

Proper 15, Pentecost XI August 16, 2009

I remember hearing a while back that preachers need to preach what they practice—that our reluctance to talk about what we actually do could be more a matter of squeamishness than of humility. That has stuck with me, and, with that reading from Ephesians about drunkenness ringing in our ears, now seems as good a time as any to say a word or two about what the Church has to say about alcohol, its use and abuse. That is something, after all, that I know a little bit about.

But this is a tough subject for us Episcopalians, and, perhaps especially, for those of us who are recovering alcoholics or drug addicts. (Yeah, there's nothing worse than a convert.) After all, *drinking and being unashamed* is one of the fundamental prerogatives, indeed one of the best perks, of being an Episcopalian. Just look at the jokes. (Do you know the difference between an Episcopalian and a Baptist? Episcopalians talk to each other when they meet in a liquor store—there are a million of these.) How dare anyone mess with such a tradition. So we usually don't say much at all. I've been sober over 28 years and I've preached on drinking maybe once.

Meanwhile, alcohol abuse (and other drug abuse, but alcohol is by far the most common and the most destructive), is still absolutely the number one and the most serious and costly social crisis in our country. It causes more problems than anything else. On a more personal level, as I've come to know you over the last couple of years, I've learned that, in this regard, Saint Nicholas' is far from immune. Many of you, indeed, most of you—yes, likely most of you—have been hurt, and hurt badly, at some time in your lives, in one way or another, by someone's use and misuse of alcohol. It may be your own use, or that of a parent, or a child, or a spouse or another relative or a stranger driving a car. There are all sorts of variations, but you have been hurt. You know that. There is a lot of pain out there.

At the same time, our culture is downright weird about this. Drinking is usually pictured as adult and sophisticated, a mature thing—but at the same time we have all sorts of laws and regulations about alcohol, just like we do about bad things. Then we don't respect or even follow the laws we have very much.

We've tried prohibition, and wet and dry cities and counties, and regulations on what you can buy when you can buy it and where and from whom and how old the clerk has to be. There have been statewide elections and county-wide elections and city-wide elections in more cities, counties and states than you can shake a stick at. Still, at the end of the day, it's really hard to tell how much, if any, good all of this has done, or to say how much hurt and pain and cost and tragedy all of this regulation has managed to avoid. Certainly not as much as its proponents hoped and promised.

One odd result of all of this is that, as a culture, we really don't have any shared and common idea of what is acceptable, of what is OK and what's not, as far as alcohol use is concerned. And we send the weirdest mixed messages. One of my favorite examples is that many of the most attractive, creative, compelling and downright entertaining ads on television are for beer. Lots of these are really good. Then, from time to time, a simplistic, second-rate public-service piece by the National Council on Alcoholism will get tossed in between a couple of these really brilliant beer commercials. What will anyone with half a brain pick up from that?

So, the world around us offers no clear guidelines. At the same time, the mainline Church stays pretty quiet. God forbid we get preachy or that our pulpits ever get to sounding like *those other folks*. Besides, if we can't thunder condemnation, rant on and on about demon rum, and try our best to drag everybody from Jesus to Jimmy Carter onto the water wagon, then is there anything left to say, anyway? We seem to think not.

However, we Episcopalians do have some things to say about alcohol and its use. In fact, all of Holy Scripture and the unbroken moral tradition of the Christian Church have at least two clear and important things to say. The first thing we have to say is that abstaining from alcohol is not a basic tenant or a required moral behavior of the Christian faith. It *is* a basic doctrine of Islam and Buddhism, which are religions of abstinence, but it's not part of the content of traditional, orthodox Christianity.

As we all know, Jesus frequently got into trouble for acting more like an Episcopalian than an old-fashioned Methodist. That sort of sets the tone. And while alcohol is certainly not required (outside the Eucharist), it is considered a gift from God, a good part of a good creation. The fact is, no matter how hard we might try, we just can't put the devil *in* any specific thing, be it a *in* book or *in* a bottle. Creation is good. That's one thing we have to say.

The other thing we have to say is that it's never OK to get drunk. The Old Testament always says that it is never OK to get drunk. The New Testament always says what we just heard Ephesians say, "Do not get drunk with wine." The tradition always says the same thing. For example, when there's a stone in a Bishop's ring, the stone is always an amethyst—that's because in Greek the word amethyst means "not drunk". Also, we add water to the wine at communion because of the ancient Greek custom that if you put water in your wine you were *not* planning to get drunk, and vice versa.

It's never OK to get drunk. Getting drunk is shameful. Getting drunk isn't cute, or funny, or a rite of passage or normal. There are no circumstances under which it is expected, accepted, generally alright or ever appropriate to get drunk. It isn't something that kids will just naturally do; and it isn't something we have to put up with or tolerate. It's not a good way to celebrate anything. I would go even farther and suggest that jokes about how funny it is to get or to be drunk aren't funny; and that stories about getting drunk aren't entertaining; and that TV shows, movies and songs that treat getting drunk as a harmless amusement or an ordinary part of a normal life are downright dangerous.

That's the standard of scripture and the of Christian moral tradition. The traditional word for this approach is temperance, one of the classical moral virtues, but that word got hijacked back in the 19th century, so I guess we have to say moderation, which isn't as rich or as expressive a word. Still, that's the standard, and I suspect that if we accepted that standard and tried to exhibit it and enforce it in our homes and in our circle of friends and in the larger society, then we might even begin to make a small dent in all the pain. If we were to act like we believed this, even when it's uncomfortable to act like we believe this, then at least a few things might be different. These are two clear things the Christian church, and, I hope, Christian people, have to say about alcohol.

By the way, that's what's going on with us alcoholics. The reason recovering alcoholics don't drink is not because alcohol is a bad or an evil thing. Recovering alcoholics don't drink because we can't drink at all without getting drunk, and getting drunk *is* a bad and evil thing. So, the only way we can use alcohol responsibly—that is, not get drunk—is by not drinking at all. The issue is not the stuff, it is the people.

Again, it's never OK to get drunk. It's destructive to us. It removes us from our selves. It undermines the witness of the Church, it deadens us spiritually, and so on. And remember, the moral issue here is not some sort of distilled water spiritualism that insists that anything that feels real good has gotta be bad. The moral issue here, as most everywhere else if you really get down to it, is idolatry. It has to do with what is at the center of who we really are. Our choice is always between being filled with God—with God being the center of our lives—or being filled with something else. This is really the only moral issue there is. One way that issue shows up is with alcohol. There are plenty of other ways it shows up, too.

The business of alcoholism and recovery and my own recovery and all of that is for another time and place, but I will say this. It's never OK to get drunk—but it's also never necessary. If there is a problem here, if there is a struggle, with you or with someone you care about, then know for sure that it's possible to live another way. It's possible to live without that particular monkey. There is hope and there is healing and I know that, and am living that; and a whole lot of other people are, too.

So, there's a place to start with questions about alcohol. We really do have a thing or two to say—things that are clear and true and useful. We have some direction, and some notions of what is alright and what isn't. There is a lot more to say, this barely touches the surface, but it is a start.