

Are ringing bells calling us in or out?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The setting is an anti-slavery gathering in Concord, Massachusetts, 1844. Frederick Douglass and Ralph Waldo Emerson are the featured speakers. Writer, editor and feminist Margaret Fuller is in the front row. The event, called by the leadership of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, is a celebration of the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies 10 years earlier. But there is grumbling in town. These abolitionists are a mix of “disunionists” and Transcendentalists. Some are calling for the disunion – even burning copies of The Constitution and turning the flag upside down. Their cry is, “No union with slaveholders!” For others, the main issue is to work cooperatively to end the ownership of human beings, peacefully, if possible.

There is a more immediate confusion in the crowd. “Where do we meet?” Organizers lead the throng to one church. The pastor angrily slams the door and locks it. At another church, they are met with the same disgust and denied entry. The writer Nathaniel Hawthorne and

his wife Sophia invite people to the lawn behind their house – the “Old Manse” – with a view of the North Bridge over the Concord River, where the first battles of the American Revolution were engaged.

Then, a strong rainstorm forces people to run for cover. Many gather at the courthouse in town but the only way to draw the townsfolk is to ring the Parish bell. The sexton refuses and no one dares touch the bell. Out of the crowd steps a young man, a recent graduate of Harvard, who had failed as a school-teacher. Just returning to town from hikes in New Hampshire and New York, he walks straight back into yet another Concord controversy.

The 27-year-old has never been a member of the Parish church, or any other. In fact he once wrote that his religion was “a love of nature.” Yet, still in his hiking clothes, he steps forward through the timid crowd and takes hold of the rope. He firmly rings the bell as people begin to pour into the courthouse, out of the pouring rain, from every corner of town.

The bellringer was Henry David Thoreau. His mother Cynthia and sisters, Helen and Sophia, were disunionists who opened their home for runaway slaves—a stop on the Underground Railroad. Henry too had sheltered and guided escaped slaves to the north.

Following the excitement of the

event, Henry printed and distributed his friend Emerson’s speech, signing as “agent for the Society”-The Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society!

This vivid story comes to mind while considering the question: Where are the bells today and who dares to ring them? Do the bells call us in or out?

One chilly Sunday morning in January 1853, Thoreau wrote in his journal that the church bells were calling people inside, to the “stove-warmed church,” while God “exhibits himself” outside in the frosty forest, as with Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Going inside a building, or staying inside an institution, was not Henry’s idea of “finding the divine.”

When I was in college and later in seminary, we were called to classes by the chimes in a belltower. While living in Berkeley, the bells of the University could always be heard in the distance. Bells can serve a practical purpose, piercing our consciousness to wake us to move, and learn.

The early church thought of themselves as the “called out ones” – the “ecclesia.” This has traditionally been understood as meaning the People of God, called out from secular society. Some feel God wants them to be “in the world but not of the world.” What does this really mean?

We need new voices to sound a wake-

up call for the faithful and the secular. The bells need to shake us out of our fenced faiths and buttressed beliefs to realize there is no other world. We may find the church doors, like so many minds, closed and locked. If they refuse to open, to let out or let in, someone unexpected may step from the shadows to grab the rope and pull.

Bells are always pealing. We simply can’t hear them or choose not to hear. They are agitating and alarming, and can no longer be ignored because they call us to face Truth and act for the Right. What is Truth? What is Right? We won’t know until we heed the bells, gather together and accept that we are both in the world and of the world.

Thoreau and his circle of abolitionists had a good sense of the true and right. They knew their message would not be popular but they stood up and spoke out.

What is that ringing in our ears? An alarm? A wake-up call?

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