

Pentecost 13B  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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### The Worst in Me

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and <sup>2</sup>saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)*

*<sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”*

*<sup>6</sup>He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*“ ‘These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.*

*<sup>7</sup>They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’*

*<sup>8</sup>You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”*

*<sup>14</sup>Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup>Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’”*

*<sup>21</sup>For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”*

Many years ago I had a person in my life that just brought out the worst in me at every turn. I can honestly say that I did not dislike this person. But something about her just put me on edge and I was never my best self when she was around. Then someone told me about toxic people. These are people that for some reason or another bring out your worst characteristics or dredge up your most troubling anxieties. You may not even be able to identify why this happens. It just happens. Apparently the only real remedy is to avoid them or at the very least carefully manage every encounter in order to mitigate the damage. Maybe it is better to be with them one-on-one or in a large crowd. Maybe a time limit does the trick. Or maybe the activity matters. Whatever it is, you give yourself permission to either modify or even end the relationship. Because if they are toxic to you, they are probably not getting much that is good out of the relationship either.

Reflecting back over the years I can identify three people that I could say were toxic to me. Only one is still peripherally in my life and I find that I can manage encounters with her if I remember that she does not intend to be toxic and I don’t intend to be my worst self whenever she is

around. Now of course, I have had to consider the possibility that I myself might be toxic. Is there someone who cannot be their best self in my presence? Hard as it is to even imagine such a thing: could I bring out the worst in someone to the point they might do well to be rid of me?

When Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes that challenge his disciples he says to them: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. It begs the question: what is coming out of me? Jesus, ever ready with a response, says: it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly. Well, yuck. It makes me feel like Linda Blair in the well-known scene from the Exorcist where she vomits up pea soup. Talk about toxic. Could that really be coming out of me?

If it is what comes out of us that defiles us, it is probably safe to assume that it must be defiling those around us as well. For example, adultery never just hurts one person. It hurts entire families. Murder never hurts just the victim but devastates families and terrorizes communities. Slander destroys reputations. Avarice results in someone's loss. Every one of these sins has impact on far more than just the person spewing them into the world. They splash on everyone nearby as well. It is a horrifying thing to think about really. My sin is never really just my own, safely contained within me, hurting only me. My sin can make me toxic to others.

But what are the alternatives? What *could* I be splashing on those around me? What would getting wet look like if it were good? So I emailed this list of sins to three of the smartest people I know and asked them to give me one-word opposites. Instead of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly they suggested commitment, truthfulness, civility, contentment, commendation, humility, fidelity, wisdom, nurture, beneficence and generosity.

To call this list "virtues" implies they might be achieved by human striving alone. Instead let's call them blessings. For that is indeed what they are. James says that every generous act is from above, from the Father of lights. The good that comes out of us comes from God. And it comes from God not just for our sake but for the sake of those we might splash. Every one of these blessings only makes sense as it encounters the other. Commitment requires relationship, truthfulness requires conversation, civility requires a neighbor and so on. Just as sin leaks out on those around us, so does blessing. The difference is that one is toxic and one is life-giving.

The temptation however is to be satisfied with feeling truthful, civil, wise, nurturing. We can do some self-reflection and maybe quite honestly say that we have good feelings about others, we are kind to those we encounter, we give generously. But are we really getting anyone wet? Am I out there splashing these blessings around in an intentional and concerted way.

This is where the Pharisees and scribes got hung up. They took holiness code that was prescribed for priests only and expanded it to be required of all people. They didn't do this in an attempt to be officious and rigid. They were honestly striving to achieve holiness for all of God's people. These enhancements to the law became what is known as the tradition of the elders. Not law in the Scriptural sense but certainly in practice. It helped set the people of God apart and gave them visible assurance of their identity. The problem came when they began to rigidly hold to tradition and forgot the greater commandments of God: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. They became so concerned with the *identity* of holiness that they forgot holiness in *living*.

So when they encounter Jesus, they pick on the practices of the disciples rather than deal directly with the challenging teaching and inexplicable power of Jesus. And here is where I think many of us can relate to the Pharisees.

We have a long history of rich tradition expressed through liturgy, sacraments and music. Through these things, we bring out the best in each other. These traditions are life-giving. And our congregation is also pretty lucky. We may not always agree on everything but we do not let disagreements over our traditions divide us. But like it or not, we are part of the modern Christian church. And the modern church has sometimes been portrayed as being more willing to tussle over personal morality, worship styles and denominational issues than we are willing to face the tough teachings of Jesus and the prophets about care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. Rest assured, I am NOT pointing fingers here. This is a classic case of every time I point a finger, three of them are pointing back at me. But I will say this. As I grow and mature in my faith, the more assured I become of my own salvation in Christ, the more discomfited I am about my own response, or lack thereof, to Jesus.

This congregation had created space where we really do bring out the best in each other. But what would happen if we got really splashy? What if we made up our mind to really get each other wet? To take these blessings and soak the neighborhood? Frankly, it is more than a little scary. But St. Barnabas, as a people baptized to be the hands and voice of God, is being called out of this building and into the community.

To that end here are two of the things we have planned that involve getting people wet. We have entered into a companion relationship with St. Paul's Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis. With less than 150 rostered members, they are part on an effort in the Minneapolis Area Synod to reach out to the increasing number of Latino immigrants in our area. Interestingly enough, St. Paul's serves immigrants that come largely from not only the same state in Mexico, but many are from the same village. Joining with St. Paul's will be a messy process. Our congregations are very different: theirs is poor, ours affluent, theirs is largely of color, ours largely white. But both congregations love to eat together and worship together. We aren't sure just exactly what this companionship will look like, but someone, hopefully everyone, is going to get wet!

Another way to get splashy is to come to the table talks this coming Thursday from 7 to 9. Here is where we will think about what it means as people of faith to listen to the call of Jesus and the prophets to do justice, to be merciful, and to let a people of faith actually shape their community in big and meaningful ways. We have much to learn. We must learn to listen to each other, to speak forthrightly and thoughtfully, to trust people who hold to different political ideologies than we do. By coming together with people we have committed to love as brothers and sisters in Christ, we will discover that there is much we hold in common and there is much we can do to get our community, our state and our nation, really, really wet!

Through the death and resurrection of Christ we have been soaked in salvation, each of us loved into our best selves. Through the life of Jesus we are called to live the blessing, messy and wet, every day. Amen.