

You could write a pretty long book, albeit for a pretty small audience, chronicling how different rituals and practices have made their way into and out of our various Christian traditions. That book would be both history and comedy. The funny thing about church tradition is that because so much of what we do has symbolic meaning, we are prone to think that *everything* in the church has symbolic meaning, even those things that we do just because they're practical or because we've always done them that way. For example, weekly communion in this congregation predates me, but I have been involved in congregations when that shift was happening, so I've heard the argument that you shouldn't have communion every week because then it won't be special, as if what makes the sacrament meaningful is how rarely we celebrate it and not the presence of Christ's very self in the meal. But communion only stopped being a weekly celebration in times and places where not enough clergy were available to serve every church; a pastor rotating through a circuit of congregations would only get to each one on occasion. Yet from that unintentional shortage came the fiercely defended claim that communion was meaningful because it was rare, a belief that would surely set Martin Luther spinning in his grave. So, sometimes our religious practices are carefully constructed symbols of our beliefs, but other times we invent theology to explain our traditions. Considering how often a tradition begins as just a practical necessity, it's shocking and should be a little embarrassing how certain acts of piety become hills we're willing to die on, or, more accurately, altars on which we would earnestly, even gleefully sacrifice others in the name of faith.

In today's gospel, Mark is speaking hyperbolically when he says that "*all* the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders." We know that's an exaggeration because Jesus and his disciples are Jewish, and some of them didn't wash before they ate. Public service announcement: Jesus is not anti-handwashing. Jesus *doesn't* say that eating without washing can't make you *sick*, because germs exist, and we absolutely can get norovirus if we don't wash our hands. So Jesus is not arguing against basic hygiene. But it's likely that Jesus and his disciples, in the course of their travels around Judea, did not always have the opportunity to scrub with soap and water for the length of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" just as, if we were camping where clean water was scarce, we might not be as conscientious in washing up as we would be under normal circumstances. The setting of this gospel scene is unclear, but whether there weren't facilities available or the disciples just skipped the sink, they ate without washing their hands.

The Pharisees' criticism is not about germs or hygiene but about the disciples' failure to observe tradition. They aren't claiming that the disciples have broken the Law, because the Law doesn't require all these washing customs in everyday circumstances. The Law said the *priests* had to observe

those rules in the course of their service at the Temple, so the religious folks who were trying to be extra-reverent had appropriated them as a spiritual practice. But equating those traditions to the Law is what Jesus calls “teaching human precepts as doctrines.” So this is not a matter of Jesus breaking or bending, dismissing, changing, over-riding, or even re-interpreting the Law; this is an argument about cultural tradition. And again, it’s not a conflict between Jesus and Judaism; this is an intra-religious argument—people who all worship the same God disagreeing about how to do that.

Jesus references Isaiah, but he could have quoted just about any of the prophets, because the Lord speaks through all of them to accuse Israel of paying more attention to their religious traditions than the commandments that require charity and justice. There is nothing wrong with the Pharisees and scribes washing up before meals; but they think doing this makes them holy and *not* doing it makes Jesus’ disciples *unholy*. They would use this tradition that they had adopted to make them feel closer to God as a reason to stay away from a group of God’s other children—and they would feel pretty self-righteous about it. Jesus teaches them that nothing that goes into a person *defiles* them—that is, makes them unclean, profane, unholy. But the evil inclinations in our hearts that would cause us to treat other people badly—that’s what separates us from the way God wants us to live.

This is one of those texts that has too often been read through a lens of antisemitism—that the Pharisees and scribes, and by extension, all Judaism—was all about rules and rituals and legalism, then along came Jesus who was all about love and freedom and bacon cheeseburgers. That’s not a faithful interpretation of this passage, because there is nothing that the Pharisees and scribes do here that Christians don’t do worse. Why does that denomination use grape juice instead of wine? Why don’t they follow the liturgical calendar? Why does their sanctuary have a crucifix, or kneelers, or screens, or drums, or icons, or a whole pool for baptism? *How can someone say they are a Christian and...* just think about how we’ve filled in that blank over the years: dancing, playing cards, listening to certain music, having too much fun on Sundays, wearing—or not wearing—whatever to worship, and that doesn’t even scratch the surface of gender roles and sexuality. In the earliest years of the church, Christians couldn’t serve in the military; can you imagine how that would go over in our current culture? Almost every day I read or hear someone say, “You can’t be a Christian and...” or “You’re not a *real* Christian if...” and invariably, whatever comes next can’t be found anywhere in scripture. Our traditions are not what make us God’s people, and our criticism of other peoples’ traditions surely is not what makes us good witnesses to the gospel. In the face of all the evils that Jesus warns against, we are supposed to be known as his disciples by our love; let’s make sure that is what we are putting out there in the world.