was the Tolling of the Years. We've done this here, too. When news reaches us of someone's death, or sometimes only just before the funeral, we toll the church bell once for every year of their life. It's a somber thing, slower than our normal Sunday morning bells and typically going on long enough to draw attention to a change in the ether. Occasionally, the tolling is shorter, 14 or 2 or 20, short enough, again, to mark the loss even for those who don't know who's gone.

Now, the bell at that Southern church used to be up in the belltower, but years of ringing and an imminent domain highway squeezed in snug against the western wall damaged the masonry, so they took it down and mounted it with a plague in the churchyard. It was pretty, but seemed such a waste. So I went to an antique store and got a worn old mallet with just the right amount of gravitas. And when we held funerals, I'd toll the years by hand. But sometimes it was tiring to swing out all those years, especially for the 90-year old spring chickens that held on just long enough for a priest to arrive and then all went out at once. So, when my arms gave out, I'd pass the mallet to a family member. The first time I did this, I was met with a look of confusion as the new patriarch asked me what, exactly, I expected him to do with this? But he took his swings, and I saw quiet tears well in the old man's cracked face.

And the practice took hold, and by the time I did my last funeral there, I didn't toll a single year. The family asked if they could do it, and each member rang that bell. The grandkids went first, the oldest hesitant and sad, the youngest delighted to make a joyful noise. And then the kids took their turn, each ringing a decade or so. The oldest bore some old hurt I didn't know about and waited to decide to swing or not until the last moment, but she did. And her first rings were like sledgehammers falling. I thought she was going to knock that bell right off its mighty foundation, but it endured her anger and she kept on ringing as sobs choked out and tears wet that old bronze and finally, her last swings barely knocked a tone. She stepped away and fell into her sisters' arms, and the mallet lolled into her mother's hand. And the new widow stepped forward. She leaned in and asked, "How many more years do I have with him?" As she rang out those final hard years, she took her time, savoring each note with all the love she could squeeze out of this moment. We all knew the next hour in the church, the hour after that driving to and from the graveside, the hours after that at the reception, and the long, long hours alone in the house after the whirlwind calmed, we all knew those coming hours would take everything out of her, and we all knew this was her last private moment with her husband before the world inserted itself into her grief. So we waited, each note another jolt, another reminder of a life gone, a year lived, a love loved so painfully sweet, and a loss that would never fully heal. When the last year rang, she stepped back, gently leaned the mallet against the bell, went to her brood, and gathered them under her wings.

I've spent so many Good Fridays thinking on the pain of this day, the loss, the betrayal, the utter disappointment, that I think I've missed the love. And I don't mean the love of God that passes understanding, not really. I don't mean the love that lays down its life for another. I don't even mean the love that takes on the sins of the world, though of course all that's here now, too. The love I'm talking about is in the ones who stay behind, the ones who can't pull themselves away, the ones who feel estranged and hear each hammer swing as a jolt in their soul, the ones who ring out with joy or hesitance or duty, the ones who hold each other close, and the ones who weep bitterly.

There's so much love around this day. Yes, it's dark, and yes, it's loss, and yes, it's a brutal thing we recall, bloody and mean. But I've spent too much time thinking we always need to put ourselves in that bloody

and mean place today. Maybe we do? Maybe it's good to remember what humankind is capable of. But then again, maybe we have too many reminders of what we're capable of. God knows we see that all the time. So, maybe we need the reminder of our better side, too. Maybe we need the reminder that, even when faced with the utter desolation of this day, we can still choose to love. The shadow of this day may be true dark, unfathomable grief and the destruction of hope. Or, that dark might be the shadow of God's wings, loving us, holding us close, shielding us from the blinding reality of hatred and violence.

If we could toll the bells today, ring out the years, I'm not sure if I'd ring 33 or 2000, but I know I couldn't carry the weight of that ringing on my own. I know I'd tire out, either from my shoulder or my soul. And I'd need to pass that mallet on to one of you, and one of you to another. Ring out our joy, even today, the joy that love is here, at the foot of the cross, in the face of cruelty. Despite the powers of this world, love is here. Love will lift him on the road, love will catch him as he falls, love will surround the hard wood. Love will take him down, wipe his eyes, clean his wounds, cover his nakedness. Love will bathe him with oil and perfume, love will straighten his legs and fold his arms, love will swaddle him, love will carry him and tuck his body just so in the safety of enfolding shadow, and love will weep its way back home. And love will remember. And love will wait. For that's the promise. Love is here, even when he is not.