

St Luke's Call To Worship Bell



Have you noticed the large brass bell mounted in a wooden frame near the entrance to the sanctuary? It's our new Call to Worship Bell. You'll hear it ring just before the choir and cross lead the procession on

Sunday mornings and probably on other appropriate occasions too, as we go through the liturgical year...Christmas Eve, Easter Morning...maybe other times as well.

While it's new to St Luke's, the bell has had a long history before it came to us. It's a solid brass railroad bell from the mid 1880's. It would have been mounted behind the smokestack on a steam locomotive. You can see scarring visible on one side caused by years of exposure to hot steam and flying soot. At that time, the bell was hung to swing from a cradle and rung by tugging a rope, usually by the stoker when the train was traveling slowly to warn people and horses to stay off the track. The horses were probably well aware of the train. Maybe too well aware for comfort.

When steam locomotives were replaced by diesel engines, probably in the 1920's, the old engine would have been scrapped; but the bells were always saved. In our bell, the clapper was replaced with a new "high tech" double action clapper. And instead of swinging from a bell cradle, the bell was mounted so it didn't move. Instead, the clapper was activated by compressed air, moved in double action, front to back... ding ding... ding ding. Instead of riding high on the engine, the entire unit was mounted underneath the cab of the diesel locomotive. (We know the bell was refitted for diesel because the clapper has the name of the model and the manufacturer molded into the cast metal.) Then the history gets murky. The bell was retired from use, probably in the late 30's. Someone bought it, had it polished (a very time-consuming process), lacquered,

and fitted into the frame still holding it today. That person also spent a considerable amount of money to have a cabinet maker construct a solid walnut, very sturdy frame. (The bell weighs 45 pounds; the clapper about 10). Strangely, there was no loop on the clapper so that a bell rope could be attached and the bell rung, so we added that during polishing and refinishing. Whoever owned it rarely or never heard it ring! (It rings the note G above middle C.)

After years of apparent silence, the bell ended up in a job lot of antiques at one of the flea markets on South College, back in a corner underneath a brass bed frame and part of a tube and fabric airplane wing. I found it, heard the sound by banging the clapper against the bell wall, and hoped that Fr Abshire and the Arts and Furnishings Committee would be open to having it as a gift to St Luke's and memorial to my husband, Don. They agreed and Don's sister Carole, who is an expert refinisher of antiques, agreed to take on refinishing the walnut frame. She spent three weeks bringing it back to glowing beauty. Don's son, David, being a train buff, interviewed some old timers to help us put together as much history as we could, and I polished the bell...with Pledge furniture spray...highly recommended by bell collectors (and any brass that's been lacquered, by the way). The bell rope is knotted in a traditional pattern for bells finished with a large knot called "a monkey's fist." At the back of the frame is a dedication to Don. The front of the bell has two small plaques saying "Hear My Call...Follow All." This inscription is taken from one on a calling bell in an 11th century church in Dartmoor, England.

The use of bells for worship was brought to Britain by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, but goes back much farther in the Orthodox church, where a Calling Bell is named and baptized just as we baptize children. Orthodox belief is that the sound of a bell is holy and the only sound from earth that can be heard in Heaven. They also believe that the Call to Worship bell calls not only the present congregation, but also the souls of all the members, passed on, who will be called back to join the worship with us once again.

May it be so!

*Marcia and David Piermattei and Carole Egger
September 2017*