

Homily – Role Models for Others

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During our Eucharist we share bread and wine. I think we are all aware that there are some churches that don't have the Eucharist, Communion, or Lord's Table every Sunday, but in the Episcopal Church, we think it is important to share the bread and wine, and we take great comfort in the words and rituals and prayers that go along with the sharing.

Some churches share grape juice or even apple juice instead of wine, but in the Episcopal Church, we stick with traditional wine. Or, at least something pretty close to traditional wine. Here at St. Barnabas, like many churches, we actually use a tawny port.

Port wine is fortified, which means that after 1-3 days of fermentation, winemakers douse the grape must with neutral brandy, resulting in a wine with high natural sweetness coupled with alcohol heft. And, because it is aged in wooden casks, tawny port has a mellow, nutty, slightly woody, dried fruit character. We, and many others, use a tawny port in Communion because it tastes better in the little sip, or that dip of the bread into the cup.

Now, when I was in seminary, I had a classmate who was a recovering alcoholic. And, those of you here today who are recovering alcoholics know that sobriety is not a one-time fix. It is a lifetime of temptation to take that next drink.

In that time in our weekly Sunday morning worship it is wonderful that we can celebrate years of sobriety along with birthdays and anniversaries. As a community we walk with one another, and together we celebrate the successes against the temptations of addiction.

Now, back in seminary, my recovering classmate was adamant that alcohol not be a part of any socializing that went on around him. He even insisted that wine could not be served during communion. And, his justification that wine never be part of communion was this passage that we have today from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. *"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ...But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."*

Paraphrasing Paul for a moment, this passage says that it is wrong for a non-alcoholic to drink wine around an alcoholic or recovering alcoholic for it could tempt the latter into falling down again.

For followers of Jesus, we are to be role models by doing good in the world AND by abstaining from doing those things that could cause others to sin. And, when taken to its fullest, my sober seminary classmate had a point. Perhaps we were to abstain from wine at dinner when he was with us. Or from beer, during a Super Bowl party that he was attending.

Of course, the temptation is to not invite my classmate to social events, but deep down I know this is the wrong answer. Conversely, I could invite my classmate, but forewarn him there would be beer so that he could just decline to join the group. But, that seems wrong as well for it isolates my friend. In and of itself, we know wine and beer are not bad, but like anything can become bad when done to excess.

Now, psychologists would say that healthy people take care of their own needs, and that a person should work on their own stuff. We cannot take responsibility for others when the other should take care of it themselves.

However, like most communities of God, this community at St. Barnabas is not just made up of healthy people who lead perfect lives. At least my own life journey has not yet achieved full health. So, in line with the words of Paul to the Corinthians, we have some responsibilities to watch out for and protect those around us.

Those followers of Jesus who have achieved some areas of self-control in their lives are examples to the rest of us on how to take self-responsibility and how to lead sober and loving action. But, there is a certain amount of added obligation in this. Healthy people are not only responsible for themselves and their actions, but they are responsible for each other and the way their deeds set examples for others.

This makes me sigh with fatigue, but it still feels right. For those of you that are already this healthy example for others, I want to thank you. We want what you have. However, we must also remember that no one is perfect. This is why we band together in community. None of us is perfect in ALL areas. We all have differing strengths and weaknesses. This means that many of us might be role models in some areas of life, but we would be followers in other areas. Part of the beauty of the Eucharist is that we each bring our uniquely good and bad things with us as we come to the rail to take Communion. I have to admit that I love watching our community come up here each Sunday morning. There is a lot of beauty as we bring our true selves to share the bread and the wine and remember what Jesus has done for us.