

In the north of the Netherlands there is a village of about 1,000 people. If you go to the village of Makkinga, you will pass three signs on the outskirts of town. First, you pass a sign that tells you that the speed limit is 30 kph and then you pass a “Welcome” sign. The third sign is a little bit of a joke: it is a traffic sign that, when translated into English, reads: “Free of traffic signs”.

As part of an experiment sponsored by the European Union the village of Makkinga took a radical step: they removed all the traffic signs. They took down the advisory signs and the speed limit signs, the stop signs and the signs that show where to park. They even removed the lines in the streets. The only signs they left standing are the ones that tell you street names.

Now that may sound like a recipe for chaos, but average traffic speed in Makkinga is now *lower* than when the signs were up, and traffic-related incidents have declined dramatically. The experiment has spread to numerous other cities and regions: Ejby, in Denmark, Ipswich in England, the Belgian town of Ostende and several other Dutch towns have all clear-cut their forests of traffic signs. Entire neighborhoods have successfully done away with traffic signs in Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, France, Germany and Austria.

Three years ago, London spent nearly £30m to redesign Exhibition Road, a half mile stretch of busy street in the heart of the city that runs from the South Kensington tube station to Hyde Park, passing the entrances to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum. The best bit about the redesign is what’s *not* there: no raised pavement, no curbs, no railings, no traffic posts or humps, no zebra crossings and very few road signs.

What lies behind all these counter-intuitive experiments is the philosophy of project-founder Hans Monderman, a Dutch traffic engineer, who thought that the fewer road signs there were in social settings, the safer those places would be. Monderman claimed that when drivers can interact with others who are sharing the same space, they slow down and there are fewer accidents. In the appropriate context, he suggested, allowing drivers more liberty in determining their driving habits also heightened their sense of responsibility for road safety, and increased their consideration for others using the road with them. Over-reliance on the rules, Monderman contended, strips people of something more

important: the opportunity to be considerate. “We are losing our capacity for socially responsible behavior,” Monderman said. “The greater the number of prescriptions, the more people’s sense of personal responsibility dwindles.” What he noticed is that when people stopped looking at signs and signals, they started looking at each other.

It’s important to point out that Monderman did *not* suggest that rules of the road are *never* helpful. In fact, he insisted that these shared spaces are possible *only* as a system that is part of well-organized, well-regulated larger systems. I can’t imagine that Monderman was thinking of our reading from Mark, but I am fascinated by the similarities between what Monderman noticed and the way that Jesus interacted with the people in the story that we just heard.

We listened in on a disagreement between a Galilean Jew, Jesus, and a group of Jews called Pharisees from Jerusalem. We have to hear this reading as groups of Jews holding slightly different opinions on what it means to be a good Jew and not a Christian Jesus getting the best of stubborn Jews.

The Pharisees were a Jewish reform movement committed to the spiritual renewal of the people through faithful adherence to the teachings of the Torah—the Law handed down by Moses. The same can be said about the movement following Jesus. They shared a set of instructions—the Law—that named what was ritually clean and ritually unclean. Where they parted ways is in the Pharisees esteem for certain Israelite practices and customs that had developed after the exile.

The “tradition of the elders” was maintained, defined and practiced primarily by small, elite groups, most notably the Pharisees and their scholars, called the scribes. These minority groups expected and demanded that every Israelite must please YHWH in the way that these groups believed that they must.

The practice of washing one’s hands before eating a meal was not a biblical law for all Jews. The practice began as a requirement for priests before they could minister at the altar. But the Pharisees took seriously the command from Exodus: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” And so the Pharisees insisted that *all* Israelites should be as holy as priests, and consequently, that all Jews should wash before eating. From the Pharisees’ perspective, a faithful person not only kept God’s teachings but also the traditions

and practices that had developed around Torah. In that way, one might hope to lead a pure and holy life pleasing to God. The Pharisees saw those followers of Jesus who did not wash as not just physically and ritually unclean, but spiritually unclean—stained, non-observant people.

But for the unwashed Galilean peasants and fishermen following Jesus, keeping that level of cleanliness was nearly impossible. Unlike the Pharisees living in Jerusalem, most likely did not have the same access to the water required for ritual bathing. They could not postpone planting or plowing after a rainfall because of ritual requirements and they came into regular contact with dead fish, birds or other animals, making them ritually unprepared to worship. They had adapted their religious practices significantly to meet the realities of peasant life.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus why some of his followers didn't wash, he answered by quoting Isaiah—in essence, reminding them of their own deeper commitment to spiritually renewing the Jewish people by faithfulness to the Torah. Jesus called his interrogators “hypocrites,” a word that, in the original Greek, referred to those who interpreted or explained, especially in a theater setting. In the Greek tradition, a “hypocrite” was an actor who interpreted poetry or who made myths intelligible, but in the Hebrew context the reference also implied a person who did not fear God.

Jesus was not criticizing the Pharisees' tradition so much as he was pointing out their overestimation of ritual purity as that which makes Israel acceptable to God. What makes Israel acceptable to God is ethical behavior shaped by the presence of God. That is not an original idea innovated by Jesus: the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Micah vigorously attacked religion that focused on piety to at the expense of ethics. Another first century Jewish teacher, Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai, declared that “it is not the dead that defiles nor the water that purifies!” To this day, rabbis and prophets insist that the scrupulous observance of food laws does not make Israel holy—Israel is made holy by morality shaped by the presence of God and marked by an expanding compassion for others.

Jesus was simply pointing out to people following the “tradition of the elders” that they had allowed the focus of their devotion to wander. Then Jesus turned to his own followers: to us, the crowd. Notice that Jesus never

condemned the beliefs and traditions of the Pharisees. By denying that unclean foods actually defile, Jesus did not annul the laws of purity. As one devout Jew speaking to others, he merely returned devotion to a set of rules to its proper place. He reminded them and us that ethical living must never be subordinated to human tradition.

What purifies is not in the traditions, not in the signs and signals, though these are useful. No, what purifies or defiles is in the heart. What purifies is steadfast love and relationship with God expressed in our relationships with others. What defiles are deliberations of the heart. The resulting sinful choices do not matter because they disappoint, offend or alienate God—they matter because they disrupt relationships.

Jesus, like the village of Makkinga in the Netherlands, was refocusing the people of God on relational matters—matters of the heart. He was reprioritizing the rules to put first things first: love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Clearly, the kingdom of heaven is better organized and tended to by God than by human traditions.

I find it easy to stand by while Jesus chastises the Pharisees and other people who demand that everyone must seek to please God in just the way that they do. And I find it equally *uncomfortable* when Jesus reminds me that what is in *my* heart in those moments is not love—that I am not actually seeing my neighbor as Christ sees them in the shared space of God's love.

When I take the time to slow down and actually interact with others sharing the love of God, I have the opportunity to choose: I can give in to the arrogance in my heart and ignore or dismiss those who hold different perspectives or I can choose to remember that they, too, are children of God who share in God's spacious love. I can choose to remember that even the person with whom I may have a bitter disagreement is a child of God who shares in God's love with me; that the person who expresses their love for God differently than I do or provokes irritation within me is a child of God who deserves my loving consideration and not my judgment. After all, no one has ever named an Episcopal Church "Christ the Condemner."