

Pay attention! This is important. This is how Jesus deals with people who have lost their sense of purpose and replaced it with merely maintaining an institution. This is important because, in some form or other, this same thing happens to all of us, all individuals, all organizations, all Churches, no matter what size or how wonderfully they started. In fact, you could say that this is the story of human history: something happens; something important, something significant, something that we know is going to change everything. For a while things are booming along, amazing things are happening, maybe even miraculous things, and then people begin to start to build things around the good things that are happening: Temples, churches, corporations, governments, kingdoms, empires, nations, all kinds of institutions to try and replicate and preserve the energy of the thing that is happening.

They may last for a while, perhaps a very long while, but eventually the purpose gets lost. Maybe a king dies, maybe the thing gets too big to sustain, maybe it simply gets to a point where everyone is just going through the motions and no one even knows why anymore. Eventually all human institutions wither and fade, because they are precisely that: human, meaning mortal. It is arrogance to think that anything else is possible. It is no accident that Jesus lives in a time when the people of Israel were facing this sort of dissolution; they were living in what is basically an extension of the exile to Babylon, they were back in the promised land, but the promised land really didn't belong to them, it now belonged to Caesar. They were dealing (or not dealing) with the reality that Empires were coming and going and they were little more than a footnote. Their hope for a kingdom like David or Solomon had was lost to all but the most deluded zealots. Most of the people in authority had long since decided that they just needed to get on board with whoever could help them the most or at least hurt them the least.

This is a central feature of Jesus' life and work, challenging the "kingdom of the world," with the Kingdom of Heaven. The most troublesome people to get to with this message are the very people who think they already know all about the Kingdom of Heaven. Those are religious folk, those are the folk who have already set their ideas about who God is and what pleases God. At any given time in our history, the ones who have settled on those issues are usually the most dangerous people to the well being of the rest of us. The brands of religion that emphasize "answers" and certainty are the ones that usually take offense at Jesus, even when they call him Lord.

Whatever else we might be, let us not be the church that simply enforces hygiene requirements, let us not be the church that honors God with our lips, but our hearts are far away. I admit, this sort of hypocrisy is always easier to spot in others than it is in myself. I can look at fundamentalists and various other forms of Christian faith, and clearly see where they have prioritized human values rather than the principles of love, mercy and justice. I can see for instance, certain leaders blatantly ignoring immorality for the sake of political power, I can see institutions defending themselves at the expense of the victims of abuse, and I can clearly see that there are certainly some real judgments that need to be made. I have to leave the judgment to Jesus, and thus I can only use the standards he set.

The rituals of hand washing were not for nothing, the traditions had evolved as a way that the covenant people could separate themselves from Gentiles. They are part of keeping Kosher, a spiritual discipline that is practiced to this day by observant Jews, but Jesus clearly doesn't think that the practice is healthy any longer. What had become of many of the more ritualized observances of the law is that they were only practicable by the rich and powerful. What had been important distinguishing disciplines in the era of nomadic tribes who often sojourned in foreign lands had become burdensome and largely without meaning in a world where Empires were the new paradigm. It's not that the people were supposed to forget that they were called out and set apart, it's that they were not equally empowered to be such. Working people, like the fishermen and various ordinary folk that Jesus called as disciples, never had the luxury of servants and time that were required to observe the hand washing ritual in question here. They

probably did it at weddings and special occasions, it was kind of like wearing a tuxedo or a ball gown, you know what it's for, but it just isn't a really big part of your life. As they're out wandering from town to town, of course they don't do that ritual that requires multiple large vessels of water, you don't wear your tuxedo when you go backpacking.

This whole thing is actually a rather classist slur. They are not really asking about the Law, they are asking about why and how Jesus came to be associated with such crude fellows. That Jesus picks his friends and followers from the low places is not an accident. That, on the few occasions when someone who was actually wealthy and powerful wants to become his follower, he sends them away is also not a glitch. It's not that Jesus sees some sort of moral superiority in the poor, or that he is incapable of loving someone who is wealthy, it's that he sees how pervasive this desire to maintain the status quo really is for those who have found their comfort zones. Why do you think churches are struggling these days? I think the big reason is that people are pretty comfortable living without God, or maybe only a very vague idea of God. When bad stuff happens they briefly flock back in the door, and then drift back away when safety returns. Should we wish for some sort of drama to bring people back to God? By no means, but we probably do need to evaluate whether or not our rituals and traditions are actually serving people and speaking to the way that people are suffering.

This is what I think Jesus would see in our society today: people who are like sheep without a shepherd. People who are craving connection and community so badly they will take it in its most unhealthy forms. He would see a very large and ostensibly successful religious establishment that uses his name to endorse greed and power mongering, and he would see thousands and perhaps millions of people who continue to lack the basic relationship of discipleship. He would see the church arguing about human things and neglecting the bleeding hearts of people who feel left out of God's Kingdom. I often times find myself wondering what the church needs to be like in this world of ours, but honestly I usually end up with a lot more examples of what it should not be. We think of all kinds of ways to avoid loving our neighbors and God. It would seem we are super creative at avoiding the Kingdom of Heaven, maybe it would be good for us to turn our talents the other way around.