

# FOR WHOM TOLLS THIS BELL?

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

From 1949 to 1964, Kenneth Patton was the minister of the Charles Street Meeting House, an experimental church created by the Universalist Convention to re-establish a Universalist presence in Boston. It was innovative in a variety of ways, including aesthetically. Commenting theologically on the aesthetics, Patton declared,

[A]t the Charles Street Meeting House, . . . we have gathered the symbols and art of the world's religions to adorn our place of religious celebration. Thus we declare that they all belong to us, but by the fact that they are all there, with all their mutual contradictions and identities, we declare that we belong to none of them, nor to any selection or combination of them.

Do we have our religion, and thus, our religious community? Or does our religion, and thus, our religious community, have us? How does the answer to this question affect the way we compose ourselves as a gathered church? Come, let us live in the questions again today. Come, let us worship together.

## SERMON

In 1920, a well-to-do German couple took their high-school-age son, Dietrich, to a famous pianist, who had agreed to appraise the boy's musical gifts. They hoped to launch him into a distinguished musical career. After the audition, the pianist gave them his appraisal. "There is talent, yes," he said. "Competency. But interpretation" – he sliced the air with his hand – "missing. . . . What is missing, training cannot provide."

Several months later, sitting at the dinner table, cutting his schnitzel, Dietrich mentioned that his teacher had asked his class to talk about what they intended to study in college, and that he had said theology. Everyone stopped eating. His older brother, an aspiring scientist, quipped "A theologian is about as useful as a maker of paper airplanes." His mother was supportive. His sister recalled fondly, "When we were small, nearly every night Dietrich and I would talk about eternity before we fell asleep." "Eternity!" boomed the older brother. "Now THERE'S a sleep-inducing subject."

And then came the judgment of the father. "I'd hate to see you waste your years at university," he said. "There was a time when theology and philosophy and science were one. But that hasn't been true for centuries. The best minds of our time concern themselves with

these latter two disciplines, because there lie the most possibilities for improvement of humanity.”

Dietrich looked at his father and replied, “It’s what I want. And I don’t care about the disappointment of not studying music. That sort of life would have been too easy. Not this. This will be the hardest thing in the world.”

So began the arc of Dietrich Bonhoeffer toward a remarkable destiny as a religious leader. At 25, he was ordained into ministry. Two years later, in 1933, he was the first minister to speak out against Hitler. Other ministers were caught up in a ghastly messianic fervor. “Christ has come to us through Adolph Hitler,” said one minister. “It is because of Hitler that Christ God, the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. . . . Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ,” proclaimed another. Bonhoeffer called for a confrontation with the government, concluding that the church might hear itself called “not only to help the victims who have fallen under the wheel, but to fall into the spokes of the wheel itself” in order to stop the machinery of injustice.

In 1934, Bonhoeffer took a leading role in the founding of the Confessing Church. This was a breakaway religious community that put itself at odds with the Nazis. Over the next year, he also took a leading role in establishing breakaway seminaries supported by the Confessing Church. By 1936, these seminaries had been declared illegal. Undeterred, in 1937, he published a seminal work on holy calling and spiritual belonging, entitled The Cost of Discipleship.

Unable to orchestrate institutional opposition to Hitler, in 1940 Bonhoeffer took a position in a German military intelligence agency, feigning a recantation of his previously expressed views. He used this position to smuggle Jews out of Germany. These activities led to his arrest and imprisonment in 1943. By then, he had also become involved with military officers who were conspiring to assassinate Hitler. After the conspirators’ unsuccessful attempt in 1944, his involvement became known. He was executed on April 9, 1945 – barely a month before Germany surrendered. He was 39.

The relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s extraordinary story to contemporary issues of church membership and leadership is not obvious. Certainly it does not seem to be relevant to the conventional view of church membership, which goes like this. There is a procedure for formalizing new membership, usually by signing a membership book and being introduced at a worship service. Membership is explained to the new member as including three ways to become involved: attending Sunday services, making a financial pledge, and joining a committee.

This transactional conception of membership reflects a view of the church as a kind of cooperative service organization, like a condominium association. The church dispenses benefits, and the members do what is necessary to perpetuate the organization. Members may derive many different kinds of benefits, but these are not treated as a focus of great collective concern.

Our church has moved beyond this conventional conception of church membership – far enough for the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer actually to be relevant after all. We continue to find our way in this work. My hope is that we are moving toward a conception of membership similar in form to that of the early Christian churches. They were called “ecclesia,” a Greek word meaning gatherings of called people. Their shared calling reflected an expectation of spiritually transformative possibility.

Membership in an ecclesia was about belonging, and so should be membership in a modern church. When you heed a holy calling, heard as an inner resonance of something much greater than yourself, you are acknowledging that, in a certain sense, you belong to that much greater something. You are accepting the claims that this greater something makes on your attention, your energy, and much more. A holy calling is one that comes from a “something” so much greater than yourself that it moves you to a fundamental reordering of your life.

When I find myself using language as ungainly as “a much greater something” to describe what compels a sense of spiritual belonging, I know I am being gingerly in describing holiness. Pretty soon I just go ahead and say God and hope no one will feel excluded by this word or fail to appreciate the immense range of meanings it includes. Certainly no one should be excluded from the idea of hearing a holy calling. Words like “calling” are usually invoked by and about ministers. But the truth is that they are for everyone.

Now, I need to stop here for a moment and acknowledge the discomfort I’m undoubtedly triggering in some of you by talking about being called by God, and worse yet, belonging to God. Such talk in a UU church! Those of you who are refugees from the Baptist Church or other similar previous religious lives are probably wondering if I’m about to sneak in an altar call. I’m asking you to be with your discomfort and give me a hearing.

This kind of talk may sound like subordination of the individual, a bowing down or submissiveness, or a surrender of independence. These concerns are understandable, but it would be unfortunate to hold holy calling and spiritual belonging this way. Each person, after all, is the judge of what call is heard, if any; what claims are made, if any. Nobody’s got a gun here.

In every life, irrespective of religion, there are calls being heard and claims being made all the time. This is so because, as UU theologian James Luther Adams has observed, a person “may go to church regularly, he may profess some denominational affiliation, . . . But he may actually give his deepest loyalty to something quite different. . . . Find out what that is and you have found his religion. You will have found his god.”

What calls to us and makes demands on us may be small and limiting or grand and freeing. We can make gods of our own egos, which are calling constantly and never shut up about their demands. This “theology of the ego” is a tiny religion practiced by tiny churches, each called The Church Of Me, each acknowledging no source of legitimate demands, beyond itself. A person who belongs to such a church is in danger of being reduced to “a troubled guest on this earth, an accident amidst other accidents,” in the words of two fine poets.

Instead, we can listen for a call that speaks to more profound parts of the self. When a person hears that kind of call and acknowledges his spiritual belonging to its source, a part of him usually kept in shadow is called out into the light. This deeper calling leads to nobility because it enables the whole self to “become visible,” as the poet David Whyte has said, “while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others.” Whatever its form, this gift has the quality of connection to the holy.

Although discovery of calling involves a turning inward to listen deeply, for most people these discoveries can only be made by also turning outward, to a community of others seeking the same thing. The newcomer experiences his holy calling as a possibility, rather than a ripened reality. An ecclesia – a gathering of called people – calls out to him as the place for his search for this holy call. Membership – joining this gathering -- engenders a progressively clearer sense of calling and belonging.

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is about this ever-clearer sense, which he called discipleship, as it evolved through a series of spiritual re-examinations. One came along in 1933, when he was a new minister. His church superintendent ordered him not to perform a funeral for the Jewish father-in-law of his sister, and he complied. After a period of anguished self-searching, he apologized to his sister and brother-in-law and declined a parish ministry post in Berlin as a protest against anti-Semitism in the state-sponsored church.

Bonhoeffer’s gravest spiritual crisis concerned pacifism. As a young minister he rejected the pacifism of Jesus’ Sermon On the Mount as impossibly idealistic. After years of soul-searching, though, he came to embrace it – a conviction that was sorely tested when he became complicit in the plot to assassinate Hitler. In a letter to friends in the resistance written shortly before his arrest in 1943, we can hear Bonhoeffer’s self-doubt and, once again, the persistent, unifying thread of holy calling and belonging: “We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds,” he said. “We have learned the art of equivocation and pretense. Who stands firm?” he asked. . . . “Only the one for whom the final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all of these . . . whose life will be nothing but an answer to God’s question and call.” Strange talk from a brilliant intellectual. Strange and disturbing. But look at the life that gave expression to it. What a soaring inspiration.

His discipleship was costly. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew that it is only when we pay a high price that we fully know the preciousness of what we say we love. He also knew that costliness is always a two-sided coin. He knew in the bottom of his heart that the high cost of discipleship paled in comparison to the cost of turning a deaf ear to his holy calling.

Now some of you are thinking, “I don’t hear something like a bell ringing out with clarity when I try to listen for such a calling. It’s more like my car radio or my cell phone when I’m traveling in an area of poor reception, or no reception at all.” But it is this way for everyone at times, and the listening takes practice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s virtue was not clarity. As we have seen, he was as conflicted as the rest of us. He dithered, he doubted. Rather, his virtue was persistence. He wouldn’t give up on the listening. Nor should we.

Up to this point, we have been looking at membership from the newcomer's perspective. But membership points toward the deepening of calling and belonging over a lifetime. When members of the ecclesia – the gathering of called people – begin to ask themselves how to do this, they have embarked upon the work called “spiritual practice.” They realize they need to read and study; to reveal themselves to each other; to take their holy calling out into the world; to sing, praise, lament, and celebrate. So they begin to create new educational programs, covenant groups, and social justice projects. New liturgy.

As these called people look back over their journey, they are moved to make the burden lighter for those who join after them. So they fashion a program for membership that starts with practices to assure that newcomers make informed, intentional choices about joining. The program also includes structures for involving new members in the deepening experiences the old members created for themselves.

The membership program amounts to a set of expectations, but these are flexible enough to allow for some individual variation, particularly in the pace at which new members travel this path. No one is taken to task for not meeting these, but everyone is expected to be in conversation about how it's going, and if it's not going, then what the difficulty is.

When the called people get to this point on their journey, they have become leaders. The conventional view of church leadership is that it serves two purposes. The first is to provide the practical skills needed to manage the church. The second is to give a status reward to members who have met, in an exemplary way, the three conventional expectations of members – financial pledging, committee work, and attendance on Sunday morning. In the ecclesia -- the gathering of called people we have been looking at -- members who are serving as leaders may also be doing some of these tasks; but leadership itself has a distinctive meaning.

Religious leadership calls for an enlargement of the personal experience of calling and belonging – one that enables the leader to inspire, and take responsibility for, the calling and belonging of other members. To inspire another member to a deeper experience of calling and belonging, the leader must see this person as capable of self-revelation, of making his whole self visible and bringing what has been hidden within him into the world as a gift to others. This self-revelation arises from a deeper sense of calling and belonging, of moving closer to the holy. Being seen by another as having this capability inspires that movement. Inspiring others is one particularly important form of being responsible for the calling and belonging of the whole community. Within the broad range of concerns of the church, there are many other forms of this willingness to be held accountable. With a deepened sense of calling, this accountability feels natural, unforced.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ministry embodied this kind of leadership. His life was a thunderous message of possibility, capability, and accountability to the people of his ecclesia. When the German Evangelical Church saw its mission in terms that excluded Jews who converted to Christianity, he did not hesitate to bring the church to schism by founding the heretical Confessing Church. When many in that church limited their support for persecuted Jews to those who converted to Christianity, he became a heretic within his own heretical

movement. When the government outlawed the seminaries he founded, he made the rounds of villages in eastern Germany to supervise his seminarians secretly.

The Bonhoeffer who took these and other risks could not have been predicted from his temperament. He had no particular strategic or organizational instincts and few collaborators. Often his only company was his calling. His persistence is testimony to the devotion with which he listened for it and the depth with which he heard it.

Our church is right in the middle of the membership and leadership maturation processes I have been describing. Examples abound – more than I have time to describe. Volunteers in our Leadership and Membership cluster are developing ways to deepen the meaning of membership and provide leadership training – starting with a program for cluster chairs on February 3. At today’s congregational meeting, we will vote on the creation of a new congregational committee to be stewards of our Covenant of Right Relations. The kind of relating this group will promote actually IS the work of the church. Our six covenant groups are off to an excellent start. Many involved in these groups have expressed excitement at how quickly the participants have developed relationships of trust and open communication.

And our church’s movement to policy governance is, more than anything else, a way of recasting leadership roles to assure that our policies and practices are shaped by our spiritual mission. The results of the board’s work will shape how our cluster chairs play their roles. That in turn will enable all those participating in the work and experience to have a deeper and deeper sense of calling and belonging. This will require time and patience. The board members and cluster chairs are doing a lot trailblazing in this work. It is an unusually high aspiration. I hope we all can give them support and understanding.

And I hope you will hear some important invitations in this morning’s challenging ideas: to listen as deeply as possible for the tolling of a bell that pulls you toward that “much greater something” sometimes called God; to play a fulfilling role in building paths that others coming along behind you can walk; to lean your weight against the rope and make the bell of this church ring out; and in accepting these and similar invitations, to step into your destiny as a true ecclesia – a gathering of called people.

AMEN.