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Romans 14:1-12  
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*The Good Wine*

I'm going to talk about something today that affects everyone's life. It is one of the most profitable industries in the world, and at the same time places a significant stress on many aspects of our health care system. It is something that is intensely personal, and glaringly public. It is something that has a particularly strong influence on campus life, at Duke, and college and university campuses around the world. The subject is alcohol.

There is a common assumption that when a pastor talks publicly about alcohol, it will involve a hellfire and brimstone, bible-thumping, finger wagging attack on anyone who keeps a six-pack of Budweiser in the fridge, or a bottle of wine or quart of gin above the sink. I have no intention of doing that. I want to talk about alcohol because it plays a significant role in life on and off campus, and because the church should be a place where we can talk about important and even uncomfortable things, and because God is deeply invested in all aspects of our lives.

As a pastor I've sat in the wreckage of families torn apart by an alcoholic family member. I've been with parents who have lost a college age son or daughter because somebody drank too much before getting into a car. I've been with students who have lost a friend to alcohol poisoning because a seemingly harmless party went out of control. Such experiences are horrific in their sadness. Yet, I've also enjoyed many lovely evenings with friends or family around a bottle of wine, and had some of the most significant conversations of my life over a pint of beer in one dimly lit corner booth or another. The power of alcohol to destroy individual lives, families, and whole communities is fierce, and yet alcohol can also be a means of drawing people together in meaningful and life-giving ways. This cocktail of destructive and constructive outcomes is what makes alcohol so hard to manage.

Drinking is hardly a new phenomenon on college campuses; it wasn't invented by John Belushi and his *Animal House* companions in 1978 and it didn't go away when the legal drinking age was raised to 21 in 1984. In recent days, some 100 college and university presidents, including our own, have signed a petition saying that as a society we need a public conversation about the legal drinking age and whether it should be kept at 21 or lowered to 18. There are thoughtful people on both sides of this issue who earnestly want the best for young people and society at large, and yet disagree about the proper course of action. Everyone agrees alcohol on campus is a significant issue, if for no other reason than 1700 students die from alcohol related events each year on college campuses in the US.

Those who want to keep the drinking age where it is, say that heavy drinking among college students is getting worse not better, and lowering the age will only encourage the behavior through easy access and sanctioned consumption. A recent study found that one in three students say they binge drink once a week, and that more and more students say they drink simply for the sake of getting drunk. Advocates for the drinking age remaining at 21 point to studies that say heavy drinking as a teenager can do significant damage to a developing brain, and they also say drinking and driving deaths have gone down since the legal drinking age was raised.

Those who advocate for lowering the drinking age want a consistency in national laws. They say if an 18 year old is seen as responsible enough to vote, and is old enough to be drafted or sign up for

armed service, that same 18 year old ought to be able to handle a beer. They contend that students under the age of 21 drink more dangerously because they are trying to hide it – and suggest that if alcohol becomes more accessible, and less clandestine, moderation will increase and bingeing, and the risky behaviors that come with it, will decrease. .

On campus there are frequent conversations about drinking and the consequences of drinking. Some 15 years ago, Will Willimon, the former dean of this Chapel, wrote a report on Student Life at Duke, titled: “We Work Hard, We Play Hard.” How right he was. If that report were written today it might, titled: “We Work Really Hard, We Play Really Hard.” I’ve been in meetings with other administrators on campus, genuinely struggling with how to address the issue. Administrators at Duke and elsewhere often feel their hands are tied to an abstinence only policy that relegates student drinking to off campus locations that lead to an increase in risky student behaviors involving cars, strangers, or long walks through shadowy areas of town. Rather than talking about moderation and responsibility, administrators, lest they appear to be advocates of breaking the law, often find themselves saying “no,” even though they are well aware the majority of students on college campuses are saying “yes.”

Life with alcohol is no less complicated for students. Alcohol can at times become a social litmus test drawing a boundary around who is “in” and who is “out.” Many students talk about the incredible pressure they feel to succeed, to excel academically and socially, and how drinking can serve as both an escape route from the academic pressure and as a path to social success. The influence of alcohol provides students a release, a sort of “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” attitude. “I was drunk. It wasn’t really me, and thus I don’t have to deal with the consequences.” Meanwhile there are many students on Duke’s campus and elsewhere who don’t drink at all, who seem to have plenty of fun without a Busch Light in the hand. And many a student has lamented that the social scene on campus becomes all about the booze and its aftermath at the cost of meaningful relationships.

In today’s passage from Romans, Paul is addressing a Christian community that is deeply divided about what is appropriate or inappropriate to eat and drink. He has very little to say about the specifics of what should or should not be consumed, but he is concerned that the Christians in Rome are turning on one another in a kind of self-righteous judgment. Throughout the letter of Romans, and throughout all of the Old and New Testaments, run two parallel themes, like the outside boundaries of a football field. One theme is freedom. God has given us freedom, the ability to live, decide, and act for ourselves. God is not a master puppeteer pulling the strings that conduct our lives. We can choose for ourselves. The other theme is accountability, the sense that we are all a part of a larger community called the Body of Christ, and more broadly we are all a part of a human society, and thus our actions effect others inside and outside the church, and we are to exercise our freedom precisely in ways that encourage, and cherish, and appreciate the gift of the other. Elsewhere Paul says we should not be a stumbling block to someone else. In caring for one another we occasionally have to have difficult conversations with each other about our lives, and those conversations may from time to time include how we consume alcohol. The blend of freedom and accountability is fully revealed in the life of Jesus, and often referred to as “grace.” It is freely given, but comes with significant responsibility.

When we look to Jesus we do not get a clear or easy answer on how to handle the questions surrounding alcohol. He certainly knows how to have a good time. Throughout the gospels we read stories of Jesus eating and drinking with disciples and prostitutes, tax collectors and priests. The Pharisees get so frustrated with his social habits at one point they call him a glutton and a drunkard. When the wine ran out at a wedding, his first miracle was to make more. Jesus of Nazareth is no prude. The kingdom of God is described in the gospels as a heavenly banquet, a grand party, much like a wedding banquet, a place of eating good food and drinking good wine. During communion at Duke

Chapel we use wine, real alcohol, not because we want to flaunt the virtues of alcohol, but because Jesus drank wine, and even becomes wine as a way of sharing his life with us.

Yet in his eating and drinking, the emphasis for Jesus is always on the relationships at the table, and his desire to model a different kind of social arrangement by including the excluded, upsetting social norms, and deepening human connection. In other words, for Jesus, the emphasis of his social life is not the food and drink as much as whom he is eating and drinking with. It would be a mistake to describe Jesus as saying “anything goes.” There are behaviors sometimes facilitated by being drunk that Jesus will not endorse, such as taking advantage of another person sexually, or getting behind the wheel of a car, or ignoring somebody who has passed out and in need of help, or destroying the gift of one’s own body. Jesus eats and drinks as part of a life-giving way of relating to others, to turn strangers into companions and enemy’s into friends, in the same way that God in Christ becomes bread and wine to draw us close to him and one another, so that through eating and drinking together we would learn to cherish each other as friends. Alcoholics Anonymous is a precious gift because the members of those groups come to love one another more than they love to drink. Therein lies their power to shape, and transform, and redeem. Their friendships become a source of life.

Throughout church history faith and practice have always had a social dimension. My own tradition, Methodism, has had a complex relationship to alcohol over the years. You know the old joke: What’s the difference between Baptists and Methodists? Methodists will speak to one another in the liquor store. I have a pastor friend who from time to time is asked the question, “Can Methodists drink?” And he says, “Well, that depends. Some can, and some can’t.” Yet Methodism has long held an appropriate social wariness of alcohol. John Wesley, who with his brother, Charles, began the flourishing Methodist movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, was an outspoken critic of the way owners of coal mines set up company pubs just outside the entrance to the mines, so when weary and lonely miners, separated from their families and worn down by a twelve hour day, would come out of the mines the pubs were right there, a stumbling block to turn the miners’ meager wages into more profits for the mine owners. Christians in modern day South Africa have leveled the same charge against the owners of diamond mines in that country. For years ACC basketball coaches would not allow alcohol to be advertised on local television broadcasts because they reasoned it would have a negative influence on the hoards of young fans watching the games. The early Methodists, and many others across the Christian tradition, saw alcohol not as evil in itself, but as being used to prey on the poor, and thus as an issue of social justice. Those who have seen a friend’s life ruined by easy access to alcohol might also recognize this as something that goes beyond personal choice to social responsibility. A colleague on campus who studies the alcohol issue closely sees a terrible irony: College students start drinking as a means to increase social connection, yet so many people only stop drinking after an addiction acquired in college has damaged or destroyed all the meaningful relationships they once held dear.

I wonder about the role that alcohol plays in your life: Does alcohol deepen your sense of reality, or obscure it? Do you use alcohol to avoid significant issues that need to be confronted in your life? Does it enrich your relationships, or substitute for them?

Jesus drank wine, and Jesus becomes for us the good wine. He is the host and guest at the communion table of God, the source of life, grace, and friendship. At the center of the church, at the center of our life with God, is a party. The table of our Lord is a fabulous party where there is always more to eat and the wine never runs dry. A party. A party. A grand party. Perhaps you might ask yourself, the next time you are in a place where the drink is flowing . . . Is this the kind of place that makes you a better friend? Is this the kind of place where you would be proud to have Jesus as your guest? Is this the kind of party that Jesus would want to host?