



My poor kids have had hand-washing drilled into them. My husband once worked as a short-order cook, and he is always on the look-out for dirty hands in the kitchen. “Did you wash your hands?” he’d say whenever one of our boys would reach for food, or set the table, or unload the dishwasher. They heard it from me, too. Working in health care settings, I’d heard over and over how you have to get your hands wet, and lather up for the length of time it takes to sing “twinkle,

twinkle little star,” then rinse, then turn off the water using a paper towel, and then use another paper towel to open the bathroom door. That’s how all the nurses taught me, and so that’s what I passed along.

So when the Pharisees want to know why Jesus’ disciples are eating without washing their hands, it doesn’t sound like a bad question, to my 21st century American ears.

But those weren’t the kind of ears Jesus was listening with.

The Pharisees weren’t worried about whether the disciples might get sick. The story has nothing to do with germs or sanitation. Hand-washing before eating was important to the Pharisees because it was tradition, handed down from the elders. The customs about washing one’s hands and cups and other vessels were away in which the Pharisees and their followers tried to honor God in everyday life and bring holiness to the act of eating. These customs also helped Jews maintain their identity even while their land was occupied by the Romans.

But traditions have a potential dark side. We can fall so in love with our traditions that we think God came down with them. This isn’t criticizing Jews. Christians do the same thing. Christians have cut themselves off from one another and even killed each other over tradition. Churches have torn themselves apart fighting about tradition.

In the worst case, we can use tradition -- the outer, formal practices of religion as cheap substitutes for the love the God requires. Our gospel lesson skips over some verses that explain why Jesus calls these particular Pharisees hypocrites. They’ve gone so far as to invent a tradition to help people get out of their God-given obligations to their parents. God commands that they take care of their elderly parents, but the experts have invented a tradition that says young people could declare their property devoted to God, and from then that property would be shielded from any expectation of its being used to support parents. Human tradition, flying in the face of God’s command.

The danger is always there. Just this summer I came across a blogger who said it seemed like Christianity was becoming a set of behaviors that people could adopt -- for example, going to church and putting Christian symbols or bumper stickers on your car -- instead of the harder work of becoming a decent human being.

Ten years ago a powerful book came out where the author described her experience working in a series of minimum-wage jobs. She said when she worked as a waitress, her worst customers were the ones she called "visible Christians" -- people who'd come straight from church, sit at a big table together, run her back and forth like crazy and then leave \$1 for the tip. (Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, 2002)

Jesus doesn't have time for this stuff. The kingdom of God is at hand, and what matters is what comes out of our hearts. That's what needs cleaning up. As for food -- it's all clean. Just like that, Jesus wiped out the food laws that separated Jews from their neighbors.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is still at it. One preacher says every time we get out our little etch-a-sketches are draw lines to separate us from other people, God shakes it up, make the lines go away. God cleanses us from the inside, so that we can see each other as the brothers and sisters we are, and grow more and more in love.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church had a young pastor, straight out of seminary. She learned that their custom at Holy Communion was for everybody to stand in line, and the pastor would hand out the bread and a church council member would handle the chalice. It was an unusual way for Lutherans to do Holy Communion at that time, but the young pastor went along without asking about it. When Lent rolled around, this pastor said everyone kneel at the rail at Communion time. It seemed like a good idea. Lent is a penitential time, and kneeling is a good penitential posture. And, having a deep respect for the role of the pastor, everyone went along. And it seemed to work fine until Winifred, the matriarch of the congregation, came down the aisle, and Winifred's knees weren't what they used to be. The pastor saw Winifred wince while struggling to stand up after kneeling. Then the lightbulb went on for the pastor. The good people of St. Paul's didn't kneel during Holy Communion for reasons of kindness. From then on, all the people of St. Paul's stood for Communion. (["What Matters and What Doesn't,"](#) Janet Hunt, *Dancing with the Word*, 2012.)

Maybe you think that church went overboard, but they got their priorities straight. And that's what God's kingdom looks like: dividing lines erased, and love shining through.