
Standing Together

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” These were the words of John Donne, a pastor in England in the 17th century. It was common practice to ring the church bell when someone in the community died, and often people would say, “I wonder who died.” John Donne said that when someone dies, the tolling of the bell signals not only the loss of the life of an individual but also the loss of life of the community. A few lines earlier he had said in the same sermon, “No man is an island,” meaning that we all are connected together and the loss of one is a loss for all.

Most of us have experienced this at one time or another. Over the years members of my congregation have passed on to glory, and they always leave a vacant spot. A part of the congregation dies with them. Two such occasions are significant. Dirk was a man of about 94 years old when he died from a short bout with cancer. Up to the end his mind was sharp, and my conversations with him were always good. When he died, all his wisdom became unavailable to his family and the church. I had a similar experience with Sylvia. She was a quiet woman who didn't say much when I visited her, but for some reason, when she died, I found myself missing her deeply. I wasn't all that close with either Dirk or Sylvia, but I felt their loss profoundly. I felt that the bell was tolling for me along with the rest of the community as well.

But it doesn't take a death to cause the bell to toll and for us to experience a loss. In the last few months a number of churches in our denomination have been moving toward disaffiliation from the Christian Reformed Church. They have found the decisions made by our synod (a body which meets once a year made up of representatives from across the denomination) to be untenable. They feel that they can no longer be part of the denomination, and they have begun the process of cutting ties with the CRC. While those who remain committed to the CRC believe that their understanding of Scripture is faulty, we are saddened by their departure. We have been in fellowship with some of those churches for as long as 70 years. We have shared their joys and struggles. We have worshipped with them, learned with them, encouraged them and been held accountable by them. They have been an integral part of the life of our church for a long time, and when they decide to separate from the denomination, while we still can be in relationship with them, it is a little like a death. The bell tolls, not because a church has died but because the separation has the same feelings as a death. No longer will we enjoy the close fellowship we once had.

It's not that we should compromise our beliefs to remain together. That would be impossible because we who are left believe firmly that our understanding of the social issues that have caused differences is biblically based and theirs is not. In fact, the denomination has clearly stated that what they espouse and teach is sin, and they have been called to repentance, and if they do not, they no longer have a voice at denominational tables. Our congregation believes firmly that while we all sin, if we remain in unrepented sin, we are breaking fellowship. They are remaining in unrepentant sin, and that is unacceptable.

Yet, we mourn the separation. The bell tolls when a church leaves, but it tolls for the separation, even if it not tolling because of the death of a church. We have lost life as well when the church is no longer united, and we mourn that loss. It is a sad time for our denomination and our congregation.

Death, by its very definition, is separation. Whether it is physical death (separation of body and spirit), spiritual death (separation of an individual from God) or the death of a relationship (separation of churches, for example), it is death, and it hurts. We miss the fellowship that once was.

I suppose that this experience of loss should make us long for the resurrection even more. Resurrections bring back together that which is separated (body and spirit, God and people, and churches and individuals who are at enmity with each other). We long for the resurrection which will happen when Jesus returns. Beyond the most wonderful joy of seeing Jesus face to face, I love for the renewed fellowship we will experience when we are reunited with our brothers and sisters who, at this point, have been separated by sinful perspectives and behaviour. We all are guilty of that, and we all experience the loss. In the resurrection, however, we will be brought together again, all of us who put our faith in Jesus, and we will live in unity again before our Father's throne and in the presence of Jesus.

I suppose the brokenness that we are experiencing right now in our denomination should make us long even more for the sure hope of the resurrection. I look forward to spending eternity with fellow believers without the divisions caused by human error and sin. That will be a wonderful time, and I don't think we will ever tire of it. May it be that Jesus returns quickly and does away with all the brokenness we create and brings us back to full and beautiful relationship both with the Father and with others. May that happen soon.

Pastor Gary