Several years ago Brian McLaren and Tony Compolo co-authored a book called *Adventures in Missing the Point*. Each chapter in the book was about a certain issue in the church and in the world that Christians were facing. It covered everything from sin and salvation to women in ministry, homosexuality, and environmentalism. It was written somewhat as a point/counterpoint. One of the authors would write the main section of each chapter sharing his take on the topic and the other would write a response. Sometimes they would agree, sometimes, they would disagree, but all of this was to help the reader think about how our culture has and is influencing our theology and religious practice. While each chapter of the book looked at an individual topic, the overarching question of the book was “As Christians living in the 21st century, are we doing what we are supposed to be doing?” It’s not news that we church people have a history of disagreeing on what things are vital to the practice of our faith. And it’s also not new.

It is what was happening in our passage today as the Pharisees, experts in the law, questioned Jesus about his disciples eating without having washed their hands. Now as petty as this may seem, know that for the Pharisees this wasn’t about hygiene or germs or doing what their mama told them...this was the law...and the law was at the heart of their religious experience. People showed their obedience to God by being obedient to the law so the Pharisees were appalled that the disciples were blatantly disobeying God’s law and perhaps that Jesus hadn’t corrected them. They go to Jesus demanding an explanation. “Why haven’t your disciples washed their hands?”
Let me give you some background on the Pharisees and the law. We can find the Jewish law in the Torah...the first five books of the Old Testament. In the Torah we can find a short version of the law...the 10 commandments in Exodus and we can find a longer version of the law...over 600 of them in Leviticus. And that’s where the law became very specific and we get into the issue of clean vs. unclean which is the issue at hand.

Camels, rabbits, and pigs. Unclean

Eagles, ravens, and hawks. Unclean

Lizards, rats, and skinks. Unclean

But not just animals, people too.

A woman who had just given birth. Unclean

A leper. Unclean

A person who had touched a dead body. Unclean.

A Gentile. Unclean.

And not only were these people unclean, so was anything they touched.

It seems, for everything that was named unclean, there was a corresponding law to follow.

There were particular ways to wash cups, pots, and kettles to make them clean.

There were rules for how a person should clean himself after he had touched or potentially touched something that was unclean. Someone returning from the market not only had to wash any items he brought back, he also had to cleanse himself because who knows what he may have touched or whose arm he may have bumped. This was serious business.
So what did the law say about washing one's hands before a meal? Actually, nothing.

There was a law about handwashing, but it was for priests who were supposed to wash their hands before going to the altar to offer sacrifices, not for an ordinary person eating a meal.

Well, that is until the Scribes got a hold of it. They wanted to make sure that they, and anyone and everyone knew exactly how to follow the law. They wanted it to be clear, specific, and thorough. So they took the law, went through it and explained it and offered detailed instructions for how it should be followed. When they were through they had created thousands of smaller rules and regulations that would tell people what to do in every possible situation. You didn’t have to wonder what to do, when, or how...they had it worked out for you.

This is what they were talking about when they asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?” The tradition of the elders were all of these little rules that went above and beyond the law.

To give you an idea of the difference between the law and the tradition of the elders, let’s look closer at what they both said about handwashing. Remember what the law about handwashing was...priests were to wash their hands before making a sacrifice at the altar. That was the law.

Well the scribes said, Exodus tells us “you shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” So if we are supposed to be a priestly kingdom, we all have to wash our hands like the priests wash their hands. We may not come to the altar to offer sacrifices, but we do come to the table to eat, so before a person eats, he should wash his hands as a priest does at the altar.
Do you see the problem with the tradition of the elders? It took God’s law and exaggerated it. And demanded more of people than the actual law. It made the law become burdensome and it focused people’s attention on rules rather than the worship of God.

Now, laws are important and rules matter. They give us a sense of order and help provide guidelines and structure to ensure a common good. But when we put the laws and rules before everything else, we are missing the point. And it seems like this may be just what the Pharisees were doing.

But Jesus knows how to speak their language. He doesn’t give them a speech about what they are doing wrong. He doesn’t offer his opinion. He quotes Isaiah. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Just as the Pharisees have taken and used Scripture to make their point and demand action, so does Jesus. Anyone can say the right thing. Anyone can follow the rules. But where is your heart?

You see, Jesus had a different take on the law. He had a respect for it and wasn’t about destroying or getting rid of it. But he also didn’t demand a legalistic following of it. Jesus gave a new way to understand and live the law. He was confronted time and time again demanding answers or action on the law. And his response always centered on love and relationships. Do you remember what Jesus said when the Pharisees asked him what was the most important law? The most important law was “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all
your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...and to love your neighbor as yourself.” According to Jesus, the law comes down to this...loving God and loving others.

And here is where the rub came because while the Pharisees held the law above all else, Jesus held love above all else. While their intentions were good, the Pharisees were missing the point. God had not given the law to oppress the people. God gave the law to help people know how life worked best. But, if we worship the law, we cannot worship God.

And that is what Jesus showed us in how he lived his life and interacted with others. Jesus had a place for the law, but never above his love for God and his love for people. So that meant Jesus touched the leper without worrying about becoming unclean. Jesus showed love to the social outcasts by including them in his circle, sharing a meal with sinners, and seeing women and children as valuable members of society. Through Jesus we see that if following the rules keeps us from others, it keeps us from God.

So then, how do we make sense of this passage? Are we supposed to judge the Pharisees? Does it give our children an out to not have to wash their hands before dinner? Are we supposed to wonder again, what were the disciples thinking or doing (those guys never seemed to fully know what was going on)? Well, it would be easy to do any of those. It’s easy to take a look at this story and point out the faults of the Pharisees and think thank goodness we’re not like that! It would be easy to roll our eyes at silly outdated rules or chuckle at the disciples.
But instead, let’s take the time to learn from this passage. Let’s hold it up like a mirror and think about the ways we practice and live our own faith. Our challenge today is to recognize that we, like the Pharisees, can and do misinterpret what is important to God. We too can get so caught up in our way of doing church or religion that we see our way as the only, the best, or the right way. This isn’t a matter of being too liberal or too conservative. It doesn’t help if you are traditional or innovative. Let’s be honest, none of us have this figured out. We all need to continue to learn to live fully in the ways of Jesus.

As usual, after Jesus has this encounter with the Pharisees, those around him needed help understanding what he was talking about. He debriefed it first with the crowd and then with the disciples and you heard snippets of both of those conversations in our reading this morning. Essentially, to both groups Jesus said, “The things that are unclean, the things that defile are the things that are in the heart a person, not things that are outside like the food they eat.” The Pharisees measured their faith by the extent to which they followed the law. But Jesus was saying that wasn’t it. We shouldn’t get wrapped up in doing all the right things so that we forget to love God and love our neighbor, because that is what it is all about.

How can we as Christ followers living in the 21st century live faithfully? Perhaps what we do won’t fit with the social norms or expectations...

While our culture is busy dividing us into groups I wonder what our church and our world would look like if we spent time getting to know someone who is different from us. My missions
professor in seminary worked with a great variety of people but she said every time she met someone she would always begin by working with that person to find something they had in common. She said sometimes they would have to dig deep to find it, but, eventually they were always able to find common ground. At work, at school, in our neighborhoods, and even in our pews, we are surrounded by people who are different from us. Maybe they are from a different part of the world, have a different faith background, are in a different political party, have made different life choices. You don’t have to agree to form a relationship. Could you open your heart and mind to this person and create a space where you can learn from each other?

In a world that makes so many demands on our time...work, school, extracurricular, chores, sports, meetings, could we set aside time for the worship of God? Could you make prayer, scripture reading, Christian fellowship, and Sabbath practice a part of your life? It may not pay the bills or help you make the deadline but setting aside this time will help you remember you are a beloved child of God and this will impact everything else you do.

In a world that is skeptical of the stranger and that celebrates independence, could you reach out to others and...Serve your neighbor. Share food. Care for the lonely. Give your time. There are opportunities all around you. As you follow Jesus and get your hands dirty, you will remember we are all dependent on each other and on God.

And in all things, in our thoughts, words and actions, let’s show love to God, ourselves, our neighbor, and creation...Isn’t that the point after all?