

“The Value of Liquor- Selling and Liquor- Drinking”

Text Acts 2: 1-15

Preached October 22, 2006

Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

The scripture lesson this morning is not according to the lectionary readings for this morning, and later you will understand why. The lectionary reading is the suggested readings that many denominations use on a given Sunday. But today we're looking into the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, a very familiar passage that is usually read on Pentecost Sunday. This is in the second chapter of Acts, and you are welcome to take your pew Bible and turn to that if you'd like. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. So if there's a little variation with your Bible that you're using, it's all in the same note. This is the second chapter of Acts.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were altogether in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

“Now, there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem, and at this sound, the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, in our own languages, we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power?’

“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others, and I think when you say others here, it’s those who were looking in on what was happening. “But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”

Amen.

Rev. Broadbent:

For a millennia, people of faith have been confused with drunks. From time immemorial, people of faith, some people of faith, have even been drunks. The most beloved children’s story in the Bible, Noah and his ark and all the animals, and they are on the seas for 40 days and 40 nights, and they land on

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dry land, and then the story ends. Right? No. Noah gets drunk in his tent. And yet he is still the means by which God blesses all of his offspring.

So Noah, we know, was a drunk. But others, other people of faith, others in our family album, were only mistaken for that. Certain behaviors caused them to be mistaken for being drunk. Consider Hannah in the temple in 1st Samuel, the first chapter. She had been barren until that point and had gone to the temple to pray to God. And the priest, Eli, who apparently was not very perceptive of the details of somebody's spiritual practice, thought that Hannah was drunk, because she prayed with all of her heart. And her lips were moving, but there was no sound coming out, but she was praying to her God, "Please give me this gift that I ask for."

In the Song of Songs, an allegory really, a love poem at various times, the writer says things like, "I am drunk with love, and they will see me in the streets, and they will think that I am drunk. But instead, I am in love."

And in the Book of Acts, that infant church is just starting to find their feet, and something happens, and it's wonderful and amazing, and they get caught up in it, and there's a swirl of wind and voices. And what do those who are looking in on it say? "They must have had some new wine, a nice Beaujolais."

In fact, Jesus himself pulls a – maybe the college crowd might call it a party foul. He is at the wedding in Cana. It's really his very first public miracle, and the guests are all drinking and partying and having a good time. And then they run out of wine. So Jesus turns two barrels of water into wine. But here's the foul. They are better than the wine that got served before everyone was drunk. What is wrong with this guy from Nazareth? He must have had a few too many himself.

Now where am I going with this on historical Sunday?

Colorado Springs' Gazette, November 14, Saturday, 1874 – "Professor Edwards [our founding minister] will preach tomorrow evening in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church [which was our first home] on [quote] the value of liquor selling and liquor drinking. Service to commence at 7 o'clock."

What did he say? We don't know. But on the next Saturday, November 21st, 1874, under a little column called "The Churches," it says, "There was a large congregation on Sunday evening last to hear the address of Professor Edwards [you see, he was also the first professor at Colorado College] on the subject of liquor selling and liquor drinking. The address was an exceedingly forcible one and must have convinced any who needed conviction and were open to it."

What did he say? [Taking a drink] This is water.

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Now I choose this title advisedly. Our church plays a very important role in this community as the home to any number of 12 Step groups. And we in our own congregation have again any number of recovering alcoholics whom we celebrate with, as well as non-recovering alcoholics, whom we stand by.

My very own mother is a recovering alcoholic and is very soon – I need to find out exactly when this is – celebrating 20 years of sobriety. So I know this in my own household, so I do not choose this unsensitively. In fact, I would like to explore it even a little bit more.

What was the context that Jonathon Edwards would have been preaching this sermon in? Many of us know its part of the lore of our city that there was a liquor band in Colorado Springs. Many of you, if you read the deed to your house, the title to your house, very closely, you will find a little clause in there which, I'm sorry to let you know this, makes it so that you may not brew whiskey in your basement. Have any of you actually looked up that little clause? Yeah. It's actually in there. You may not brew whiskey in your basement. Sorry.

And yet this was a contentious matter. Palmer had said, "There's the law. It's black and white. You may not brew whiskey of any kind." But there was a loophole. The loophole was the pharmacist. And there were more pharmacies in town than were needed to supply any drugs that people needed for their illnesses. But according to Marshall Sprig in Newport of the Rockies, which was one of the first names of Colorado Springs, you could go into a pharmacy and flash a little sign. The town had twice as many drugstores, he says, as were needed to meet the demand for drugs. Their main business was selling whiskey – for medicinal purposes, of course.

By law, each druggist was the judge of medicinal purpose. Naturally, if a customer said that he was ill because he needed a drink, the druggist was legally bound to provide the medicinal cure, even if, or perhaps especially if, the patient staggered up to the medicinal purpose counter suffering from delirium tremors. So the pharmacies were the place where you could go and ask for this medicine, and they had to oblige you. That's a pretty big loophole.

But what bothered the pharmacists was that there were yet more people who bootlegged whiskey and were able to provide it in various ways that circumvented the pharmacies and maybe provided it at a cheaper price. There was a saloon with billiards, and there was, just behind the bar, where you could get your medicine, so to speak.

There was something called the Spirit Wheel, which was at the southeast corner of Pikes Peak and Cascade. There was a building there with a steel disk,

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and you could walk up to it and you would place your quarter or your coin on it, and you would spin it around into the building, and then you would wait. And then your jigger of whiskey would come back out, and you would receive it. This is what the pharmacists were so worried about.

So what was he preaching on? I love to think that he was preaching, of course, liquor drinking and liquor selling. That he agreed that it was something that was eating away at the fabric of society. And yet he chose that title as this funny little teaser. Isn't that funny? Wouldn't that be funny? A sermon that is whaling against liquor drinking and yet the title is, "The Value of Liquor Drinking and Liquor Selling."

Who knows? Maybe he was being counter-cultural. Maybe he wanted to look at the positive side of liquor drinking and liquor selling in Colorado Springs. Probably not. He was a Congregationalist from New England after all. Of course, they had their own vices.

But what did he preach on?

Our own Colorado Springs Gazette, in the last few weeks, did a whole series in the business section around the costs of alcohol. And most of it, about 80% of it, was about the great toll that alcohol takes on our society. The drinking related accidents that happen. The treatment. The incarceration. Not to mention the emotional cost and financial cost to families. I mean, this really continues to be a grave disaster, a disease in our culture.

On the second day of the report – and I'm thankful to Joanna Bean, who is Acting Editor of the Business section for the Gazette. She provided me with these articles. They did try to tease out possible values for liquor. They said it has contributed to an economic growth in the downtown, in terms of the bars. Well, alright. But if you have to walk by them while they're screaming out on the balconies, it maybe balances out.

Also they talk about the networking that happens among people, mostly business people, probably mostly men, but not exclusively, who meet in a regular bar over drinks and conduct business. There's some kind of networking value that happens. It's not unlike the pub that you might see in England or Ireland. Pub is short for Public House, and there, in England or Ireland, it's very different from a bar. It really is. You bring your families there. You watch the game. You grab dinner. But alcoholism is a problem in those countries as well. And so, do the benefits of liquor outweigh the costs? Probably not.

But I wonder if there's a spiritual value for us in thinking about this struggle that we continue to have around liquor selling and liquor drinking in our own culture. I don't think it's a coincidence or an accident that one of the persons

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of our triune God-head is the Spirit. And the spirit is also the name that we give to that lesser god that we imbibe to help us somehow transport. I mean, I think it's the same spiritual question that's being asked by the person who can't help but drink and is seeking that deeper meaning and the person who is spiritually seeking. It is "I want to be transported. I want to feel like there's something other than what I'm feeling right now. I want that relaxation and ease." Or for some, "I just want to get through the day, and this is the only way I know how to do it."

You see that they are not too far away, those two practices, if you will? And I also don't think it's an accident that the people of faith, when they are most caught up in God's love, are mistaken for being drunk. I think in some ways it's the same high, but it's all the more so.

Hannah, in the temple, intoxicated with this trust that God is going to deliver her and answer her prayer, praise with all her might and all her heart, and the priest standing by there doesn't get it. He thinks she is drunk.

And the couple in the Song of Solomon, so in love with one another that their love can only be described as intoxication. That's a phrase that Bishop John Shelby Spong uses, being intoxicated with God. Or the early church, gathering together in that place and being so caught up in one another and in the possibilities that are before them are, again, mistaken for being drunk.

Now, it's hard for me to believe, when I look at Jonathon Edwards' picture, which is up in the south balcony, he looks very serious. He's got this wonderful scruffy beard, and he has a — it's a formal picture, so he's got kind of a tuxedo collar on. But I just, I wonder if he had a similar sensibility that when God is most deeply known, it's as if you're drunk with love for God, but you haven't had a drop to drink.

I also don't think it's a mistake that some of those people we know, who are recovering alcoholics, are some of the most spiritually grounded and also spiritually flamboyant people that we know.

I think of Jenny Finn. A few weeks ago we had an inquirer class, and I was taking the class on a tour of the church. A very sober group of us. We just talked about theology in the library. And we walked over into the founder's room, and she and a few others were getting ready for a workshop, a dance workshop. They hadn't started yet, but you could already see on their faces and in their bodies that they were in the spirit. Faces glistening from just a little bit of perspiration from moving around. These smiles that were anything but forced. They were the smile of the soul. Jenny Finn is a recovering alcoholic. She gave me permission to share that with you.

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I also think of Richard Grebenstein, our head usher and now a staff member of our church. If you were here last week, you heard something of his recovery story. He is one of the most jovial people I know. I see some nods.

I have been at somebody's house where a bunch of folks from church were there, and we were drinking beers. I was drinking beers. Richard was not, but he was there, and he was more open and jovial and friendly than any of the rest of us. Maybe that's an exaggeration, but my point was that he may as well have been, but he hasn't had a drop in years.

It's no wonder that people of faith are sometimes mistaken for being drunk, because when the Spirit lives in us, we cannot help but be free and open and loving and happy. So my prayer for our church in our next 132 years is that we would grow together in that way so that sometimes there might be the following conversation, when we are worshipping together or when we are marching in a parade, or when we are doing this or that event, you might hear someone say, "What is wrong with them? Are they drunk?" And someone else might say, "No. That's just First Congregational Church."

Amen.