

Sermon by the Rector Proper 17-B August 30, 2009

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#)

[Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10](#)

[James 1:17-27](#)

[Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

The great American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce once observed that he was far more interested in what people betray than in what they proclaim.

By "what they proclaim", Peirce meant what we proclaim ourselves to be. By "what people betray", he meant what we reveal about ourselves without intending to do so. In this category we find all those psychological phenomena Freud and his followers discovered and popularized: the Freudian slip, body language, the unconscious gesture.

In the long shadow of Peirce, and Freud, we modern people squirm. We scrutinize ourselves and others for words and behaviors that give away more than we want to give away, and feel the pressure of this mutual scrutiny. Mostly, we strive not to reveal things we'd rather hide from others, and ourselves.

But, under pressure, they come out. Facing a challenge or crisis – or feeling ourselves fortunate, gifted, blessed – we give away more than we want to. Envy, anger, resentment, a willingness to manipulate others – vices named, or implicated, in the uncomfortably long list of self-defilements Jesus lists in the gospel, come to the surface when things aren't going well. And, when things are going well, pride, arrogance, maybe a smattering of contempt for the less-blessed, show their unattractive faces too.

In these cases, when we betray something that's at odds with what we proclaim, we resort to "external attribution". Something – a person, a circumstance, a problem, a blessing – "got to me", we say, or "got the better of me."

Freud called this "projection", and the existentialists termed it "bad faith": looking outside of ourselves for the source of something whose true source is within. And it's this "external attribution" reflex that Jesus addresses in today's gospel. "Nothing outside of you can defile you", he says; "All defilement comes from within. We defile ourselves." In the language we're using this morning: nothing "gets to us" or "gets the better of us". We let blessings and problems, good things and bad, "get the better of us."

We might regard this teaching, at first glance, as a counsel of despair. But It actually invites us to recognize, and make use of, our God-given power. Once we come under the Master's stern tutelage, and recognize that our capacity to defile ourselves dwarfs that of anything outside of us, we can begin to hear the voice of what the Song of

Solomon regards as our True Lover. This Song is love poetry, of course, speaking of the stag, the gazelle who appears at the young woman's window to call her away. Interpreted in the light of the gospel – and not distorted thereby, only expanded, in my view – this gazelle is Jesus, the True Lover, and the young woman our soul. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away," he says. Only a false lover sings the praises of "external attribution": "It's not you, it's the situation, the circumstance, forces beyond your control." The true lover says, "Step away from this reflex. Bid the false lover's voice be silent. See yourself more clearly, from a distance; recognize that the power to defile, or make pure, rests in you, not in anything outside of you."

James declares this God-given power in a different way. He writes of the Word, implanted in our heart – a kind of second self, able to see and understand more clearly than the self caught up in the pressures of the moment, easily seduced by the external attribution reflex. Meekness characterizes both this Word, and its proper reception. James draws from it some very helpful advice for resisting the temptation to believe defilement comes from outside us: be slow to speak, quick to listen; slow to judge, quick to seek understanding. A friend of mine says that if things are slow, we should – slow down a little more! Our quickness to speak and judge, to project outward that which we can only find within, makes this homely little maxim ring very true.

Like all of us, I've been thinking a lot about Senator Edward Kennedy – may he rest in peace - this week . Forty years ago last month, he plunged his car into a pond in Chappaquidick, on Martha's Vineyard. He swam to safety, while Mary Jo Kopechne, a passenger in his car, drowned. I wonder what he was feeling that night, especially after the reality of what had happened settled in. Maybe he thought a lot of things had gotten the better of him: three brothers dead, two by assassins' bullets and one in warfare, his remains never recovered; and at the same time, the extraordinary gifts and opportunities that were his as a Kennedy. Maybe he wondered if these things, blessings and curses, had made him arrogant, cold, bitter, selfish. Maybe, too, he began to hear the true lover's voice, and heed the word, the "second self" implanted with meekness: "You've been given extraordinary gifts, advantages and opportunities, my beloved child. It's up to you whether they make you arrogant or humble. You've suffered extraordinary grief. It's up to you whether it makes you bitter or compassionate. So arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. Consult the Word of meekness implanted in you."

I don't know if Senator Kennedy heard this voice. I don't know if his extraordinary legislative career came from regret and remorse, genuine care for the least and the lost among us, some other source, or some combination of sources. I do believe this: that the gap between the self he betrayed, revealed unintentionally, and the self he proclaimed in his public life, narrowed substantially after that tragic July night 40 years ago. Whether you liked his politics or abhorred them, what you saw was, in larger measure than before, what you got. He had at least begun to learn the lesson so hard, but so necessary, for all of us to grasp: nothing outside of us can defile us, only what

comes from within – over which, by the mercy and grace of God, we have a measure of control.