

**\*Ring a prayer bar\***

This was given to me at a retreat some time ago. A call to prayer.

**\*Ring the prayer bowl\***

It happens every week here, we ring the prayer bowl- not originally a Christian practice but a Buddhist one, another call to prayer.

I remember as a young adult travelling and finding myself in Jerusalem and enchanted by the sound coming from the minarets 5 times a day, the Adhan- call to prayer- haunting beautiful human voice carried on the wind.

In every religious tradition there is some form of sound-making that calls the faithful out of the daily grind and into a new level of awareness, into a sacred way of being, into prayer. Actually, it's not just religions. This is the call to awareness I grew up with every Saturday night in winter:

**\*\* Hockey Night in Canada Theme\*\***

Stirring isn't it? A call to attentiveness. Pay attention. Your team is on the ice. Sirens, trumpet blasts, songs, bells, all cues in one setting or another to say "listen." Though less theatrical, "Let us pray" is a call to awareness of the divine, a call to draw yourself, body, mind and spirit, into awareness of God, of what is important in life, of what matters.

Moments in life can be like a call to prayer, a ringing of the prayer bowl, a call to awareness. Someone dies unexpectedly and (bell) we are all aware of our own mortality, of the thinness of the veil, we drop into another level of awareness. Inescapable mistakes- I remember almost failing first year university and (bell) wake up Sparks. It was a call to awareness. A red dress hanging in a tree (bell) - a call to awareness of a pattern of racist violence in our society. A child is born (bell) life is new, and fragile, and precious and we behold the privilege and the responsibility.

And turning points in life can be a different kind of call to awareness: retirement, graduation, the end of a job and the beginning of another. I say a different kind of call to awareness because they have in them a decision: will the future be different than the past, will I change something? Will I actively create my future or will I just let it unfold? Yes, stuff happens, but life is more than a series of things happening, and at turning points in particular, it is like there is something more calling to us (bell) – are you awake? Are you aware? Your life means something and you have an opportunity to do something about it.

In the great farewell speech in the gospel of John we hear Jesus say these words, “No one has greater love than this- to lay down ones life for ones friends.” And depending on your life experience that can bring up all kinds of things. I remember looking at this phrase in bible study with some older folks one time and some teared right up, remembering people who had left to go to war and never come back. It has profound meaning for those who put themselves in harms way for the sake of a greater good.

As important as this reference is when read that way, I think Jesus meant more to laying down our lives than losing them. I believe each one of us, in one way or another, lays down our life for something. We sink our life’s energy, our creativity, our time, our focus into something. We gathered in this space yesterday to celebrate the life of Eleanor Oakley and the place was filled with people from the Scouting movement, because to a remarkable extent, Eleanor laid down her life, poured out her life for children through Scouting. And this speech in John’s gospel, coming at a turning point in which Jesus is about to hand the torch of the gospel over to his friends, this speech serves to focus them, to be a kind of “I have a dream” speech that the followers come back to time and again like a sailor comes back to a compass (or perhaps GPS these days). This speech, these ancient

words become home base from which we orient ourselves in our lives and in the world. These ancient words.

Greater love has no one than to lay down our life for our friends. So many yard sticks by which we could measure the meaning of our life. He was successful in business, she was a beloved minister, she had so many friends, he was a devoted father, I could go on. And Jesus says, love. Love is the yardstick. At turning points in the Christian life, it is the giving of love that is the meaningful measure of things. It is our true north. It is love we need to wake up to- come home to- orient ourselves by.

And for Jesus, the end of our love must extend beyond ourselves. As you turn the corner, hear the bell, realize the significance of a moment in time, the wakeful eye scans the horizon for direction, for bearings, and the draw, the magnetic north for the follower of Jesus is the direction in which the love that is in here, finds a destination out there. The self-serving life becomes stagnant and meaningless. The self-serving church dies for lack of purpose. Greater love has no one than to take the love that is in here, and lay it down out there, lay it out, entrust it to life and the world, entrust it the wind. And that takes courage, and tenacity, and hope.

Michelle Landsberg, former Toronto Star columnist once wrote a piece on the extent to which people feel like they have power to effect change in their own lives given the power of popular culture, globalization and the crumbling of any sense of authority and guidance in the world. And she framed that sense of powerlessness as a myth (a story) that is perpetuated to keep us in our place, to keep us from agitating for change- forming communities of change. If there is nothing we can do about the way our future is unfolding, we might as well just get what we can and leave it at that. The underlying message to the myth is that we are small, and there is little we can do about things.

And yet, listen to these ancient words. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends.” There is no greater love than for me or for you to take our lives, and the love that is here, and lay it down. Pour it out. Life is not just a bunch of stuff that happens. Everyone has the power to do something with the love that is in us. And that matters.

I remember a visit I had with someone who had a cancer diagnosis, and she had no idea how many days were left for her. Could be days. Could be weeks. Could even be months. She didn’t know.

She had the most fascinating approach to her cancer. It was growing inside her in an inoperable tumour. She gave it a name. She would have conversations with it. She gave it a piece of her mind and put it in its place. But here’s what she had to say, “As long as I have breath, I have a future. And as long as I have breath, I will be a creative force in my own future.” There was a person who had come to understand the value of her life. It was like, every day, when her eyes popped open, the prayer bell sang (bell). “Right. I have another day,” and she called herself to the awareness of the sacred, the holy, and the precious opportunity embedded in the life she was given.

As mother Theresa of Calcutta put it, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can all do small things with great love.” Great, divine love, laid down, poured out, today. Amen.