

DON'T GET DRUNK -- YOU'RE MISSING THE POINT!

(08/27/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 5:1-33

“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.

(Ephesians 5:18)

This morning we are continuing our Sunday morning study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 5 contains one of my two favorite passages of scripture. Paul says,

Wives, be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church . . . Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

I like that verse! I have oft quoted it to my wife--alas, to little effect! This proves that some people just have no respect for the Bible!

My other favorite scripture passage is Deuteronomy 21:18-21. I used to quote this to my two sons when they were going through a rebellious period in their lives. The passage reads,

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear and be afraid.

I remember when Corey, who turned out to be a minister, actually a very good minister, expressed his opinion that this disciplinary guideline was not a particularly enlightened approach to childrearing. I also remember when Jay pointed out that if my father and mother had followed that biblical injunction, I wouldn't even be around to throw stones!

But that's not the point—except that these two verses and the one or two verses that condemn homosexuality might help pry us free from biblical literalism, from fundamentalism, from believing that everything that is written in the Bible is the inerrant word of God. If we take the mind and heart of Jesus as our guide, if our understanding of scripture is inspired by the presence of the Holy Spirit, these passages are not only blatant nonsense; they lead to feelings, beliefs, and actions that are actually evil!

This morning I would like us to focus on the 18th verse of the 5th chapter. In this passage, Paul tells the Ephesians not to get drunk. That's good advice--for the Ephesians and also for us, especially for those of us who are alcoholics or problem drinkers. Paul tells them

that getting drunk with alcoholic spirits is debauchery. (I like that word—debauchery; no one says that anymore!) Paul tells them what they really need is to be filled with the Holy Spirit!

You may not know this, but C. G. Jung, the depth psychologist and psychologist of religion, was instrumental in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. An exchange of letters written in 1961, shortly before Jung's death, between Jung and Bill W., one of the two founders of AA, throws light on this passage of scripture.

Back in the 1930's a hardcore alcoholic named Roland traveled to Zurich to seek Jung's help. Jung accepted Roland into treatment and managed to help him stop drinking. Not long after the treatment ended, however, Roland relapsed. Appalled by the mess he was making of his life and afraid that he would drink himself to death, Roland returned to Zurich and pleaded with Jung to help him.

According to what Roland later related to his friend, Bill, Jung told Roland that he couldn't help him. He said that not only could he not help him; there was no one in the world that could help him. He told Roland that he was going to die, that he was going to drink himself into insanity and death.

Roland, filled with despair, asked if there were anything that could help. Jung said there was one possibility, but it was not likely to occur. Jung told Roland that he needed to have a religious experience. He then told Roland, quite candidly, that he did not hold out much hope that this would happen to Roland because Roland was not the kind of person that tends to have religious experiences.

I agree with what you're thinking. In this exchange, Jung came down more on the side of reality therapy, of tough love, than on the side of being a warm, sensitive, empathic, supportive presence to Roland. I'm not sure I would pick Jung to be my therapist; then again, perhaps he would be and provide exactly what I need!

But, again, that's not the point. One night, not long after his disheartening consultation with Jung, Roland fell to his knees in despair. He then had what he later described as a religious experience. This religious experience, this transforming experience of the Holy Spirit within him, not only helped him stop drinking; it took away his desire to drink.

Several years later Bill, another hardcore alcoholic, ran across his friend Roland. Having assumed that Roland had probably drunk himself to death, he was surprised to find his friend alive and amazed to find him sober. Knowing that Roland had received psychotherapeutic treatment from Jung, and that Roland had gone back to Jung when he fell off the wagon, Bill asked Roland if Jung had helped him.

Roland replied that Jung had, but in a strange way. Roland said that the most important thing Jung told him was that he couldn't help him and that actually no one could help him. Roland said Jung prescribed a religious experience as the cure for his alcoholism. He related to Bill how he managed to stumble across this experience, how he actually had a religious experience, and how it had changed his life.

Bill, who, because of his drinking was already circling the drain, was stunned. He had a sense that Jung's advice to Roland might also be applicable to him, but, like Roland, he had no idea how to get one of these religious experiences. You see, back in those days, people had no access to LSD or psilocybin. Bill, who was living in England at the time, joined a small group confessional movement that was associated with the Methodist Church. One night, much to his surprise and delight, he had just the kind of experience he had been seeking. Just as had happened to Roland, it not only helped Bill stop his drinking; it took away his desire to drink.

The two men later got together and compared stories. They realized that they had stumbled on something very important. They realized that the cure for alcoholism, the *real* cure, had to include a spiritual dimension. This realization gave rise to Alcoholics Anonymous, which, at its core, is a spiritual discipline.

In 1961, the year of Jung's death, Bill wrote to Jung telling him about Roland's experience, about his experience, about the organization that had arisen out of their experiences, and their insight into the spiritual dimension of healing for people who suffer from addictions. Jung wrote back, expressing his gratitude to Bill for telling him what had happened.

Jung then told Bill why he had given Roland this advice. Jung said that the alcoholic is seeking an experience of Spirit. The alcoholic seeks that experience of the Spirit of God that brings "the peace that passes all understanding," the peace that comes to those who know they are a child of God and are loved by God. This is the kind of experience that people in former times sought and often found or experienced in church/temple/mosque, through the organized religion to which they subscribed, or through a spiritual discipline that they found meaningful.

Jung is telling us that the alcoholic is seeking something of tremendous value. It is something we all want and need. However, the alcoholic is making a mistake! The alcoholic is attempting to find Spirit and its accompanying gift of serenity, through ingesting alcoholic spirits.

Any recovering alcoholic who has experienced serenity will tell you that being drunk is a poor substitute for serenity. In addition, the alcohol eventually becomes demonic. The alcoholic needs to drink more and more to get that nice warm glow. Finally, no matter how much the alcoholic drinks, he/she cannot experience that nice, warm, mellow feeling. Eventually, in this misguided quest for Spirit, the alcoholic will destroy not only his/her liver and brain cells, but also his/her relationships with loved ones. This path leads to insanity and death.

In his letter to Bill, Jung quoted the Latin maxim *spiritus contra spiritum*. This means “spirit against spirit.” Jung said that only an experience of the real spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is able to cast out or help one to overcome the addictive and misguided search for serenity through the ingestion of alcoholic spirits.

In the 18th verse of the 5th chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells his listeners (and also us),

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a valuable piece of advice! Paul is not just telling us not to get drunk, though that would indeed be good advice. He is telling us that the cure for drunkenness is “being filled with the Spirit.” Jung believed that when we drink, we are searching for this experience of being filled with the Spirit. We are just going about this search in the wrong way!

I believe this is true of every obsession, every compulsion, and every addiction. There is a teleological dimension to the attachment. It is a search for a *telos* or goal; it is a search for something we need. We are just going about it in the wrong way! Because we are searching in the wrong way, our quest will not only fail; it will ultimately destroy us.

Many people who drink say that they drink because “they have had a tough day,” because “their boss or husband or wife is insensitive,” or because “they have stress.” This is where we come to the final piece of gold in this passage from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

Paul says that if we are “filled with the Spirit,” we will “sing and make melody to the Lord within our hearts.” That is a beautiful statement, especially for those of us who are not gifted singers. We can’t all sing in the choir (actually, we can in our choir! We will even waive the audition if you manifest a sincere desire to join), but each and every one of us can “sing and make melody to the Lord within our hearts.” When we do this, when we are “filled with the Spirit,” we will find ourselves “giving thanks to God at all times and for everything.” It will shape our attitude toward ourselves, toward other people, and toward life.

When we are really at peace, when we are at peace with ourselves and with God, we find that we do not rail against what we experience as the injustices of life, all the things in our daily life that don’t go as we want, all the people in our life that are not as we would like them to be. We accept life as it is. We accept other people as they are. And we are grateful, tremendously grateful!

In another of his letters Paul, writing from prison, says, “I have learned in whatever state I am to be content.” Every time I read this, I think to myself, “Easy for him to say; Paul never lived in the State of Florida—or Texas.” Let’s see if he could still be content when he listens to what his governor and his legislators are saying, when he discovers that their vision for America is not the same as his, is not the vision of the diversity, the inclusiveness, the quality of life for all people that we are trying to create in this great country, a vision that is congruent with the heart and mind of Jesus!

Paul concludes his letter by telling us to be in Christ. He tells us to become a prisoner of Christ. He tells us to let Christ dwell within our heart, to be filled with the Spirit. If we can do this, we may find that our obsessions, our compulsions, our addictions will fade away as surely as they did for Roland, for Bill, and for millions of other addicts who have embarked upon the twelve-step process of recovery.

If we do this, Paul says, we will find ourselves content, at peace, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is truly “the peace that passes all understanding.” Of all the gifts of faith, this is probably the greatest one of all!

God grant that we will experience the serenity that comes from being in Christ Jesus that, as his disciples, it might show forth in our daily life!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

We come to this church out of our need. We come out of our need to find a deeper meaning for our life than the one offered by our materialistic culture. We come because we know, deep down, that we have a strong tie, a strong relationship with the transcendent, that transcendent realm from which we came, to which we return after we die, and which we carry with us and within us throughout our life. We come to utilize the richness of worship: of scripture, sermon, prayer, sacred music, silence, and also fellowship to deepen our relationship with that God who is the Ground of all Being and the Ground of our being, of our life.

We come to this church to receive the greatest gift of all—God’s gift to us in Jesus. We come to witness to his birth, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. We come to celebrate his power over death, and we seek his guidance in helping us to overcome the darkness that we experience in the world and also within ourselves. Yes, we come to this church, this worship service out of our need.

But we have not come to this church today simply to receive. We have also come to give. In fact, one of our deepest needs is the need to give, to give to others and to make our contribution to life. We know that people who are givers are happier than those who are takers—whether they give joyfully within a family, with a friend, in their work, or with the larger community of our sisters and brothers around the world.

It is in this spirit that we bless the gifts that we share with our church this morning and the many gifts we freely and joyfully share with the world in the week to come.