

**“Alcohol: A Christian Response”**  
**Genesis 9:20-27, Romans 13:12b-14**  
**Second Sunday in Pentecost**  
**June 10, 2007**

Before I get started, I want you to know that for the next few weeks, I will be preaching a series of sermons that I hope will generate several dinner table conversations between parents and their kids. I want to talk about some of the issues that affect our young people, offer what I believe to be the perspective of our faith, and then let you go home and help each other make some responsible decisions. After all, the home is where decisions are first made and values are primarily formed. You may or may not agree with what you hear me say, and that is fine. The important thing, and what I hope that you will do, is that you talk about the information you hear in these next few weeks as a family.

I would like to start this series by talking about the use and abuse of alcohol. I wanted to do a sermon on drugs and alcohol, but the topic was just too big. Since alcohol seems to be the “drug of choice” for so many of our young people, since it is often referred to as the “gateway drug”—the first step in the path to trying harder drugs, and since certain events in our community have recently taken place that have given us cause to stop and think, I thought I would focus upon it. So I encourage you to listen closely. Let’s get started. And if you know the following song, then I invite you to sing along:

*In heaven there is no beer  
That’s why we drink it here  
And when we’re all gone from here  
All our friends will be drinking all the beer.*

If you have grown up in Nebraska, then you have probably heard that song a time or two. Anyone here this morning want to be honest and say that they have ever heard it, or ever sung it? I first heard it down at the old Sokol Hall in South Omaha when I was in college. For my mother’s information, I was there for “study” purposes. You might have turned on the radio back in the 60s and 70s and heard that particular melody on the old “Big Joe Polka Show” on Saturday nights. That song was a staple of that program. It’s

lots of fun. It's got a good beat. And it is easy to dance to, especially when...oh, never mind! But if you do know that song, and if you are like me, then you are probably unaware that there are several other verses to it. Who needs to learn the rest when it is only the first verse that really matters, right? But if you look hard, then you will find another verse that goes like this.

*In heaven there is no fear  
So we worry too much here  
And we drink ourselves full of beer  
To help us when we deal with the fear.*

That's interesting, don't you think? The second verse of that song presents the message that the best way to cope with whatever the world throws at you is to drink yourself silly. Obviously, that is a position that neither your mother nor 4000 years of biblical faith would take. As people of faith we have always believed that it is God who helps us deal with all the fear that fills our world. We need nothing other than the one who loves us to get through the heartaches of life. That being said, wine—not beer—was the main drink of biblical society, mainly because it was the only drink that would keep in a non-refrigerated world. And to be quite frank, the Bible had plenty of positive things to say about it. Wine was seen as part of the good life, just like milk and honey—mainly because if any of those three were being produced, then that meant that the people were probably living on good and fertile land. Wine was also a sign of divine care, especially in difficult times, as God promised to lead his people to a place where wine could be always produced in abundance. That is sort of the idea behind Jesus turning the water into wine. Despite what my good Baptist aunt has to say, that was real wine in those jars, not “the unfermented juice of the grape.” Jesus used the miracle at Cana as a “sign” of all the abundance that God promised in and through him. (I once heard another fine Baptist woman once say after a long discussion of John 2, “Well, Jesus may have turned the water into wine, but I would have a lot more respect for him if he didn't!) And let's not forget that Paul even tells his beloved Timothy to “...*drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments,*” advice that modern medicine has proven to

not be all that bad. If we are honest, the Bible does say some fairly positive things about alcohol.

But biblical faith also understood the dangers associated with its abuse. There is that verse from Proverbs 20:1, for instance, that states, *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”* Proverbs 23:20-21 says, *“Do not be among the winebibbers...for the drunkards...will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags.”* Paul told the Galatians that “drunkenness” was one of the *“works of the flesh,”* and he wrote to the Ephesians, *“Do not be drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.”* And when Jesus was teaching the disciples about the time to come, he said, *“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness...”* While alcohol was common in the ancient world, people of faith were well aware of its potential for abuse. Check out the story of Noah and his sons in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis and see if you don’t agree. You cannot understand our history as biblical people and not know where we have stood for centuries on the destructive effects of alcohol.

You also cannot understand our history as United Methodists without knowing its awareness of the problems that alcohol can cause. From the very beginning, Methodists have been involved with the Temperance Movement. John Wesley ministered during the boom days of the Industrial Revolution. Overworked and exploited employees often found that their only refuge from their difficult world was in drink. Doing so only added to the misery faced by so many families. As a result, Wesley put a prohibition against *“drunkenness, buying and selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them”* in the very first copy of the General Rules of the Methodist Societies. In what is known as “A Word to a Drinking Man,” Wesley wrote to one who had let strong drink destroy his life and that of his family, and said, *“God made you a man, but you make yourself a beast.”* And Wesley’s feelings about alcohol transferred over to his Methodists in America. Temperance was one of the first items on the agenda at the Christmas Conference in 1784, that meeting at which the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed. In the 1800’s Methodists were among the founders of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and

Francis E. Willard, a lifelong Methodist, was its very first president. In 1869 Thomas Bramwell Welch, a Methodist layman, became so involved in the temperance movement that he invented a non-alcoholic wine to be used during Holy Communion. He called it, of all things, "*Welch's Grape Juice*." Methodists have always been concerned about the effects of alcohol on individuals and the society. Even today our Social Principles state: "*We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons. We [also] support abstinence from the use of any illegal drugs*" (Paragraph 162J). You cannot understand our Methodist history and heritage without knowing that we have recognized the problems caused by the abuse of alcohol for nearly 250 years.

And you would have to have your head buried in the sand not to know what today's science has taught us. The Center for Disease Control reports that some of the immediate health risks of alcohol include:

- Unintentional injuries, including traffic injuries, falls, drowning, burns and unintentional firearm injuries.
- Violence, including intimate partner violence and child maltreatment. About 35% of victims report that offenders are under the influence of alcohol when the abuse occurs.
- Risky sexual behavior, including unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, and increased risk of sexual assault. These behaviors can result in unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and even death.

The CDC also reports that long-term health risks of alcohol use and abuse include:

- Neurological problems including dementia, stroke, and neuropathy.
- Cardiovascular problems including myocardial infarction, cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation, and hypertension.
- Psychiatric problems including depression, anxiety, and suicide.

- Social problems including unemployment, lost productivity, and family problems.
- Cancer of the mouth, liver disease, pancreatitis, and gastritis.

There is absolutely no question that today's science has demonstrated the very destructive effects that continual and abusive drinking of alcohol can cause.

Finally, after reminding you what the scriptures, our church, and science have to say about the subject, let me also remind you what our families have taught us by telling you a story. When I was growing up there was an old bum who used to wander around Little Italy, down around 6<sup>th</sup> and Pierce Streets right here in Omaha. His name was Johnny Baaboo. He and Otis Campbell of Mayberry had a lot in common. My grandfather once told me that Baaboo was not really his last name, that it meant something else, and if that part of the story is true, then I will leave it to my mother to decide if and when I can tell it to you. Anyway, every time I saw Johnny, he was wearing dirty bib overalls, a soiled white tee shirt, and an old conductor's hat. Always unshaven, I never saw him without the stub of a cigar in his mouth. You could often find him sleeping on the sidewalk or on the doorstep of some empty building or eating the plate of pasta my grandmother would leave for him on the back porch. Even though he was basically harmless, my brother, sister, and I were told never to get near to him, because as my grandfather would say, "He drink-a too much vino." I grew up being a pretty normal guy, and when I was in high school and college I did some pretty normal things, but my grandfather convinced me long ago that I never wanted to be like Johnny Baaboo.

Alcohol is a problem. It sure was for Johnny. It crosses all ethnic, cultural, and economic boundaries. Every year it kills far more people than marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines combined. Almost anyone who has ever gone to high school can probably name at least one acquaintance whose life has been tragically cut short by alcohol abuse. Most of us can probably also name at least one family that has been ruined by alcohol. The abuse of alcohol is one of the biggest social problems in our nation today. But I will have to admit that in all my years in the church, despite what our faith, our

history, and our common sense says about it, I have never heard a sermon against its use. I know that I have never preached a sermon against it. And over the past few weeks, I have thought a lot about why. One probable reason so little is said in the church about alcohol is that so many of its members make their living off of the alcohol industry. There are salespeople, shopkeepers, and restaurateurs, for instance, who own or work for businesses in which alcohol plays a major role. They go about their work in a very contentious manner, and they contribute in many different ways to the church. Why risk offending them? Then there is the fact that our society benefits from it. The advertising industry makes a fortune off its sales. Do you think any of us would be able to afford to go to a sporting event or a concert if it wasn't for the alcohol industry? Finally, another reason so little is said in church about alcohol, perhaps the biggest reason, is that it has become socially acceptable. Having a beer at the ballgame or a nice glass of wine with dinner is a part of life. Most of us—young and old—have done it at one time or another with no ill effect. We're not drunks! It's not an issue at our house! And that is where it becomes really difficult for people like me. It is very easy for preachers to point a finger at "those people," but it is so much harder when the finger is pointed at those who sign your paycheck! So I, just like so many other preachers, simply choose to be quiet when it comes to the subject.

But is that the right thing to do? And if it isn't, then where do I start? What do I say? I have thought a lot about that in the past few days. I do not want to come across as some strict moralist. I have no desire to stand up here this morning and tell you what you can and cannot do. Fortunately, I don't think I have to because there are no scriptures that say, "Thou shalt not drink." As a matter of fact, I think that it would be safe to say that the Bible, without directly saying so, teaches moderation. Please remember that alcohol was an everyday part of society back then. Everyone drank it, even Jesus and the disciples. Remember that little get-together we call "The Last Supper?" Even back then, the concept of responsible drinking seemed to prevail. But is that concept enough in today's world? Is that all I need to say? Well, I found a scripture that I think might help us here. I would like to share it with you, show you how our denomination has tended to interpret it, and then share a story that might help you understand what it means. Earlier

you heard a passage from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul spends the first 11 chapters of his letter dealing with theology, laying out his understanding of what Christ has done for us. Then he begins chapter 12 with a big "therefore." Anytime you find a "therefore" in Paul's writings, you can pretty much bet that on its left side will be theology and on its right side ethics. God has done these things for you; "therefore" you are expected to live like this. That "therefore" is exactly what we find in those last four chapters of Paul's letter. And in that 14<sup>th</sup> chapter, we find these very "ethical" words: *"Let us...no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to be a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another."* Paul knew that we are saved by what Christ has done for us, not by what we do for Christ. Paul knew that the Old Testament distinction between what is "clean" and what is "unclean" was no longer valid. Mature Christians understood that too. But there were many people who were new to the faith, many people who were still struggling to make the gospel a part of their lives, many people who were still waiting to see how Christ made that everyday difference, and the apostle didn't want them to "stumble" by them watching others do that which they did not yet understand. So Paul urged the Roman church to forego anything that harmed others. If eating pork or not washing their hands in the accustomed manner or—I assume Paul would say—drinking alcohol somehow caused another to question the faith, then out of the love that they had for that fellow Christian, do not do it!

It seems to me that our United Methodist Church has taken that scripture to heart. In our 2004 Book of Resolutions, we find the following paragraph which comments on our historic stand found in our Social Principles:

*"The United Methodist Church bases its recommendation of abstinence on critical appraisal of the personal and societal costs in the use of alcohol. The church recognizes the freedom of the Christian to make responsible decisions and calls upon each member to consider seriously and prayerfully the witness of abstinence as part of his or her Christian commitment. Persons who practice abstinence should avoid attitudes of self-righteousness that express moral superiority and condemnatory attitudes towards those who do not choose to*

*abstain. Because Christian love in human relationships is primary, abstinence is an instrument of love and sacrifice and is always subject to the requirements of love.”<sup>1</sup>*

I hope that you heard that. “*Abstinence is an instrument of love and sacrifice and is always subject to the requirements of love.*” Those are nice words, but what do they really mean? Webster defines abstinence as “*a deliberate refraining from an action or practice,*” which is a good definition, but it doesn’t say anything about doing so out of love. So let me give you a very concrete and very personal example of how that might look. One day I came home after a long day of dealing with sinners like Hughes, poured myself a nice glass of Merlot, sat down in my recliner, and began to watch the news. My youngest son Charlie, who was probably about five years old at the time, noticed what I was doing, and came over and stood directly between the television and me. He stared at me for the longest time, causing me to become quite uncomfortable, and then with a puzzled look on his face asked, “Daddy, why are you drinking a drug?” I have no idea where he came up with that. He must have heard something like that in kindergarten. It was one of those “gotcha” moments. I had no funny comeback, no snappy answer. The concept of moderation and responsibility would be lost on him. So realizing that I couldn’t ask him not to do something I was doing, I picked him up, walked over to the kitchen sink, and poured the rest of that glass of wine down the drain. My boys never saw me take another drink—and neither will Ella.

That was the choice that I made that day. I do not offer it as anything other than a story of how I arrived at my decision. It is not my intention to put myself on a pedestal. I do not expect my story to be normative for you. But along with Paul, I do expect anyone who claims the name of Christ not to be a stumbling block to one another. Alcohol and its abuse are two of the biggest problems in our country. Recent statistics from the American Academy of Pediatrics tells us that 4 out of 10 sixth graders have been pressured by their friends to drink. Binge drinking has become the number one problem on college campuses. There is no question that alcohol affects all of us. What decisions will you and

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Resolutions of the UMC, 2004, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, p. 229

your family make about it? How will you respond to the problem that is so pervasive in our land? If you are a parent or grandparent and love your children or grandchildren, I do hope that you will sit down and talk with them about how you feel about the subject. After all, no one has more influence over young people than their adult family members. So speak to one another. Pray together. Take the information that you have heard this morning and make your feelings known. And as you do, remember these words from the apostle Paul:

*“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness...Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ...”*