

A Question of Plumbing vs. Pollution
First Reading: Ezekiel 33:30-33
Second Reading: Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

On a recent trip to Europe ... surprise, surprise ... we toured a good number of churches and cathedrals. We were treated to grandiose works of art, massive frescoes, ornate carvings of wood, and towering stained glass windows as we sauntered through naves, narthexes, apses, and altars. Yet, I don't remember noticing any church parlors. Perhaps they were hidden from public view, or could it be that the church parlor is a uniquely American phenomenon?

Many American churches were constructed in the late 19th early 20th centuries, a time when, salons, chautauqua events, symposiums, and recitals were held in the parlors and drawing rooms of private homes, and were a common feature of the affluent life. Before telephones were smart, before televisions ruled life at home, people would actually visit one another in their homes, or even gather in groups at on another's home, and so the affluent naturally included in their architectural plans a special room for these occasions. The parlor was the most elegantly furnished room in the house where the pretentious would gather to sip brandy and engage in

highfalutin, intellectual conversations. *The Hibernian salon will meet in the parlor.*

Well, some of those folks went to church, and soon decided that the church needed to have its own exquisitely appointed parlor, only without the brandy. Though our sanctuary is just fifteen years old, the architect still included a parlor in his design. We have a church parlor. Did you know that? I should say, we have a room with fancy light fixtures and large windows, and we call it the Parlor, but you might not have noticed it because we have it set up for overflow seating or as an alternate, smaller space to view worship. The room is outfitted with a big screen monitor along with some of the seating from our old worship space.

So, we have a parlor, but we've never actually furnished it as such, and I'll take the blame for that, because church parlors, especially the most ornately furnished ones, have tended to be the most wasted space in a church.

Imagine that a small committee of social people with an affinity for interior design had a discussion in a church hallway after worship one day. They were discussing the beautifully appointed living room of a neighbor's

Architectural Digest-worthy home, when one of them said, “Wouldn’t it be nice for the church to have a nice room like that for special occasions?” And before you knew it the windows of the former men’s bible class were being measured for luxurious satin curtains purchased with a discount because a member worked for the fabric store. Next, they acquired an oriental rug from an estate sale up in Myers Park. Meanwhile, a member’s brother was a designer for Restoration Hardware, which allowed them to get a sofa, coffee table, and four wingback chairs at cost.

The Parlor was shaping up, but so was the anxiety. The vestibule, which was actually a wide spot in the hallway where they served coffee and cookies after worship was just outside the increasingly refined parlor, and the vestibule carpet was regularly stained with coffee, cookies, and lemonade. And, they were still upset about the time Ida Mae’s grandson knocked over a table holding the cake for a reception. What a mess!

So, the committee decided there needed to be rules about what can be brought into the Parlor, who was allowed in the Parlor, when it was permissible to enter the Parlor, and what background checks needed to be made before someone could reserve the Parlor for a meeting or class. Within

a year the pastor was forced to leave after the Chinese takeout incident. She didn't spill anything, but how can you trust someone who would dare to set an oyster shell of lo mein on a chintz cushion?

Therefore the rules were amended and sent off to the printer to be bound and published ... 37 pages.

So, we have a room called a Parlor with fancy light fixtures, big windows, and even a powder room for the bride, but we haven't furnished it yet. We may get around to it and it will be lovely. Yet, for now, having one less rulebook on the shelf is also pretty nice.

How easily rules and policies gain a life of their own, eclipsing the purpose and spirit of that which they were written to address, protect, or clarify. Golf courses have marshals who take their job far too seriously, assailing duffers for slow play and evicting sluggards for not wearing proper golf shoes. You may have come across a few corporate supervisors who value the rule more than the laborer.

Karl says — “When I started with my employer, I was determined to have an outstanding year. I met every challenge and a few more. At the end of the year, I expected that I'd be in line for a very positive performance

review. As I sat with my manager, his face fell. ‘I’m sorry to do this. You’ve done outstanding work for the year. But we have a policy that says that if you are in the first year of your job, I can only rate you as competent.’”

Karl decided he’d show them and he worked that much harder, crushing it throughout the next year. Surely, he’d receive an A rating this time around. However, Karl reports, “As I met with my manager, he now informed me that he could only give me a ‘B’ for the year, because if he gave me an ‘A’, somebody on our team would have to get an ‘F’.” (*Why Good Rules At Work*

Inevitably Turn Bad, Kevin Kruse, Linked in)

Yale’s Stephen Carter suggested, “the certainty of a rule is bought at a price. By excluding considerations potentially relevant to its purpose ... the rule may generate a misfit between purpose and application.” In the case of a church parlor, fellowship and community are the purpose, both of which are lost if no one can qualify to use the room.

“When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands...”

Now, personally, I don't have a problem with that rule. In fact, I don't have a problem with that rule being rigorously enforced. Count me in with Jerry Seinfeld refusing the pizza at Poppie's restaurant, because, if you remember, when it came to handwashing, ol' Poppie was getting sloppy. I can go through a bottle of Vanilla foam soap from Bath and Body Works pretty quick. However, hygiene is not the primary complaint the Pharisees raise with Jesus.

You see, the Pharisees were an influential sect within 1st Century Judaism, adhering to and propagating a way of life emphasizing Mosaic law, ritual purity, and Sabbath observance. Originally, in the law of Moses, the priests were given specific guidelines about how to handle animals for sacrifice at the altar. Included in those guidelines was a ritual of handwashing that would allow the priests to maintain a level of purity in performing their duties upon the sacred space of the altar. In a similar fashion, Islamic worshipers ritually wash their hands and feet before entering the mosque for prayer, placing them in the right frame of mind before coming into the presence of the holy.

Interpreting the law from Leviticus 19 - *“You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy,”* and Exodus 19 - *“You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,”* the Pharisees, as a group, believed the priestly rules should apply to all people. Their sense was that all Israelites were to adhere to the priestly rules of ritual purity, and like the marshals on the golf course, they were not shy about calling people out when they observed questionable practices. So, when the Pharisees saw Jesus’ disciples eating, they questioned whether the meal was prepared according to the traditions of ritual purity. *“So the Pharisees and the scribes asked [Jesus], ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’”* It wasn’t a question of whether their hands were washed, but more importantly, how their hands were washed. There was an order and technique that was to be followed without deviation. Consider again the prickly corporate supervisor.

Jennifer P says —*“I once worked for a woman in a healthcare setting and she thought that everything had to be written with a specific brand of pen in black ink. ... She wasn’t clear how I had gotten that far in my career without being aware of the special pen rule. She made me rewrite anything*

that didn't appear in the special pen ink—and refused to buy these pens for the office.” (Why Good Rules At Work Inevitably Turn Bad, Kevin Kruse, Linked in)

That's the spirit behind the Pharisees' question. *“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”* And in Jesus' mind there is a point when traditions and rules become an obstacle to, and maybe even a contradiction of those most fundamental of commands to love God and love neighbor. These are the commands that should always take precedence over rules and traditions. So, Jesus replies to the Pharisees' question saying, *“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,*

*‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”*

Scholars Dewey and Malbon observe that, Jesus is not criticizing Judaism, per se, but rather the Pharisees for “imposing rules on economically marginalized Jews who have neither the time nor the resources to follow such rules.” (Joanna Dewey, Elizabeth Malbon, *Theological Bible Commentary*)

Human rules, notions, ideologies, party affiliations, political litmus tests,

traditions, and rituals should never take precedence over the most fundamental commands to love God and love neighbor. Compassion and understanding should eclipse and always inform rigor and rules.

Seeing the Pharisees' question about proper rituals pertaining to food as a teachable moment, Jesus continues, *"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile ... whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ... It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly."* It comes down to a question of plumbing vs. pollution, really.

Much like the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos, along with the Apostle Paul, Jesus wants to make it clear that all our rituals, rules, policies, platforms, apologetics, and litmus tests come to nothing if they do not reflect a love for both God and all people through our behaviors, our work,

our relationships, and our attitudes. It is a fairly blunt message. We cannot worship God on Sunday and hate our neighbor on Monday.

While Judaic rituals of handwashing may seem alien to us, the underlying message speaks powerfully and directly to us amidst the pernicious hostility so prevalent in our culture, particularly since a majority of the hostility is coming from people and groups who call themselves Christian. A few years ago, a poll in Australia suggested that, for a majority of Australians, religion does not make for a better society. Addressing the same phenomenon in our country, theologian John Dickson observes, “Whereas it used to be quite popular for people to say the problem with Christianity is that it’s too self-righteous, it was now far more common for people to say, ‘Actually, the problem with Christianity is that it’s wicked.’”

Evaluating this increasingly common perception in America, Dickson said, “At present, the American Church is suffering from a ‘bully syndrome.’ Too many Christians are swaggering around and picking on marginalized people and generally acting like jerks because they’re angry and apprehensive.” (Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*)

Fearing cultural change, insecure about their supposed prominence in the larger culture, Christians are lashing out in ways that completely contradict the ways of Jesus Christ. They say they are defending God, but if God is God, God doesn't need our defending because, well, God is ... God. If our daily witness does not reflect the grace and hospitality of Christ, then our worship, our rituals, our traditions cease to hold meaning. If the world's first impression of Christians is that we're mean, we've got a problem, and we've got some work to do to provide an alternate witness.

“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile ... It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” So, may we always remember that the witness we are to bear ... is supposed to be good news. What is it that our lives are telling others about our faith. In a way, our job is very simple. Every day, let us reflect the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Amen.