

**“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery”**

*Ephesians 5:17*

This morning, our Epistle reading comes to us from the Letter to the Ephesians. We have no idea on earth who wrote this letter. Once upon a time it was thought to be St Paul, but the language, the structure, the content is not at all consistent with Paul. It's not in synch with his other writings. Ephesians was more than likely a pastoral directive sent to all the churches in a particular region on how to live a Christian life, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, how to try and regulate one's behavior as a child of God. Whoever the author or authors were, they begin their instruction with the words: *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise people, informed people, making the most of the time, because*

*the days are evil. So don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.***

First of all, it helps to understand that perilous word “debauchery.” I searched for several definitions and found this one with no mention of who wrote it: *Debauchery always involves behavior—especially sexual behavior or behavior involving alcohol or drugs—a condition that some find morally objectionable. In biblical and spiritual contexts, the word debauchery is **deadly serious**, but in other situations the word often has a playful connotation, as when a group of friends go out for a "night of debauchery."*<sup>1</sup> I am struck by the words “deadly serious” and feel certain that means morally, physically, emotionally and spiritually problematic.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/debauchery#:~:text=%3A%20extreme%20indulgence%20in%20bodily%20pleasure>

Drinking wine or beer or moonshine, or having a cocktail—or beer—is not harmful for 80% of the people on this earth. This Church has no problem with that. In fact, the Bible says: "**No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities.**"<sup>2</sup> But the twenty percenters fall into another category, one that is *deadly serious*. We types are known as alcoholics, addicts: men and women, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, Christian or Hindu, Pentecostal or Episcopalian. We 20% of the world's population cannot successfully predict what will happen to us after we ingest the first drink or hit. Let's stick with booze. Alcoholics are those who can't put it down, and keep going back to it no matter what the consequences might be—to themselves, to their family, to their job, to their health, to their discipleship of Christ. The twenty percenters who fall under the category of debaucherous **are not moral failures. They are suffering from a terrible illness.** Let me

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:23

emphasize and underline that statement and put in italicized capital letters until I am blue in the face.

Not moral reprobates, but very sick people who suffer a disease, and one that can be treated, and treated successfully. So states the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Nursing Association even the World Health Organization. And speaking of the WHO—the World Health Organization—several years ago that group cited addiction as the number one health hazard in the world. And yet—take my brother for example. He is a family practice physician, and a very fine one. He shared with me one time that he never heard a word about this disease in medical school, or in his training, and yet it has been a disease that he encounters on a daily basis in one form or other. Denial: refusing to acknowledge what in our hearts we know to be true.

*Joined up in the 20<sup>80</sup>s*

As a young priest, I drank way too much, and way too often.

Small wonder our branch of Jesus' church has been referred to as "Whisocopalians." Or "Where <sup>3</sup>~~two~~ or <sup>4</sup>~~three~~ Episcopalians gather together, there is always a fifth." My seminary served sherry almost every night when I matriculated in 1968, and I had my share of it. Like every alcoholic or addict, I drank to change the way I felt. I drank to enjoy myself, have fun, get over my shyness, fit in, experience what it means to be a part of, not apart from. I also suffered from episodes of depression. And it never occurred to me, again the dynamic of denial, it never occurred to me that pouring a depressant on top of depression might not be a good idea. Denial is sincerely believing that which is not true. Forty years ago, 1984, I hospitalized myself with depression—and was given an array of psychotropic drugs to remedy the downward spiral. And In that respected hospital, I got worse, not better. I was mis-diagnosed.

A group of people from my Church came to see me, they sneaked in, and in no uncertain terms, they said: Stuart get out of this place, you may be feeling depressed, but we don't think that's your problem. We think you're alcoholic, and need another form of treatment. Get the \_\_\_\_\_ out of here. Now these people were not medical personnel, and they had no business diagnosing dis-ease and ordering treatment. They were simply friends and churchfolk who happened to be active in AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, people who loved me; they were truth tellers; and they knew that the truth always sets us free.

As they shared themselves with me, I was utterly amazed to hear my own story of illness told on their lips. This precious gift of *identification*. Again **not moral failure**, but dis-ease. And one that can be treated. So hopeful were the words of those busy-bodies from the Church. Somehow (and I often use that word as a synonym for God), Somehow I was convicted by a loving and

caring intervention, and soon thereafter, I left the hospital, and entered treatment for alcoholism. Almost 40 years ago, and my life has been transformed, transfigured, transmogrified in ways that would take a week to share with you. A renewal, a spiritual uplift that rocketed me to the 4th dimension. I have no idea where the 4th dimension is, but I imagine it to be a conversion to a life that is mostly happy, joyous and free.

You probably don't know this, but I am who has gone all over this country and abroad to speak in schools and churches about the disease of addictive illness. Churches where such is a big problem, churches where the priest is so impaired that she or he had to be relieved of his job. Churches where alcohol has been served for years at the coffee hour, only where coffee was not to be seen. I have served on the board of Episcopal Recovery Ministries, I have spoken to the national Executive Council of the Episcopal Church about alcoholics in the pulpit, I helped write the guidelines for

Episcopal Churches on the serving of alcohol at parish functions. I go to the seminary at Sewanee every year and do a workshop with incoming students about this cunning, baffling and powerful disease, and I always have one, two, or three incoming students who come up and say “Can I speak to you privately, I think you were talking about me.” I’ve even been appointed an Adjunct Professor at General Seminary in New York where I have authored a course on the Pastor’s role in the Treatment of Addiction.


I lead spiritual retreats in this country and abroad where the focus is Holy Spirit as opposed to Distilled spirit. And next Wednesday, I’ll be at Sewanee talking to the incoming class of seminary students. I go to Sacramento in September, New York City in October, and New Jersey in November to speak in churches. And many come to such events—because almost everyone we know either suffers from the disease or has experienced its harmful effects by someone in the family. Not moral weakness, but a disease. I



have a friend who says that when she shakes her family tree, liquor bottles fall down.

Last year I was invited to a Church in Washington DC. My third time to visit that parish, a parish that has suffered terribly from the disease of addiction. I go there to teach and preach on the subject of alcoholism, and what constitutes recovery. I'm aware that some want to shoot me for meddling in their business, and others roll out the welcoming mat. On my last visit to this particular church, we acolytes and clergy were processing down the main aisle to begin the liturgy, just like we do here. One old man (and I can use that term because I am a full-fledged member of that category) said to his wife—quite loudly—“Oh God, not him again!” And I turned around smiled and waved, and he turned green.

That day I carried forth about the symptoms of the disease: denial being the first and foremost symptom. It's the only disease on earth that tells its victims they don't have a disease. I then spoke

oft Resentment, Isolation, Fear, Guilt and Shame being the disastrous symptoms, and I shared my own experience, strength and hope that has been mine in recovery. Are you aware that Alcoholics Anonymous, now world-wide, was founded in the parish hall of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City. And that their rector, Fr Sam Shoemaker, helped them design a program for help wherein God is the chief resource for getting well. Do you know that the spiritual precepts of that  program and process come right out of what we say and do in this Church, and how it goes side by side by what we do in our devotions here.

Today, I am physically, emotionally and spiritually a very strong person. I have my ups and downs like everyone who lives in a crazy world like ours, but personally, I am not running down that primrose path that leads to destruction. Rather I walk the King's Highway, and offer you and anyone you know an invitation to

follow suit. *Take up your Cross and follow me*, said our Lord who experienced Resurrection on the other side of devastation. I'll close with a passage from what's known as the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, page 124. It is something I say every morning as a reminder of my own Christian service: *Showing others how we were given help is what makes life so worthwhile to us now. Cling to the thought, that in God's hands, our own dark past is the best resource we have for helping others. With that dark past redeemed in the hands of a loving and caring God, we can help others avert misery and death.*<sup>3</sup>

*Amen,*

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<sup>3</sup> Big Book of AA, page 124