

The Libations of Church People  
2 Timothy 4:6-22  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached October 24, 2010 at San José, Costa Rica

In case you hadn't already figured this out, a libation is not the same as a libido. You could be excused for confusing the two, as the word libation is not exactly a commonly used word, even in its most likely context, the church, whereas the word libido, or some form of its expression, can be heard on just about every channel of your television every hour of the day, in ways that shock even our ears, much less those of the Apostle Paul. Perhaps some of you would prefer that the church talked more about libidos than libations, but you are out of luck, at least for tonight. So if Paul is not telling Timothy something about the state of his sex life, to just what is he referring when he uses the "L" word?

In the translations of some of your bibles, the word libation has been rendered as "drink offering" or something similarly less poetic, and, as the word "offering" implies, indeed it is from the sacrificial and ritual context that the word libation comes. It was part of the Law of Moses, as well as dozens of other ancient religions, to pour out onto the ground or into some receptacle the appropriate liquid, usually wine or olive oil, to offer praise, thanksgiving, or honor to your chosen deity, in the Bible's case, of course, the God of Israel. In the book of Leviticus, we find the Israelites commanded to make offerings when they finally entered the promised land of Canaan, and part of that offering was to be a libation,

or drink offering, of one quarter of a hin of wine, a hin being measured at somewhere between three and five liters of liquid, and so, more than a drop or two. We know that in the sacrificial system, the people were called to give unblemished lambs, and the best of the crop, and the choicest of flour, so although it does not specify in Leviticus, it is not hard to imagine that the drink offering called for the best of one's wine, the first fruits so to speak, and certainly from the top of the cup and not what was left after you'd had your fill first.

And so Paul says to Timothy, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come." Given what we know about the quality of the wine used for the drink offering, we could infer that Paul has a rather high opinion of himself, that he is the best of the barrel, the finest wine in the divine wine cellar. Whether or not he intends that meaning, his impending death at the hands of the Roman Empire is seen as a drink offering, a chance to give thanks and honor to God, for his life, for his faith, for the gift of his salvation, for the crown of righteousness he expects to have placed on his head. Just as the Israelites were called to make the drink offering when they entered the promised land, Paul seems to have in mind his entrance into the new promised land. He does not specify who is doing the pouring, but it seems unlikely that it is the Romans. It could be he himself doing the pouring, in the sense of not resisting the inevitable conclusion to his life, and preparing himself for that entrance. And it could be God who does the pouring, or Christ himself, similar to the way that Christ is

envisioned as our intercessor before God, the one who pleads our case before the throne of the Almighty, our place in heaven already assured in the libation that was Christ's own death. In any case, Paul is making a firm connection between his life and his death, between his present and his future, between giving thanks even in dire circumstances and what God has done in Jesus Christ. "From now on," he says, "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing." Life is not lost by dying.

We have poured some liquid this evening. It wasn't quite a quarter of a hin of our best wine, but we poured out something like a libation over the head of young Benjamin Frazee, as we celebrated his entrance into the promised land of grace, and the body of Christ. Baptism is nowhere in the Bible connected with the Old Testament commandments of libations or drink offerings, but it is hard not to draw some connections between them, especially as we have received the liturgy we use in the baptismal ritual. We give thanks for the water used in baptism. We speak of an entrance into a promised land. We celebrate that God has led the baptized, or his or her parents, safely through the wilderness and to that moment of crossing over into a place of safety and security. We celebrate the same grace that rescued the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and us out of slavery to sin. In the pouring of the water is the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit. May God receive what we have done here tonight as a libation of thanksgiving and honor to God.

Well, now that we have been appropriately self-congratulatory, perhaps we should take a look at what this really means in practical terms. And to do that, despite having made a case that baptism in itself is a libation of sorts, let me suggest that another libation has been poured out tonight, a libation has nothing to do with liquid of any sort, whether wine, oil, or water, but rather the kind of libation that Paul describes, not only his death, but his very self. You see, the libation poured out in tonight's baptism is not the water, but rather our promises, and the keeping of those promises, throughout Benjamin's life. This is the witness of the Apostle Paul, who poured out God's promises for those who would hear his message, and to those who believed, until the very end: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Paul was faithful until the end for God's sake, to be sure, but also, I believe, for Timothy's sake, and the sakes of all who believed, all who in his own words, "have longed for his appearing." The question before us tonight is how we will pour ourselves out for Benjamin, or better yet, let ourselves be poured out like a libation by God, a thanksgiving for our having entered into that promised land that Benjamin now too has entered.

In this last chapter of Paul's second letter to Timothy, he mentions by name 17 people, plus "all the brothers and sisters." Some of these are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, some more prominently than others and with much detail, and some are mentioned only here, leaving us wondering about their stories and their relationship with the Apostle. There are many differences among all these

people, but they do have one thing in common, and that is that these are all “church people,” people he has met throughout his now-fading life, church people who have either supported or abandoned him. The lectionary leaves out the verses in this chapter which name them, assuming perhaps that there is more theological relevance in the other verses, but not realizing that for most people, it is from church people (and the hymns they sing), that most of the faithful develop their theology, their love of God, and the shape their faith takes in the world. No preacher should be naïve enough to think that nine, or twelve, or twenty, or heaven forbid even sixty minutes of preaching a week can do what church people do just by living their faith, showing their love of God, and being willing to be poured out by God into the lives of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is the implication of the promises we seek from you as we baptize in the name of the triune God, that you will bear witness as Paul did to the God who changed his life, that he might bring that message of transformation to others. Hear again the question to which all of you, I presume, answered in the affirmative: “Do we, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Benjamin and his parents, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his Church? If so, please answer, ‘We do!’ ” And you did! And although holding to the baptismal promises we make on occasions such as this is not one of the articles in ECF’s

Covenant of Membership, you will certainly see that what we do agree upon as members of this church is the contents of the promise, if not the promise itself.

This type of commitment to one another is hardly anything new. It is the fabric of the Law of Moses, the summary of the Law Jesus supplied when he said, “Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself,” and the example of the early church that shared as needed, praying and breaking bread together. But you and I know that as wonderful an idea as caring for one another is, we don’t always live up to the task, do we? Indeed, among the 17 church people Paul mentions are church people who have supported him and been helpful to him in his life, imprisonment and ministry, but also those that have opposed or abandoned him. “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them!” “Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.” “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.” For as much of his life as Paul invested in others, teaching them how to love one another in the way God loved them in Jesus Christ, there were still those who failed him, and if he were honest with himself he could probably identify those whom he had failed, a sinner like the rest of us.

It is for that reality of our inability to get it right naturally and all the time, that we pause and remember the promises we have made, and encourage each other to keep in the fight, and stay on the track, and persevere through to the very

end. If you want to call it spiritual friendship, or discipleship, or just plain authentic Christian community, it's all the same thing, brothers and sisters in Christ trying to live out ever more intentionally the Gospel they have inherited. And again tonight, I want to encourage you to do that not only for Benjamin and the other children in our midst, but also for those sitting right beside you tonight, for each of us needs the kinds of faithful Christian friends Paul remembered in his letter to Timothy, the Lukes, the Marks, the Priscas and Aquilas and Onesiphori of the world, church people in all their glory.

You are the first of these “church people” that young Benjamin Frazee will know. You will not be the last, but you are the first. Some of us, whether those in this room, or those he encounters later in life, will disappoint him, will disillusion him, will maybe even lead him astray for a time. On that he can count. But the rest of us will be the ones to teach him, to help him embrace God in the way that Paul did when he was able to say, despite all that was arrayed against him, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.” And “From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” May we be a libation poured out for Benjamin, and all the saints, in the name of Jesus Christ who was poured out for us. Amen.