

How many people remember the musical “Fiddler on the Roof?” It takes place in a small village of working-class Jews in Russia. It begins with a song about “Traditions,” in which Tevye sings about how, throughout the centuries, traditions have kept everything in balance. But, as the movie progresses, we see the tension between those traditions and the changing times. In particular, Tevye’s daughters violate the tradition of marrying the man the matchmaker chooses for them; instead, they marry men they love. In fact, not all of them even choose Jewish husbands.

The Gospel today talks about traditions and how sometimes these traditions can interfere with our ability to love God and everyone. Specifically, the Gospel talks about the tradition that food should be eaten with sanctified hands (symbolized by washing). The Greek word that has been translated defiled can also mean ordinary. So washing hands made them holy rather than ordinary.

Modern anthropologists refer to this tradition as “The Great Tradition.” Nowadays, we have been well indoctrinated with the need to wash our hands before doing just about anything. Frequently washing our hands protects our health and the health of others – so it is a loving and inclusive act. However, in that day, the “Great Tradition” was the opposite.

To illustrate that, let’s think about who most of the Jews of that time – including Jesus and most of Jesus’s disciples –

really were. They were fishermen, carpenters, rural farmers, and peasants. In the case of Jesus's disciples, they traveled, probably camping out along the road. Washing their hands before every meal was a luxury that only more affluent Jews who lived in towns could participate in. Yet, under The Great Tradition, if you didn't wash your hands before you ate, you were being a bad Jew. You were being ordinary instead of holy.

Jesus challenges that tradition by telling them that holiness – or lack of holiness – is what is inside of them. Dirty, smelly people who sleep outside can be just as holy as clean ones who sleep in soft beds. In fact, if those who sleep in soft beds use traditions to exclude those who don't, then those traditions are flawed and should be replaced. Traditions can be either bad or good, depending upon their effect on our relationships with God and others. Being a follower of Jesus is about loving others and finding ways to include them and not exclude them. We don't keep traditions that are counter to that purpose.

I expect we all agree that the Great Tradition was detrimental to the Jews of Jesus's day keeping the Greatest Commandments of loving God and others. Yet, we all have a little of Tevye, the Fiddler on the Roof character, in us as well. We need traditions for balance and for keeping order. Sometimes, however, we may become blind to how those traditions affect others. Or, a tradition starts out to be loving and affirmative, but

circumstances change, and it becomes exclusionary, and we stick to it despite that.

One tradition we used to have was that of dressing up to worship. We started it by saying that we put on our best to encounter the holy. However, the problem was that, for many, it was an excuse to try to out dress others, and it had the effect of excluding folks who didn't own "dress-up" clothes. So, now, at least in Western New York, that tradition has gone. This is good. I wonder, though, how we would feel and respond if someone who'd been walking for days and sleeping out in the woods without a bath came into our church to worship.

I invite us to examine other traditions to see whether they include and show love or exclude and show a lack of respect. We all love baked goods at coffee hour and potlucks for meals. These traditions came out of a desire for fellowship. However, perhaps we need to rethink how we do meals and coffee hours so that those who don't bake or cook don't feel left out while still allowing for this fellowship. We have a prayer book tradition, yet in some churches, we've put the whole service into the bulletin because those from outside our tradition may feel excluded because they don't know how to flip through the prayer book. For that matter, the way we typically worship may not be as understandable to outsiders as it is to us. Perhaps we will find ways to re-examine this tradition, as well.

Now, not all traditions need to be changed. Thinking back to Fiddler on the Roof, another essential tradition was Shabat – or how the Jews celebrate the Sabbath. Setting apart a day to rest and meditate on God’s goodness is a good tradition that does affirm our love for God and love for humanity. While we need to be flexible and gracious to those who keep the Sabbath in a different way than we do, maintaining a Sabbath tradition is essential to our Christian lives.

James’s letter gives us a key to examining our traditions. “Be doers of the word and not just hearers,” it reads. And, “religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” We change or get rid of those traditions that exclude or hurt others or come before our spiritual time with God. We keep those traditions where our heart is focused on God and that help others.