

I confessed at a breakfast meeting this week, as I worked my way through an absurdly enormous omelet, that I suffer from clean plate morality.

It was drilled into me as a child that it was my duty beneath the eyes of God and Santa Claus to finish every bite of the meal set before me, and somehow the fate of starving children in China hung in the balance.

My logical suggestion that we mail this food directly to them was not well received; it quickly became clear that somehow their survival depended on my disciplined consumption.

It was an insult and a waste to leave food uneaten, and there was a good chance the meal before me cost more at the grocery store than I as a human being was worth, so not only was it imperative that I clean the plate, but I was to do so with a guilt-heavy gratitude.

I finished the omelet.

The rule that I should always clean my plate came from my grandmother, whose formative years were spent motherless in the Great Depression, and who took me under her sheltering wing when I was a small, skinny boy.

She scrimped for every dollar and had a precise eye for portion control, knowing well what and how much I should eat to be healthy, and also knowing well the pangs of those hungry kids who did not have enough, having been one herself.

That boyhood context is very different than a restaurant in Chicago, where a staff trained in the art of American excess dishes up heaping helpings to a sedentary pastor with a slowing metabolism and a growing gut.

It would now be better for me and for the hungry of the world if I left food on the plate, together with other patrons until the restaurant and eventually the industry reduced its portions, and until more resources went around the world instead of around my waist.

Would that I had a magic stay-fresh envelope today to send half my oversized meals to a starving child overseas, or the will and the imagination and the discipline to invest more in Lutheran World Hunger Appeal and less in breakfast for Brian.

But deep in my system, like muscle memory, is the impulse to clean that plate, no matter how over full it or I may be.

The context has changed, but the practice has not.

Sometimes good rules backfire on themselves and worsen what they intend to improve.

Abundant examples of this are strewn across the history of law, of course, and also religion...and the Pharisees were champions of both.

No doubt their insistence upon fastidiously baptizing all food and hands and kitchenware arose from a context in which such discipline made perfect sense.

Not only did a habit of cleanliness keep the people of Israel uncommonly healthy among the ancient nations, but it also kept them mindful that they were in fact uncommon.

They were chosen by God to receive and live the law, and to be a light to those other nations.

They were set apart as a special, sacred, holy nation, and the opposite of holy is common.

Or, as it is translated in today's gospel reading, *defiled*.

The disciples were eating with common hands.

How then could they maintain their integrity as the uncommon people of God?

How could they remember the uncommon goodness of God if they were so sloppy as to eat with common hands?

The tradition of the elders that one should always clean one's plate keeps alive the memory of the providence of God and instills appreciation and gratitude.

It's a good rule...but among hypocrisy and wayward human hearts, it backfires.

The Pharisees themselves were failing to notice the goodness of God because they were too busy noticing the transgressions of people like Jesus' disciples.

They abandoned the providential hand of God to police the common human hands.

As their focus shifted, they became judgmental and exclusive, as so often religion does, certainly including our own.

But there was another side effect as well which Jesus is quick to point out.

The clean plate traditions of the elders led the Pharisees to focus on the external rather than the internal, the important rather than the essential.

Clean hands became an excuse to overlook filthy hearts.

Uncommon rituals became a mask for common evil, a shiny veneer to hide and leave unexamined souls in desperate need of a deep scrubbing.

Substance was overlooked for style, and religion grew shallow and superficial.

Soon books were judged by their covers; people were judged not by their character and their internal qualities, but by trivialized behaviors and external appearances.

When Jesus exposes and condemns that, he also indicts us.

It is not only our society and media and capitalist marketplace that is guilty of this, though I wouldn't want to let them off the hook.

It is we ourselves, is it not?

Don't we care a little too much about appearances and manners, about clothes and courtesies and clean plates and Christianity as nothing much more than a way to be nice...which is really the last thing Jesus should be accused of being?

Don't we spend a bit too much time and money on celebrity gossip and hairstyles, a bit too much of our attention on scores instead of sportsmanship, on political theater instead of policy?

Do not Emily Post's good rules eventually backfire into hollow pretenses for judgmentalism and other filthy habits of our secret hearts?

Rules intended to cultivate respect turn into ways for us to evaluate and devalue, disrespect and distance one another.

Good rules written to improve our hearts and deepen our love devolve into pretexts for us to diminish one another and cheapen the priceless, multidimensional gift of life.

Our good rules so often backfire on themselves, reducing life into something common.

Surely we as a community are as guilty of this as anyone else, though I will not presume to suggest how.

That diagnosis is for us to do as a whole.

Sometime this fall, yet to be scheduled, we will have another gathering hosted by our vision team, the same group that organized our Glory in the Story event in late May.

This time, the vision team will lead us in a thoughtful examination of the rules by which we operate, our own traditions of the elders, the often unwritten norms and standards of our life together as a community.

What do we consider clean and common, acceptable and unacceptable?

What are the expectations related to money and property and conflict?

What are the rules about the behavior and treatment of children, of seniors, of clergy, of visitors?

In what ways are these good rules, fostering respect and appreciation, and in what ways do they backfire on themselves and need to be challenged and changed?

Do they draw us deeper into the story of God's love, or do they obscure it?

Do they cleanse our hearts, or do they hide them?

And do they lead us to Jesus?

Do they move us to encounter to the holy one who became common, the divine who became defiled?

Do they point and push us to the crucified Christ in whom we are baptized, the God of the common cup who scrubs and scours and carefully washes us, the God of water and wine and bread, the One outside us who, by going in, can make us clean and holy and whole?

Do our rules and traditions, statutes and ordinances, standards and expectations move us to look within ourselves to see what God does...our filthy human hearts, encrusted with crap and beautiful beneath, treasure in need of cleansing and restoration...and also move us to look beyond ourselves to one another...beneath the surface, whatever its appearance, to recognize in each other the sacred, priceless, uncommon Christ we hold in common?

The broken Christ we hold in our defiled hands?

The Christ who holds us all and forever in his defiled and broken and beautiful hands?