

For whom the bell tolls

During Holy Week this year, a group of parishioners from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in The Dalles were downtown at "Old St. Paul's", moving a piano back to where it began its existence 60+ years ago. As we were negotiating the piano up the stairs to the sanctuary, we passed a seldom used door that leads to the bell tower. It reminded someone of a story, and he shared it with us.

This story is of a turn of events that led to a wonderful happening on the Saturday following Easter this year. This was the day after the passing of my father, Rustin R. Kimsey, and the day the bells tolled across Eastern Oregon.

The story began on September 11, 2002. Dad was leading a service of remembrance at St. Paul's Chapel. It was also a service of mourning for those that lost their lives in the terror attacks on 9/11, and a service of healing for the nation. On that day, as he had many times before, father led a group ringing the church bell.

I knew early on of my father's love of bells. I have fond memories ringing the bell at Ascension Chapel in Cove, Oregon. Dad loved to ring that bell at the beginning of worship during camps and conferences over the years. The bell's rope was in the center of the narthex, welcoming all who entered.

Another example of dad's love of bells is when he took the bell from the original Kimsey homestead in Antelope, Oregon, to adorn the grounds of Kimsey Commons at Ascension Camp and Conference Center, also in Cove. It was so satisfying for dad to be able to incorporate our family bell into the landscape of the place he loved perhaps more than any other on this earth, Ascension School.

Old St. Paul's on Union Street here in The Dalles always reminds me of the days of my youth when dad was the bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Oregon. The chapel is an intimate and strikingly beautiful place, richly detailed in natural wood and stained glass, most of it dating back to the church's beginnings in 1875. The church was constructed by the local parish under the direction of pioneer clergyman and missionary Reuben Nevius, who also supervised the building of six other churches throughout Eastern Oregon, including the one in Cove. The bell tower was added to St. Paul's in 1900, giving the church the familiar profile that graces The Dalles cityscape today.

Back to the story and the bell ringing in 2002. True to form, father was ringing the bell with his standard enthusiasm. And so it happened, that he pulled the rope with a little too much fervor. The rope recoiled in a backlash and became entangled on a bolt in the bell's housing. That was that. The rope was caught and held fast by the bolt, and the bell would not ring again for nearly thirteen years.

It was Good Friday this year when we met up again with a ladder and a flashlight. The bell tower is accessible by a steep and narrow staircase. Fifteen feet above this room was the belfry. After ascending into that old space, we examined the housing, the rope and pulley and the bell itself. Within minutes, we had the bell swinging freely again.

A week earlier, I happened across a poem by John Donne, best known for the line, "for whom the bell tolls". From this poem came the inspiration to write a story about church bells and my father, Rustin Ray Kimsey. Dad's life has always been a reverberation of the words, "no man is an island". John Donne's theme speaks of interdependence and interconnectedness that all people possess. This is the basis upon which my father developed his own themes of theology and faith. It is the foundation for building churches and bell towers and communities, where all people are welcome and have purpose. It is representative of how my father lived his entire life.

Almost exactly one week later, on the Friday evening following Easter Sunday, father passed away. He was in his own home and surrounded by family. We cried together as we said goodbye. The next morning we tolled the bell in the tradition of English towns and villages as they have done for centuries. The bells in the churches at Cove and

Burns tolled at the same time. The poem by John Donne was calling out. The words and meaning were clear. What was true 400 year ago is still true today. And it is not necessary to know, for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thine own,
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know,
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.*

John Donne 1624, 17 Meditation

Note* The bells across Eastern Oregon tolled again on the morning of Saturday, April 25, 2015, at 8:00 AM, in observance of the funeral of the Rt. Rev. Rustin R. Kimsey