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“You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition” (Mark 7:9).

1 Kgs 8:22-23, 27-30; Mark 7:1-13

In today’s Gospel, Jesus contends with the scribes and Pharisees over a long-standing tradition of hand washing. What may have begun as a health practice had evolved into a religious purification rite that separated the righteous from the unwashed. Jesus challenged ritual purity for the same reason he challenged sabbath restrictions, because the rules were given priority over the practice of compassion or as a way of discriminating against the poor, who did not have the luxury of this level of cleanliness and would not have been welcome among these legalists.

Basic hygiene was not the issue, but an elaborate show of ablutions before a meal that announced personal purity, social acceptability and caste inclusion. Jesus knew the pantomime of worthiness from being denied basic rituals of welcome at a dinner party at the house of Pharisee Simon. No water, no anointing, no kiss when he entered a circle of inquisitors eager to debunk him. In that setting, a woman who was the epitome of uncleanness and moral contagion was the one who lavished real welcome on Jesus with her tears, her kisses and her precious ointment.

The tension between Jesus and the religious elites who indulged in the fine points of the Law was increasingly visible as Jesus plunged into the crowds of sick people, touching lepers and sharing table with tax collectors and prostitutes. He was perpetually contaminated by his easy association with Gentiles, outcasts and public sinners. The scruples of the scribes and Pharisees required them to avoid contact with whole classes of people. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan exposed their

hypocrisy and that of the priests and Levites in temple service for using purity laws to avoid helping a fellow Jew beaten and left for dead on the Jericho road. They are shamed by a passing Samaritan who freely shows the man compassion.

Jesus' argument was not against preferred practices and helpful traditions. What he objected to was placing them above the basic commandment of love, on which all other laws derived their validity. He drives home his point by observing how they skirted the obligation to honor their parents, a major commandment, by saying their resources were dedicated to God. Their legalism was self-serving and hypocritical.

Martin Luther found cause to divide Christendom by charging Rome with selling salvation for indulgences and tying believers up with rules and rituals that had nothing to do with Christian love or the freedom bestowed on them by grace. A church attentive to the need for continual reform will learn the lesson of today's Gospel again and again. If we love God and our neighbor, we will always fulfill the whole law.

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