

It started out innocently enough: we went into our young daughter Zoe's room and read a story or two, said prayers, kissed her goodnight, her dad made the sign of the cross on her forehead, we told her we loved her, then we closed the door.

Months later we noticed that our daughter was uncomfortable if we varied the routine.

Then it became apparent that changes weren't allowed. We soon had to say the same things, in the same way, and the exact same order each night—or Zoe would be very anxious and unable to sleep.

What had started as a nice, comforting, family tradition had become something that had to be done the RIGHT way.

When we realized that the evening routine had become unchanged and unchangeable we decided to dig deeper. WHY was the routine so important, and what was behind the need to keep this ritual without deviation? So we asked her about it.

She didn't want to discuss it. She was uncomfortable with us even asking. It was easier to keep up the routines that made her feel better, than to look at the underlying reason for her anxiety.

Don't we all sometimes feel the same way?

My father is so obsessed with stacking the dishwasher the "correct" way, that no one else will touch the dishwasher to help him anymore.

I once had a priest tell me that if all the little gestures didn't happen exactly right during the Eucharist, that he had a hard time feeling that it was 'valid'.

What is going on here?

In today's reading, Jesus is confronting this tendency in all of us. He sees ritual hand-cleaning becoming the routine that cannot be varied. People are either in or out, anxious or non-anxious, valid or invalid-- based on a ritual purity tradition that was initiated to make the people of God understand how the ordinary -- pots, food, people—could all become holy through ritual.

The Ritual then become the Holiness itself, against which true belief was judged.

Now I'm going to say something that may seem shocking: Jesus states that Levitical biblical commands shouldn't take precedence over what is really important: love of God and neighbor—in other words: compassion and caring.

Sometimes we make idols of our traditions, of our rituals, and we focus on what isn't important instead of what is.

Candles have been used in processions and in the gospel reading for millennia. But the earliest Anglicans of New England decided it was “popish foppery” and banned it. Arguments raged about whether it should be allowed. Each side thought the other evil and wrong.

This is silliness. Candles were used in the earliest churches to read by. There was no electricity, and the earliest Christians met in secret, in the dark—hence: candles.

I know that seems a silly example—but we still argue about minutiae, both about things in the service and things in our daily lives. But these are primarily used as distractions. Silver or pottery? Candles or oil? ‘

These things are unimportant.

So Jesus didn't wash his hands. That makes him wicked? Some would say yes.

Jesus says --it's not the rituals and things *outside us* that are going to help us when we do them. And doing rituals wrong won't hurt us. The things that hurt us come from inside. Fear inside us makes them do them.

He continues unrelentingly, counting them off on his fingers: sex without commitment, stealing, murder, cheating on your spouse, greed, doing things without caring if they are right or wrong, lying, wanting things other people have, saying something about someone else that isn't true-----these are things that make us wicked.

But it's easier to focus on what others do outwardly than on what we do inwardly.

Zoe, her dad and I --all finally had a talk about the nightly rituals. It turns out that Zoe needed the rituals because she was anxious that if she *didn't* do it – something would get her—something from the outside. If we didn't do everything the same way, the boogeyman or something was going to come and get her. From the outside.

But what Jesus is saying is that rituals are not there to prevent harm to us, or appease a celestial boogeyman, they are to bring us comfort.

So let's not be worried about washing our hands right or oil candles or wax candles—whether we use one set of words or another set of words.

Those are things *we make a big deal about*, so we don't have to look at the things that are really worrisome: the things that are inside us. The things we would rather not look at.

Maybe we secretly fear that Jesus may be right, and all those wicked things he listed are in us.

My friends: they *are* in us. Of course they're in us.

Jesus knows they are in us, and he still loves us, he still is with us, he still died for us.

And he also knows there is another part of us: hope, love, and contentment and compassion. That is also inside us-- and that is the part he wants us to nurture—not the scared part of ourselves, but the part that is content.

And that reminds me of an old story. *A grandfather says to his grandson:*

"A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

- *One is evil -- he is anger, greed, arrogance, lies, ego."*
- *"The other is good -- he is peace, love, kindness, truth, and compassion.*

"The same fight is going on inside you," he tells his grandson, "and it goes on inside every other person, too."

The grandson thinks about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

His grandfather replies: "The one you feed." Amen.