

The little French town cherished its *tranquillite*. Everything—including the sermons of the new young priest—was under control of the mayor, who trusted the wisdom of generations past. The people held fast to their traditions and everything looked just fine, until a young woman and her daughter arrived and opened, of all things, a *chocolaterie*—during Lent, no less! The chocolates were exotic, sensual—even erotic—and irresistible. Gradually, quietly, the old order began to break down. People started to break out of their shells a little and have way too much fun. Love blossomed.

A struggle for the town’s heart and soul ensued between a rigidly enforced morality and a new embrace of the goodness of all creation—including chocolate. Especially chocolate, perhaps, but also definitely neighbors. It was a struggle the mayor might have characterized as between the “clean” and the “unclean.”

You have recognized, of course, the story line of the film *Chocolat*.<sup>1</sup> With that story in mind, you probably will not be surprised to hear that when authorities were deciding which writings would be included in the canon of Jewish, and later Christian, Scripture, the Song of Solomon almost didn’t make the cut. Way too racy.

Its place was secured, in the end, by the argument that it’s really an allegory for the love between God and God’s people, or Christ and the Church, not the love poetry of a woman and her lover. (Actually, I’ve always thought that all love songs are also songs about God: “As the river flows surely to the sea, darling, don’t you know, our love was meant to be. Take my hand, take my whole life, too, for I can’t help falling in love with you.” Elvis Presley)

The Song of Solomon is also clearly a celebration of the human body and sexuality that are part of the goodness and beauty of all creation. (Tradition has attributed this poetry to Solomon, not because of those 700 wives and 300 concubines, but because he was known for writing songs. (1 Kings 4:32) Was written centuries after Solomon, though.)

As with human love, love for God may be easy to fall into but harder to sustain. This is where tradition, spiritual disciplines and practices, comes in—things we do, and do not do, that can keep us open to God and support us in that relationship. There are things in creation that religious traditions do declare unhelpful, unholy, unclean before God, maybe because they do make us, or made our elders, uncomfortable. Religious traditions include some strongly held ideas about what is required to be counted as “godly,” “holy,” “clean;” and what is “unclean.” Often ancient taboos are wise, based in experience of what is healthy: *e.g.*, ancient Jewish dietary laws against eating pork, or shellfish. Washing also turns out to be a healthy practice.

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<sup>1</sup>Miramax , 2000.

“Do not come to the table until you’ve washed your hands.” How many times did you hear that as a child? How many times have you said it as a parent or grandparent? It makes sense when you know about germs, as washing fruits and vegetables makes sense when you know about toxins. Besides, dirty hands at the table can really gross out the rest of us, who have carefully, even righteously, washed ours. Soon, we’ll be tired of hearing this public service announcement: “Wash hands frequently throughout the day to keep from getting the H1N1 flu.”

Why didn’t all Jesus’ disciples wash their hands before eating, anyway?

For all we know, they may have, just not the kind of washing the Pharisees and scribes were looking for. They were shocked not to see the ritual washing of hands prescribed for priests in the Temple to be clean, pure before God.<sup>2</sup> This is about religious observance, not the disciples’ hygiene or lack thereof. Greek for “clean” (*hagios*) also means what has been consecrated, particularly set apart for God. The word for “unclean” (*koinos*) means “what is common, available for ordinary use.”

Ritual hand washing was required only for priests. But, drawing on a verse in Torah (Exodus 19:6), “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” the Pharisees taught that God expected everyone in Israel to follow the practice. It was one of many practices designed to support holiness in daily life—a good thing. Something many of us explored in our Lenten program this year on “Creating a Rule of Life.”

Particularly in a diverse, distracting and distracted society like ours, we need traditions and spiritual practices to help keep our hearts and minds turned toward God, and our feet on the Way. The Letter of James, which we will be hearing from over the next several weeks, describes a variety of practices and disciplines, *e.g.*, “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger . . .” (1:19) Spiritual disciplines can be for us like a border collie, gently nudging and bumping up against the sheep, to keep them together and safe.

The tricky, sticky thing is that a ritual rigidly practiced or imposed can become a value and objective in itself. The practice can become all about not being caught making a false move. It can become all about me, and very little about God.

On one level, the Pharisees and scribes were intrigued by Jesus. They could see that he was a religious man, a godly teacher with authority. That is what had drawn them up to Capernaum, in Galilee, from Jerusalem, to gather around him. But he also baffled and infuriated them. (*See*, 3:1-6, 22.) They were genuinely surprised to see his disciples

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<sup>2</sup> The washing was elaborate. Prescribed amount—one and a half egg shells’ worth—of clean, pure water, kept in stone jars used for nothing else, was poured over hands, with fingers pointing upwards, down to the wrists. Wash by rubbing the fist of each hand against the other hand. Then a prescribed amount of water poured over hands with fingers pointing downwards. *See*, William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 164-65.

not following a practice that, *to them*, was at the heart of what it is to be religious, honor God. If he was religious, godly, why were he and his disciples not like *them*?

Jesus was as surprised and exasperated with them and their lack of understanding as he so often was with his own disciples. Well, more exasperated, because the Pharisees and scribes held out their way of serving and honoring God as the only way, and themselves as the gold standard, against which they judged everybody else's religious observance.

*You just don't get it, do you? Take a look in the mirror, Jesus comes back at them. You think you're so pure, but you are deceiving yourselves, totally missing the point, and worse . . .*

The lectionary omits part of this encounter so we won't be confused by it. But what he says about the Pharisees and scribes about the commandment of God and human tradition is confusing without the omitted verses. Those are about the tradition of Corban, making an offering or an oath to offer to God one's property, wealth. The rules and expectations around Corban were among the traditions that had grown up around the Torah. Apparently, the Pharisees and scribes taught that if a man made an oath consecrating his wealth to God (Corban) tradition *required* him not to use it in any other way, not even to support his parents.

*Sorry, Mom, sorry, Dad. I've consecrated everything I have to God—even though I'm still living off it, but we won't mention that—so I won't be supporting you two any more.*

Tradition, they held, trumped even the core of Israel's moral law. "You shall honor your father and your mother" goes right out the window if, say, you're that angry at the parents, or just tired of maintaining them. Just make the oath. Jesus would have been all the more outraged because the Pharisees and scribes were *teaching* this. And then they had the nerve to ask him about the ritual washing of hands?!

Make no mistake, Jesus did not reject either Jewish law or tradition. The early Church, including the community of Mark, was left to sort out which traditional Jewish practices were required and which were not.<sup>3</sup> We have similar work of discernment to do in our own lives. What rituals, what observances will open us to God's nourishing us "in all goodness," and bringing "forth in us the fruit of good works"? (Collect for today, Proper 17, BCP 181)

The Pharisees' desire to please God in every aspect of life is something to emulate. Holiness in daily life is part of the teaching and practice of all religions. The Pharisees just had the *em-pha-sis* on the wrong *syl-la-ble*. Fixated on external observance, they risked missing the heart of the matter. Theirs is a familiar pattern, easy

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<sup>3</sup>The community of Mark, for example, *interpreted* Jesus' words about what truly defiles a person: "(Thus he declared all foods clean.)" *See*, Mark 7:17-20.

to fall into: getting caught up in the externals of what we do, losing sight of why and for whom.

Everybody has a rule or pattern of life, conscious or unconscious. Our practices in daily life, what we do and don't do, all support what we believe in, how we seek God—or the things we have elevated as our gods. How our relationship with what we believe in most deeply is nurtured.

There are many traditions, and many practices. When Robin and I were planning our Lenten class on Creating a Rule of Life, our conversations were like sparklers going off—there were so many ideas we wanted to explore, ways of prayer, ways of reading and meditation on Scripture, all kinds of ways to open awareness of God. The number of possibilities can feel overwhelming—and we did overwhelm people, and ourselves, a bit.

At the beginning, and in the end, though, it is all about how we can cooperate with God in keeping the main thing the main thing.

By the end of the Lent when the *chocolaterie* had opened in that little French town, the young priest had come to a new understanding of the issue of holiness in daily life. In his very own Easter sermon, unedited by the mayor, he summarized it like this:

“. . . I want to talk about Christ's humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. . . . I think we can't go 'round measuring our goodness, by what we don't do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. I think we've got to measure our goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.”

Yes, but not so much measuring our goodness as remembering God, the author and giver of all good things. And holding our own disciplines and practices lightly—holding them, but lightly. Leaving space for God to reach into our hearts and bring forth the fruits of kindness, compassion, and welcome for the ones not like us. Who knows whether something in their ways, that look so different from our own, may yet offer us a new glimpse of the Way, and the One whose footsteps we seek to follow day by day?