THE CALL TO DRUNKENNESS

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The Twenty First Sunday After Pentecost
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"Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery;
but be filled with the Spirit."(Ephesians 5:18)

It was only a few weeks ago that a contingent of our students took off early one Saturday morning to go sailing. As it turned out, it rained the whole morning. But they persevered nevertheless. That's the way University Lutheran Church ought to be. That's the way every individual Christian ought to be. Out sailing in life, with the canvases filled with the wind. Or, to use another translation for the Greek word, we ought to be out sailing in life, with the canvases filled with the Spirit.

What's the alternative? To stay on shore, presumably, -- more than likely sitting around a table in the Yacht Club consuming one cocktail after another.

Our text, you see, isn't concerned with the petty problem of whether or not one ought to drink alcohol. Our text is really pointing to two fundamental stances of life. It sets before us what we might call Yacht Club existence, on the one hand, and sailing existence, on the other hand.

I.

Let's begin by admitting that there have been occasions when it has been difficult to distinguish the Church from a Yacht Club. At times the Church has seemed to be little more than a Yacht Club without cocktails.

The Church has been exclusive. We all know that Sunday morning at 11 AM is indeed the most segregated hour in American life. We all know how easy it has been to have our churches composed mainly of "our own kind." Consider merely the clothes we wear. Don't our tweeds and our bright woolens say to the poor, better than any words, that they aren't welcome here? Perhaps.

The Church also has been evasively self-righteous. It wasn't that long ago when almost the whole of American Protestantism looked down its self-righteous nose at virtually anyone who touched a drop of liquor. For many, both inside and outside of the Church, Protestantism was virtually equated with Prohibition. But as an Elmer Gantry could discover, some of the most respectable Protestants were bootleggers. Much more than that, however: having established prohibition, many Protestants sat sheltered in their comfortable lily-white churches and winked at all the vices and the human agonies of the prohibition era. Have we changed that much since the days of prohibition?

Last Saturday the City of Cambridge sponsored a day of protest directed against the Inner Belt. The Inner Belt, as you know, is that wondrous superhighway which is going to save those of us who can afford cars 15 minutes when we drive from Maine to Rhode Island. Incidentally, the Inner Belt will dislocate hundreds of families and probably force a good number of them into slums.

So where were you last Saturday? Well, of all places, I was retreating. Some of us attended the New England Lutheran Student Federation retreat in beautiful Stoughton, Massachusetts. Surrounded by pine trees and quiet, we talked about "Liturgy and Life," -- far away from the torn life of urban Cambridge.

The Church has been exclusive. The Church has been evasively self-righteous. On the surface, the Church has often been little more than a Yacht Club without cocktails. ..."Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery." That is to say generally, don't be intoxicated with your own exclusiveness and your own importance.

I should add here that although I have taken our text in a general sense, as

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referring to a whole stance of life, it surely does have a specific sense also, referring to the compulsive use of alcohol. That's surely a sign, is it not, of the Yacht Club style of existence? People can take just so much of their own exclusiveness and their own self-righteousness. So, apparently, they find consolation by methodically dulling their senses with alcohol. Compulsive drinking is a symptom of a life that's going nowhere. Compulsive drinking is a symptom of a Yacht Club style of existence.

II.

Another way of life is to set sail. Hoist the canvas of your life and let it be filled with the Spirit. Be intoxicated with the Spirit. Be drunk with the Spirit. Now what does that mean?

It means first of all, I think, that we have been given freedom in the Spirit to enjoy life. God doesn't create us and re-create us to be dullheads. According to the Genesis narrative, God creates Adam and Eve in the riches of the Garden, not in the paucity of the wilderness. Good food and good work and good fun are given with authentic human existence. Also, I take it, good drink. Listen to these verses from Psalm 104, a meditation on God's good creation and the creative work of the Spirit("When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created." v. 30). It says of God: "Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart."(v.14)

Is it a real surprise, then, to read in the New Testament that Jesus was called a glutton and a drunkard(Mt. 11:19)? Likewise, is it a real surprise to discover that the New Testament envisions the coming of the end of the world as the coming of a heavenly banquet?

So when you're drunk with the Spirit, you freely enjoy life. If you should so desire, you take good food and good wine with you on your sailing trip.

III.

But that's just one aspect of spiritual drunkenness. At the same time a congregation or an individual will want to have some direction. When you're at sea you don't want to spend all your time eating and drinking. Indeed, as anyone knows who's been sailing, the great intoxication comes when you take hold of the rudder and steer.

Let's say specifically, then, that the Church and the individual Christian rightfully have a prophetic direction. This isn't suggested in so many words by our text, but it's an inescapable conclusion for anyone who's attuned to the mainstream of biblical faith. The people of God are intoxicated with a prophetic commitment. Here, for example, are words from the Magnificat which we sing in our Vespers and which are placed on the lips of Mary by St. Luke, -- "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. ... He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

The people of God have a prophetic direction. We are committed to steering our lives so as to minister to the poor. We hold firmly to the rudder, however rough the sea, and we move with the forces working for social justice. We guide our lives for the sake of those who are of low degree, for the sake of those who are hungry.

What, then, shall you and I say and do about the Inner Belt? What shall we say and do about the impoverished people living two blocks away from Dunster House? What shall we say and so about the common folk and the troops who are being bludgeoned in Viet Nam? We can't avoid this kind of question, once we have left the Yacht Club style of existence behind, once we have set sail. We are intoxicated with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of justice.

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Notice that the Church doesn't sail here by its own power. Nor do we as individuals. This is always the case, but it's especially true in the area of social action. The Driving Force is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. We don't move a bit, we just drift, by ourselves. But with the Spirit we cut through the seas of life smoothly and effortlessly.

IV.

So, filled with the Spirit we enjoy life. And, even more than that, we give our lives a prophetic direction. But that's not all. When you take hold of the rudder and the wind fills the sails and you go ploughing off through the water, there sometimes comes that rare moment when you can just hold the tiller and coast. That rare moment when you can look up at the wind filling the sails and be exilerated. That rare moment when you might even begin a spontaneous song.

We can call this the specifically liturgical moment of sailing. We are exilerated with the presence of the Spirit and we spontaneously celebrate in the presence of the Spirit. We give thanks to God for raising up such a power in our lives. Our text is very explicit at this point. "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart."

This is the natural reaction, is it not? If you lead a Yacht Club style of existence, then you hardly have reason to praise God. For what? But if your life is driven by the Spirit, if you're intoxicated by His presence, then you'll want to say -- thank God. Those moments will come when it's quite clear that your life would have no freedom and no direction and no real power without the Spirit, that what you are and do comes from the creative Divine Breath blowing on you, enlivening you.

So you thank God. So we thank God together, addressing each other every Sunday in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart.

Perhaps this congregation should have more sailing parties. Perhaps, then, it would be easier for us to remember who we are and where we are going, both as a Church and as individuals.

"Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit."