

“Alcohol, idols, and stumbling blocks”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Corinthians 8:1-13

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Sometimes I wonder if people think I'm Mormon. I mean, I live in Central New York, the birth place of Mormonism. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I don't drink alcohol or caffeine. I don't smoke. I'm religious... obviously. I've even been to Hill Cumorah. What's worse, I've been married twice. Before Jenna, there was Jesus. I wore a gown; I took vows; there was even cake.

Of all those attributes, though, what stands out the most is usually the fact that I don't drink. Alcohol is at the social center of our life together. And it's unbelievable to a lot of people that someone wouldn't drink. That's what I'm going to be talking about today. But before I do, I want to issue a trigger warning.

There's going to be some humor in today's sermon, but alcohol is no laughing matter—not for the 17.6 million people, or one in every 12 adults in the United States, who suffer from alcohol dependency. It's no laughing matter for the half of all adults who have a family history of alcoholism. So, if you need to step out at any time, that's OK. No one will judge you or make any assumptions. Or they'll have me to answer to.

And yes, to that person who was thinking about taking a bathroom break right now, I do realize I just made this super awkward for you.

Let's start with Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a bustling Greek city. The early Christians were but a very small minority in a sea of Greek, Roman, Near Eastern, and other religions. Just as we live in a world where alcohol is commonly consumed, the early Christians lived in a world where animals and food were frequently offered to idols. These sacrifices were at the center of their social life. They spawned big celebrations, allowing people to eat the food that had been given to the gods.

This left the early Christians in a predicament. They knew these gods weren't real. And so some Christians, not wanting to be left out of society, decided they could eat the meat. After all, what difference did it make? The food was just... food. Other Christians, however, worried that by eating the food offered to idols they appeared to be endorsing false beliefs and might lead others astray.

In the same way, today, Christians are divided on a host of personal life choices, including this question about whether it's faithful to drink alcohol. Presbyterians used to be all about temperance—the complete abstinence and legal prohibition of alcohol. We were not exactly a fun group of people. When Mark Twain went out into the world, he wrote, “It was a place of sin, loose women, whiskey and gambling. It was no place for a good Presbyterian, and I did not long remain one.”

But now, the Presbyterian Church acknowledges that there are faithful Christians who responsibly drink and others who don't. It's up to them, the church says.

It's up to them, because the Bible really isn't helpful on this question. While Scripture does condemn drunkenness and forbid drinking in some instances, it never universally prohibits responsible drinking. In fact, Jesus drinks alcohol. So do the disciples. So does pretty much everyone in the ancient world. Water was generally less accessible and less safe. Alcohol killed bacteria. It also made for a fun party. Scripture was only concerned about drinking when it became dangerous. And of course, there are a lot of arguments for the danger of alcohol.

Every year, 88,000 people die because of excessive drinking. That's more than twice the annual death toll due to opiate overdose. Alcohol is involved in the perpetuation of domestic violence, sexual assault, and poverty. It can lead to poor coping skills, altered behavior, and reduced health. And for some, it causes addiction, a systemic loss of control that is still stigmatized in our society and wreaks great pain in the life of its sufferers.

But there are also plenty of arguments for responsible, non-addictive drinking. Drinking can give life pleasure. It can bring people together and foster celebration. It can help someone unwind or go to sleep. What's more, by drinking responsibly we can model a different, and healthier, approach to alcohol.

So, how do we know whether it's OK to drink or not? If Scripture doesn't provide a clear warrant, and if alcohol has both negative and positive affects, what's left to base our decision on?

That's what the Corinthians were wondering.

Paul tells them that there's nothing inherently wrong with eating food dedicated to idols. But this knowledge isn't going to help them make their decision. As Valerie Nicolet-Anderson writes, "Paul never conceives of the Christ believer as an independent individual who would make decisions that involve him or herself only. Quite the contrary in fact. For Paul, the Christ believers are first and foremost involved in a community. They are enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect them to other Christ believers. This interconnectedness is precisely the ultimate criterion for Paul. How one's behavior will influence the behavior of others is paramount."

In other words, for Paul, the operative question is not: What do you know is right? It's: Whom do you love?

Because there are people, Paul reminds the Corinthians, who struggle with this idol food. Eating it could hurt their faith or their understanding, or lead them back into old ways. And Paul loves these people. He considers them his brothers and sisters. He refuses to do anything that could do them harm. So, he decides not to eat the food. Not because it's moral or immoral; not because he likes it or doesn't like it; but because of love.

Love is how we decide whether to drink or not. It's how we're supposed to make all our life choices. How does this choice build up or tear down my neighbor? How does it help or hurt?

We may know that, for those of us who don't have an alcohol dependency, moderate drinking is OK. It can even be a good thing. But what matters are our relationships with the people around us. What matters is what they need to thrive—what that alcohol may mean to them.

That's why the Presbyterian denomination does not invest its money in the alcohol industry, and it's why we as a church do not allow alcohol on our premises.

Importantly, though, this love has not led the denomination to condemn drinking outright. The church recognizes that “responsible and non-problematic uses of alcohol have been part of human experience and the Judeo-Christian heritage since the beginning of recorded history” (1986, General Assembly). The denomination's policy recognizes that alcoholism, like a disease, is a public health issue and not a moral failure; its onus is not on the individual but on society. As for the personal choice to drink responsibly—that is left to the individual.

I am not going to tell you to drink or not to drink. That's not what the Apostle Paul cares about. Paul simply wants you to examine why you drink or don't drink. Because I suspect, for most of us, it has little to do with love. Most teetotalers refuse to drink because they believe it is morally wrong and don't wish to have their faculties compromised. Most people who drink moderately do it because they like it. They like its taste. They like how it affects them. The problem with this reasoning, on both sides, is that it's all about the individual. All about me.

In fact, I would hazard that the only group of people who uniformly base their choice on love are those who have sought help with their addiction, those who daily choose to resist the urge to drink because they don't want to hurt the people they love. They're the only real heroes in the room.

For the rest of us, what that love means may vary in different situations. For instance, you already know that I don't drink. But years ago when I was traveling in Israel with members of a Jewish Reformed synagogue, I drank. I drank some particularly dry and bad-tasting wine. Why? Because it was Shabbat. Because these Jewish brothers and sisters had invited me into a sacred

space and time, and wine was a part of that experience. My respect, my love, for them was more important than my knowledge.

In the Swedish novel *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (how's that for a title?), Allan is convinced that the *only* way to love your neighbor is to drink vodka, and lots of it. In fact, he believes that all of the world's greatest conflicts could be solved over a bottle of vodka.

When pressed about whether he truly thinks that a bottle of vodka could solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, Allan responds, "For that particular conflict, it is not impossible that you would need more than one bottle."

Later, Allan says, "You should beware of priests, my son. And people who don't drink vodka. Worst of all are priests who don't drink vodka."

Maybe the 100-year-old man is right. After all, I'm a priest who doesn't drink vodka. So you probably shouldn't be listening to me anyway. But I'd suggest that the issue isn't whether you drink or not; it's whether or not you consider the impact of your choices and put the welfare of others first. It's about love. And that's something even a bottle of vodka can't beat. **Amen.**