

Epiphany 1, Year B, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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If you read the New York Times or the New York Post yesterday
you may have seen the news from Maryland
of a cyclist
who, just after Christmas,
went for a ride,
and the woman
who got in her car after a few drinks,
and drove along the same road.
She hit the cyclist,
and then drove away.

Although she later returned to the scene,
it was too late.
The cyclist died.

It was an incredible tragedy, for that man, for his wife and two little children, and for the woman
who hit him.
But even so, it's probably not something I would have focussed on in a sermon, except for one
thing.
The woman driving the car
was an Episcopal bishop.

And as Episcopalians
it therefore
affects us.
Perhaps not directly,
but the reality is
that our families and friends
will read that article and ask
why did that happen? What does your church say about it all?
And we need to have an answer.

It would have been
a lot easier today
to stick with the psalm
and its wonderful echoes of God's voice
in creation.

But I believe that today we need

to have the difficult conversation
around those events in Maryland,
and talk honestly about the church,
addition,
and grace.

So first the facts, as far as we know them.

Heather Cook was elected assistant bishop last year, and began her work in that diocese in the fall.

She was driving on a road behind a cyclist, Thomas Palermo, who was riding in a separate bike lane.

She was texting, and she had been drinking.

A test in a police station after she had returned to the accident site showed a blood alcohol level of .22, almost three times the legal limit.

She veered into the bike lane and hit Mr Palermo so hard that her windshield was badly damaged.

She continued to drive,
and only returned to the site after at least twenty minutes.

Immediately after the accident, she was placed on administrative leave by the diocese and barred from all ministry activities. Since then time, it has emerged that she had one prior DUI conviction, from 2010.

That was disclosed to the search committee for bishop, though not to those who voted. She was understood to have been in recovery.

Late this week, she was charged with eight charges, including felony vehicular manslaughter and criminal negligent manslaughter. It still has to go before a grand jury, but she faces up to twenty years in jail.

Disciplinary charges have also been brought against her by the Episcopal Church.

Those are the facts.

But they barely begin to scratch the surface of the issues involved.

There have been questions about whether Bishop Cook was appropriately vetted, and whether she should have been allowed to be a candidate for a high pressure calling like that of bishop.

There have been questions about why she only got probation for her previous offense.

And of course, there are questions about her drinking.

And all these questions
raise questions for us.

What is alcoholism?

How does the church deal with alcohol responsibly?

And how does our commitment to forgiveness relate to issues of personal responsibility?

Let's begin with alcoholism.
How do we deal responsibly with it?
Alcoholism thrives on secrecy.
Particularly because our previous diocesan bishop, and bishops before him
were alcoholics. Sadly,
they did not always seek help,
and damage was done
to their families, friends, and the diocese.

So to talk about alcoholism first.
The definition of alcoholism that the Mayo clinic gives
is that it is a chronic and often progressive disease
that includes problems controlling your drinking,
being preoccupied with alcohol,
continuing to use alcohol even when it causes problems,
having to drink more to get the same effect (physical dependence),
or having withdrawal symptoms when you rapidly decrease or stop drinking.
If you have alcoholism, you can't consistently predict how much you'll drink, how long you'll
drink,
or what consequences will occur from your drinking.

Alcoholism
is not simply
an issue of willpower.
It is influenced by genetic,
psychological,
social
and environmental factors
that have an impact on how it affects your body and behavior.
In other words,
some of us
are more susceptible to it
than others
for a whole range
of reasons.

Alcoholism is not the only form of addiction, but it is one of the most prevalent in society
and one of the most socially accepted addictions.
And it's often accompanied
by secrecy.
That's part of the reason I'm speaking about this today.
Because that secrecy
can be destructive

as we have seen all too clearly
in what happened in Maryland.

And we have seen it here in our own diocese.
It's no longer a secret
that our previous bishop was an alcoholic,
and sadly
and indeed
bishops before him.
Although they sometimes sought treatment,
they were not able to sustain it,
and so it affected their lives
and the life of our diocese.

Alcoholism is quite common in clergy.
What begins
as having a drink to relax at the end of a day caring for others
becomes the only method they have of coping with their own needs.
It's something we clergy are encouraged to pay attention to,
and to seek help for.

Our assistant bishop, Chilton Knudsen,
is a recovering alcoholic,
and has spent much of her ministry
working with clergy and churches.

We have people in this parish who are alcoholics.
Some of them
are involved in twelve step program,
and are able to live healthily in recovery.
Others, I suspect, hide it,
and hope to be able to manage it.

Alcoholism is something that is not uncommon.
And it can be treated
in a range of ways.
But for the vast majority of people who are alcoholics,
alongside other treatment,
they need to give it up entirely.

Please, if you are concerned about your own use of alcohol or that of others in your life, or about
any addiction, please seek help.
Talk to me, call a hotline,

go to an AA group.

And know that we will pray for you and support you
however we can.

Now, what about the church and alcohol?

If you google the bible and alcohol, you'll find two groups of websites. One group
argues that Scripture forbids drinking alcohol.

The other group says the reverse.

So which is true?

Both, in a way.

Let's think about the context.

Our bible was written
well before modern sanitation,
in a climate where water was often scarce
and even when it was available
it was often not safe to drink.

So in biblical times, as throughout much of history,
people drank wine or other fermented drinks
because they tended to be safer than water.

So the apostle Paul suggests that Timothy
should drink a little wine
for his stomach.

And we see Jesus and his friends
drinking wine on a number of occasions,
from the wedding in Cana
to the last supper.

We don't know exactly how alcoholic that wine was -
probably a little less so than today.

But drunkenness could still be a problem
as we see in the many warnings against it
throughout Scripture
and about the dangers that can result.

And throughout most of the history of the church,
we have used wine for the Eucharist.

That practice
is rooted in what happened
the night of the Last Supper.

When Jesus offered his disciples the cup at the Last Supper,

he didn't just take a pitcher
and serve each disciple their own cup of wine.

Instead, he took one cup
and passed it around
for everyone to drink from.

Just as when he took the bread, he didn't ask each of them to take the bread from their plate and eat it together;

he took one loaf and broke it into pieces so that they were visibly sharing the same bread.

That's why we use the larger wafers and break them; it's why we share a common cup.

That symbolism reminds us
that we cannot follow Jesus
by ourselves.

Sharing the bread, drinking wine from the common cup,
they are strong symbols of our unity in Christ,
and our willingness to accept each other.

As we share them,
we share our love and our lives.

And so we use wine
not only because Jesus used it,
but because the alcohol in it
has disinfecting qualities
that make it safe for us to all drink from the common cup.

Other Christian traditions have made different choices.

Wesleyan Methodists committed to using only unfermented grape juice from the early 1800s, though it wasn't until after Welch invented a method of pasteurizing grape juice that some Protestant denominations switched to juice for the Eucharist.

But they, for the most part, have also given up
the use of a common cup because of the risks of sharing the unfermented drink,
turning instead to individual servings
of grape juice.

And so we have to trade off
the theological issues, the symbolic importance of sharing a common cup,
against the pastoral,
the use of wine.

The Episcopal Church has chosen to continue to use the common cup. For those who do not receive the wine, we are reminded that the church throughout its history has said that it is valid to receive in one kind only - only bread, or only wine. Receiving Christ's presence does not require receiving both.

Some people who do not receive wine choose to kiss the chalice, or to reverence it, as a tangible honoring of Christ and accepting the blessing of God.

You should also know that our policy here, as it is in most Episcopal churches, is that when we serve alcohol at a function, we all provide an equally attractive non-alcoholic drink.

And I have to admit that I always find myself uncomfortable when people make jokes about “whiskypalians”, or say other things that imply that drinking alcohol is the norm, or a distinctive characteristic of being Episcopalian. It is not.

Now to the other issue: forgiveness and responsibility.

As Christians we believe that everyone can be forgiven. That is the good news of the gospel. But forgiveness does not mean we give up responsibility for our actions.

Traditionally the process of confession and asking for forgiveness includes both acknowledging our failures, taking responsibility for them, and asking God for help to amend our lives - to change. Then we receive absolution and forgiveness.

So, if you are alcoholic or have another addiction and are working a program and would like to be available to be a resource for others in the parish, talk with me, so I know I can refer others to you.

And if you are interested in forming a task group on how we can better support those with addictions, please talk with me or drop a note in my basket.

And please, if you are concerned about your own use of alcohol or that of others in your life, please seek help.
Talk to me, call a hotline,
go to an AA group.

You need to take responsibility for yourself and your addictions. But God is gracious. There is forgiveness. There is redemption. There is new life. There is hope. For all of us.

In the words of our psalm today,
“The LORD shall give strength to his people;
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.”