

"I can fix your problem," my friend said to me and I have to admit those were words I longed to hear. My problem was the turn indicator on my little white car. When I signal a right turn, it shuts off before I get into the turn. If I'm nudging out in traffic I may have to reset the blinker three or four times. It's just annoying; it's no big deal. At least it's not like my 1970 Volkswagen Squareback which honked every time I turned left. Anyway, my friend said, "I can fix your problem." I said, "Great!" He said, "Quit using the blinker." I said, "What?" He said, "You don't need it. People can see from the way you're pointed where you're going. Especially if you're in one of those left-turn lanes in a line of cars all signalling a left turn, waiting for a left-turn arrow. Besides, all you're gonna do is wear out that light bulb." And I thought, "You! You're one of *those* drivers. We have no idea where you're going and you drive the rest of us crazy! You! I've always wondered who those people are."

This friend is somebody I respect. I had the hardest time putting together this new information about him with all the wise advice he's given over the years.

I imagine the Pharisees reacted as I did in their conversation with Jesus. Scribes and Pharisees generally get sneered at in the Gospels because they are enemies of Jesus. But they weren't all that bad. Scribes were scholars of the law; they interpreted it for people. Pharisees were a lay organization known for observing the law. In today's world, Scribes would be theologians, or religious journalists--like the people who write that column in *The Catholic Key* interpreting the Sunday Scriptures for your daily life. They'd be like Scribes. Pharisees would be like any religious lay organization--the Knights of Columbus, the Daughters of Isabella, or a pro-life network. These were good groups--you'd expect them to have a good working relationship with Jesus, but he sparred with certain individuals as in today's Gospel, and the evangelists wrote them all off as religious extremists.

In this Gospel they complain to Jesus that his disciples don't wash their hands before eating. Washing hands was a religious custom, not just hygienic. In essence they were saying, "When your disciples begin a meal they never make the sign of the cross and say 'Bless us O Lord.'" It was that kind of a complaint. I imagine Jesus rolled his eyes here. "You people think doing what's religious means being religious, but being religious or being defiled comes from inside, not from these actions." He's defending his disciples, whom he knows are religious inside even though they're not obeying every law. And he's challenging the Scribes and Pharisees who obey the laws but are not religious.

Certainly Jesus would be the first to say prayer before meals is good. But for him traditions have value only when they come from the heart.

After a respected friend challenged me to quit signalling every time I turned or changed lanes I had to think through why I use my blinker. Now I'm convinced it's a safety issue. My friend is wrong. I will continue my tradition. There are other matters to scrutinize--why we buy certain things, how we choose a school, why we go to church, why we have or don't have a sexual partner. When our traditions have no deeper meaning they are empty. When they express what we believe they are blessed.