

So, back in elementary school my home church needed a few more ringers in the junior bell choir, and since I had started taking piano lessons from the director, she not-so-subtly nudged me in the direction of expanding my rather miniscule musical repertoire, at the time. Yes, the handbell-playing made me better in terms of counting the beats and awareness of dynamic levels, not to mention relying on a group of others in making the entire music come to life. Except, what became rather evident, even when I moved up to the so-called advanced bell choir, is that we were never going to be the main attraction when it came to the music ministry of the church. Instead, that was always going to be the vocal choir that captivated the emotions of those sitting in the pews on a Sunday morning.

That didn't change when I moved onto college, and, again, joined the handbell choir on campus. There was one vocal choir that would always get the attention, no matter how well we played, no matter how crisp our rhythm was, no matter how distinct our dynamics throughout the piece, no matter how well we meshed together for a unified sound; we could never top the choir that had international notoriety built up over the years. Except, I didn't realize when I first signed up for the handbell choir at the start of

my freshman year, that, at the end of that next spring semester, we handbell ringers along with a different vocal choir on campus were already set to go on tour to South Korea and Japan. To this day, over fifteen years later, I'm not exactly sure how that happened or why it came about that a bunch of college students in southwest Ohio should sing and ring in places half-way around the world, but nevertheless, it happened. And to this day, over fifteen years later, I still remember the culture shock: a completely different world than what any of us had ever experienced before.

Yes, of course, there were different foods than what we were used to from our campus cafeteria, to say the least, not to mention different social customs and even size of hotel rooms that us young American adults snobbishly assumed should be up to our expectations. And yet, the most drastic difference for us happened in between the performances and the dining and the overnight stays, when we toured not European-style cathedrals, but Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, serving as the ultimate reminder that we were *not* in southwest Ohio anymore.

So, even though we played at a Presbyterian church in Seoul, South Korea and Lutheran and Catholic sanctuaries in Kyoto, Japan, just to name

a few, it's quite possible that many of the people who came to watch us perform were not Christian at all. Now, I don't remember any conversation emerging about that. I don't remember any of us debating any kind of inter-religious topics in the middle of the night, talking about what we thought about other religions, in general, and what would happen to such people not just in this life, but in the life to come. The verse we heard this morning never came up: "God desires everyone to be saved" (so it says in First Timothy).

Does that mean God even desires to save those who will frequent the Great Buddha Temple in Kyoto and never set foot in any Christian house of worship? Does that mean God desires to save those who will never hear Christ's name at all, or even those who have heard the name, but never had the role-models to show the power behind the name? Of course, we in the European-shaped churches have debated this for centuries, and we have all drawn our own conclusions based on a wide array of Bible verses. And, quite honestly, some of our own opinions are shaped by personal experience, good and bad, with those of other faith traditions.

I can only tell you about mine from fifteen years ago, about some of the most hospitable people I have ever come across, even if our verbal languages were incredibly different, to say the least. I can, also, tell you that I have still never experienced a reaction to a handbell choir as I did in South Korea and Japan. I have never seen eyes be so mesmerized by a simple ringing of a bell, as if we were revealing to them a new instrument of beauty that captivated them in a brief moment of their span of life. Many would come up after the performance, wanting to see the bells close-up. It wasn't so much us; it was the instrument. It was how the music was brought to life that they were enthralled.

And no, we didn't first ask what religion they associated themselves with, and quite honestly, it didn't matter to us. It's not like we would have made a decision beforehand to play any differently, either, with any less attention to rhythm or dynamics, if they were, in fact, *not* Christians. They deserved the same collective effort, regardless; the same music, the same hope that humanity can, indeed, come together for the good.

In the end, it's not just that God desires everyone to be saved in some distant future; it's that God desires everyone to be respected now, to be

loved now, to be deemed more than worthy of our collective effort to still bring some semblance of mesmerizing, captivating Good News to life. We can and, I'm sure, we will debate to the end of our respective life what the final version of God's collective kingdom should look like, to see whom God invites to join the heavenly choir.

But I have this sneaking suspicion that God is going to continue the usual divine trend: to go way beyond our human narrow-minded, judgmental to the max, relentless cynicism and hatred-rut-amuck-shaped expectations; to prove us wrong just how wide this divine mercy reaches, and show us what true love really looks like. As if God hadn't already done enough when Jesus decided to take up a cross for all of us who fall spectacularly short of the glory of God. Not only did Jesus deem us worthy in His holy effort to die, but to rise for us, that we too, may be precious instruments of a mesmerizing, captivating love, not only for others to see, but for us to never forget the Greatest News as well. And for the honor to be part of such a choir already here on earth, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!