

On Temperance, Freedom, and Spiritual Beauty

Reading - from "The Virtue of Temperance" by Doug McManaman, published on the website www.catholiceducation.org

There is a certain beauty in the child, the beauty of innocence and docility. But there is nothing beautiful about a spoiled child. Similarly, temperance brings about a spiritual or moral beauty to the person who has cultivated it, a beauty that Thomas [Aquinas] calls "honesty". Intemperance destroys the clarity and beauty that belongs to temperance. Now beauty is the result of harmony and due proportion. Beautiful prose, for example, is harmonious and clear. It is the lack of clarity that diminishes the beauty of a piece of prose. Intemperance, in the same way, is a disorder, or lack of harmony

This lack of due harmony gives rise to a certain disgracefulness. For intemperance is the most repugnant to human excellence, since genuine human excellence is essentially related to those abilities that are most characteristic of the human person, namely, intelligence and will. But it is from this source, the light of reason, that the clarity and beauty of virtue arises.

And so temperance brings about a spiritual beauty that in many ways overflows into the body, especially the face of a person. A woman might be, from a strictly physical point of view, stunningly beautiful and a perfect candidate for a successful modeling career. But often it happens that after a few moments of conversation with such persons, their beauty thins out and begins to ring hollow. As Thomas writes: "a thing may be becoming according to the senses, but not according to reason."

Conversely, the appearance of an average looking woman can begin to acquire a beauty and attraction that is not immediately evident from a consideration of her physical features alone. This is the spiritual beauty that comes from the excellence and honorable state resulting from the cultivation of the virtue of temperance, the beauty of a heart that recoils from the disgrace that is contrary to temperance and a love of the honor that belongs to it; in short, the beauty of an unselfish heart.

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Sermon Reprint by Rev. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
Sermon Delivered Sunday December 14th, 2008

What most people think of when they hear the word “temperance” is the movement to ban the sale of alcohol that resulted in Prohibition in our country. Though this is not the focus of this sermon, let me say a few words about that meaning of temperance just for fun and information.

Some people in this church’s history were concerned about that type of temperance. These folks include some members of the Ames family that founded Unity Church, as well as the Reverend William Chaffin, an early minister who served this church for 55 years! The room next door, where we now have coffee hour after our services, is named for Rev. Chaffin.

When I say these people were “concerned” about drinking, I am under-stating the matter. Our musical director and one of our resident historians, Dick Hill, sent me some documents this week written by Rev. Chaffin about how he expressed his “concern” about the illegal sale of alcohol in Easton.

With the financial support of Oakes Ames, Rev. Chaffin showed his concern by hiring detectives to find out where the alcohol was being sold. He had already targeted some suspects and showed the detectives where he wanted them to collect evidence. He writes, “I was able in this way to get quite a number of persons arrested and prosecuted.”

At their urging a woman who sold liquor was tried, but her husband was the one thrown in jail. According to the law at that time, if the husband was around when the wife made an illegal sale, he was held responsible. The woman reportedly said, “I want you to understand that long after Chaffin is in Hell, I’ll be selling rum just the same!” Quite a gal, that one.

When one of the detectives on this case became frightened (maybe of that woman) and was trying to run away, Rev. Chaffin “jumped on his shoulders and pinioned his arms so he could not use his pistol.” Rev. Chaffin writes that he then “... hollered to

his principal who came and we captured him and he was afterward led to his work.” Talk about hands-on ministry!

The good reverend says he made some enemies in this way, (not surprising) but that some who hated him lived to become his friends - probably not that woman, though. You think? Rev. Chaffin writes that he eventually had to give up his temperance work because of his health. I’ll bet! You have to be pretty vigorous to tackle cowardly detectives. Rev. Chaffin was, we presume, somewhat of a fiery individual. When you go into coffee hour after the service, take a look at his portrait and see if you can see that fire in him.

Although all this sort of thing is what we usually think of when we hear the word “temperance,” that’s all I’m going to say about that definition. The virtue temperance has more interesting aspects I’d rather explore with you today.

Like prudence, justice, and fortitude (which we’ve already covered in this sermon series), temperance is considered one of the four cardinal or “pivotal” virtues. As a virtue it is “moderation in all things,” a good message for the holiday season when it’s tempting to be **im**moderate in all things. We tend to over-spend, over-shop, over-work, over-drink, and just plain over-indulge at this time of year. Not only is this unhealthy, it can also distract us from what’s really important about the holidays.

As we shall see, one important reason to practice temperance is that it helps us remember what is truly important. I discovered other good reasons to cultivate this virtue on a website about the “manly virtues.” They list the benefits of temperance as longer life, better health, saving money, developing strength of will, becoming more modest or humble, and being a role model.

This site also turned up a word I hadn’t really associated with temperance, “contentment.” This reminded me of some words by William Henry Channing, a 19th century Unitarian minister. He talks about living content with small means – in other words, living a temperate life.

Contentment is therefore another benefit of temperance. You are temperate when you are content with what you need and not always seeking more. This brings me to the next idea that struck me in my reading this week - the thought by Andre Comte-Sponville

that temperance is about freedom. He says that when we are intemperate we become so enslaved to our pleasures that they actually cease to be pleasurable.

When pleasure turns into compulsion or addiction, then disorder and disharmony reign. There is no true serenity for the addict so long as he or she is “using” – whether that addiction is to alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex or relationships, over-eating, overworking, compulsive buying, and so on.

Now in Chaffin’s day alcoholism was seen as moral failing, hence his rather stringent “interventions.” Today we tend to see addiction to drugs or alcohol not as ethical failures but as diseases. The “disease model” removes some of the sting of shame from addiction, both for the addict and his or her family – and shame is a big part of any addiction. The shame leads to low self-esteem, which just feeds the problem in a vicious cycle.

Sometimes I think people who use substances or compulsive behaviors are trying to fill an inner void. That void may be as specific as the loss of a job or an ability or a person, or it can be something harder to define - a sense that something is missing. For a short time the substance or behavior dulls the pain of that void. It might even provide something that seems like peace, or hope, or happiness. Of course substances and compulsive behaviors cannot really fill that void, so any happiness they seem to bring is as illusory as it is fleeting.

The addicted person remains in bondage for those moments of less pain, but over time what was once pleasurable becomes a taskmaster, and those around the person begin to suffer more and more. This continues until that person dies, or else admits his or her own powerlessness over that addiction and seeks help and support in recovering from it.

The recovering addict seeks true peace, hope, and contentment. Through recovery, an addict can find the freedom to discover a more lasting foundation for serenity. Recovery from any addiction is life-long and difficult but also rewarding. Its rewards are largely the same as those benefits of temperance outlined on the website I mentioned earlier about the “manly virtues.”

In fact, that website’s recommendations for practicing temperance look a lot like elements of 12 Step programs. I know this because I am a grateful member of AlAnon –

both of my grandfathers were alcoholics, as are other members of my family. AlAnon helps me stay centered, keeping the focus on myself rather than trying to “fix” others.

Anyway, to start practicing temperance, the site on manly virtues recommends listing areas where we need to exhibit more self-control. Then for each area you can list specific ways you can show more temperance. It further suggests setting goals you can accomplish, so you don’t become discouraged as you learn the virtue, the habit of good living, that is temperance. Rome wasn’t built in a day. So start out small and build your self-control muscles over time.

The site recommends that we stay accountable to our goals – when we slip, it suggests that we take responsibility for our own actions and then move on. It recommends reviewing our goals regularly with others who are also trying to find temperance and contentment.

The website suggests denying yourself, but not to the point where you remove desire from your life. Remember that virtue is about finding the middle road. If this is not a serious addiction, you can test your will power, as you grow stronger, by having the object of temptation around. For example, I could try this with chocolate, one of my pet indulgences. It never lasts very long in my house, but I could try resisting it.

Don’t punish yourself for slipping up, the website recommends. We all have weak moments. By reflecting kindly on those instances, you can mine them as sources of further information. Why did you slip? What triggered it? When you know, you can find other, healthier ways to address those triggers in the future.

Returning to my chocolate example, I found that when I take an hour or even a half hour off for lunch instead of eating it at my desk while working, my chocolate cravings wane. Reflecting further, I discovered that one thing that triggers those cravings is feeling over-worked and deprived of down time.

That’s just me, though. You are different. The site on manly virtues recommends not comparing yourself with others – just stick to your own program and own goals. And don’t be carried away. Moderation in all things, including moderation! As the site says, “Realize when enough is enough and never let your desires get in the way with loving your family and friends.”

Loving your family and friends is what's really important. And if you don't have family and friends around to give you love and to receive your love, then it may behoove you to figure out why you've set up your life that way. Now that may sound harsh, so let me say more.

A few years ago I was reading a book about building lasting romantic relationships. In one place it said, "If you're single and reading this book, ask yourself why you've set up your life that way." That sentence was the start of a journey of self-discovery for me that yielded really rich results – I learned a great deal about myself through responding to that challenging question.

Now if your family is far away, you could sit and feel sorry for yourself. That's an option. My mom calls it "a pity party for one." Or you could take the initiative, and seek out others with whom to spend the holidays. If your life lacks what's really important, no amount of drugs or addictive behaviors is going to help. To find true contentment you have to change your life.

To find that contentment we need to free ourselves from the hold that things or pleasures may have on us. This message swims against the tide of our consumer culture, which tries to convince us that we need more money so we can be "free" to have as much as possible of what we want. The wider culture defines freedom as having the wealth and the power to buy what ever brings us those fleeting pleasures.

We can see that this is not true freedom when what we own starts to own us. Practicing the virtue of temperance frees you to seek and find better sources of peace, hope, love, happiness and even beauty. This is another idea that struck me this week about temperance – Doug McManaman's idea that practicing temperance enhances our spiritual beauty.

He says this happens in a series of steps. When we practice temperance, it helps us make room for greater self-awareness. He argues that material things are incapable of self-awareness, and so the more we immerse ourselves in the material world, the less capable we become of self-reflection.

McManaman writes, "This general lack of awareness has a direct influence on a person's ability to establish the habit of justice within him (or her) self, which is the virtue that perfects the will." How are freedom, temperance, awareness and justice

linked? He says when we free ourselves of enslavement to things we become more truly aware of our selves. This helps us discover what is due to us (what we need rather than what we want), which in turn helps us become more aware of others and what is due to them. This is the virtue of justice according to McManaman – knowing what is due to others.

So the chain of ideas is that practicing temperance gives us the freedom to develop greater self-awareness, which leads to greater awareness of others, which leads to justice. This is a great and liberating thought, and it becomes even grander and more interesting.

McManaman says that this sequence is true for a nation as well as a person. When a nation frees itself from enslavement to things, it becomes capable of self-awareness, and this leads to true justice. According to this chain of thought, achieving a real democracy with a sense of justice is rooted in the sort of self-awareness that stems from the virtue of temperance.

A truly democratic nation, like a truly just and temperate person, is a nation that cultivates spiritual beauty. A beautiful nation, like a beautiful person, has achieved inner harmony, serenity, contentment, clarity, reason, honor, gracefulness, and a sense of due proportion.

A world that practices the virtue of temperance is a world composed of people who are truly free – free from the demeaning bondage to materialism. Such a world possesses the beauty of an unselfish heart. What a glorious vision. It takes my breath away. This is the sort of world I would like to live in. How about you?

Gandhi said we must be the change we want to see in the world. Now I'm not going to wrestle you into it like my dear predecessor Rev. Chaffin – but I welcome you to join me in cultivating the virtue of temperance in this holiday season, and beyond.

Last week I spoke about the Buddhist notion of skillful doubt – testing each new belief against our personal experience. We've talked about a bunch of beliefs today, so let's test them against our experience. Let's see if practicing temperance does increase our self-awareness, if that helps us discover what is due to our selves and others, and causes us to develop a greater sense of justice. Let's see if practicing temperance really does enhance our spiritual beauty.

Let's see if by becoming the change we want to see in the world, we can make a start at creating that world. Let's see if by developing a revolution of the spirit, we can start to create a world of justice and temperance, a world with spiritual beauty that shines forth from the unselfish heart. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.