

Sermon Preached on August 29, 2021 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, St. Bartholomew's Day

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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:" ~ Mark 7:21

Several weeks ago I spoke about my friend whose husband was dying. Well, he died. It was hard and sad. And now it's perhaps even harder and sadder for my friend, because he's not here anymore to love and take care of. And compounding my friend's sadness are difficulties with her stepdaughter.

I gave her a couple of short sermons about the difficulties of stepmotherhood—somewhat of a redundancy, but these things can always bear repeating in times of crisis. But I also told her that in my experience families can go a couple of different ways, a couple at least, after a death. Either they draw closer together or they may spin off and fracture. Those outcomes have been years in the making and can't be controlled in the present, in my experience.

And that brought to mind one of my experiences of a fracture, and one with a relationship to our Gospel message about what defiles us. "*...there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:"*

I had a very close friend, Rita, whom I met when I began graduate studies. After my daughter was born I moved to be near her in a Boston suburb. We saw each other through our divorces, various reckless love adventures, one of her sisters becoming Miss Massachusetts, and other major life events.

Rita had three sisters, and after we'd been friends for about 10 years one of them became sick with cervical cancer. Long story short, it spread, it became terminal, and she spent many months in Mass General, in the days when long hospital stays were still possible. I spent many, many hours sitting in the hospital with Sandra. I housed and fed her sister who lived in Connecticut, when she and her husband came to visit Sandra, and her father when he came up from North Carolina.

They had been a family in crisis for many years. The mother had disappeared somehow leaving four girls at the mercy of the wicked step-mother Joanne whom father married. I sometimes think *wicked stepmother* is an oxymoron; but this one was a real piece of work. Rita had stories of going to school in slippers because Joanne refused to buy her shoes, of straightening her own teeth with elastic bands because Joanne wouldn't spring for braces. And the most poignant detail I remember is that there was a hierarchy of condiments in the house: top grade mustard and ketchup for the adults, second grade for the two sisters Joanne loved, and house brand for the two unloved ones. Rita and Sandra were the latter, the unloved. And they felt they were the fortunate ones, because of how being loved by Joanne had damaged and deformed their sisters.

So, Sandra died. I celebrated her memorial service. And then the father and Rita's remaining sisters and her aunts went back to their own lives. And after about six months Rita stopped having anything to do with me. No reason I could fathom, no explanation. I had been bereft at Sandra's dying and now I had lost one of my

best friends. Eventually I stopped trying for contact with Rita, for a reason she'd spun me off and away, and life went on. I got ordained, I moved.

But one late night about five years after all this transpired, I called Rita, and said, simply *why?* I caught her before she had a chance to hang up, and this is what she said: *You are sick. You came on to my father in my sister's hospital room. You are a nasty piece of work and you betrayed me and my family.*

She went on and on in this vein, and while she was ranting, I had two images.

One was of being pelted with manure. And the other was of toads and vipers coming out of Rita's mouth, as they did in the fairy tale of the Princess with diamonds and toads. No diamonds from Rita, just a long litany of slimy things.

I had two reactions: one, Rita is crazy. I mean, I'd always known she was terribly neurotic, an affliction honestly come by given her family background, but this was way out of bounds. And once the shock of this barrage wore off a bit, I felt free. Free of uncertainty, free of wondering what I might have done wrong, indeed, free of Rita. Sad, again, but free.

The manure, the toads and vipers, the slime and vituperation, did not defile me. *There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile.* I would just add this caveat to what Jesus tells us: nothing from outside can defile us *unless we let it. Unless we let it.* Unless we internalize the evil outside us, it can't poison us.

And I would venture to say Rita was defiled by her attack on me, an attack that had no basis in reality and was cruel beyond recounting. I can understand her anger and grief at the loss of her favorite sister. But that anger belonged with God, not with me.

So, lesson learned, Anne. And as Moses tells his tribe in our Hebrew Scripture this morning: *But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children. Alleluia! Amen.*