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Through the past 30 years I've served several congregations, and it's always interesting to notice the similarities and differences in each location. Sometimes I would observe a practice that seemed unique, and so I would ask, "Why does our church do such and such?" Sometimes people would launch into a story, highlighting the history of how a practice began. Other times I would hear the reply, "I don't know. We've always done it that way before."

Sometimes a new practice might begin for a particular reason, but only the long-time members of the congregation can recall why it started, as one seminary student discovered while discussing an internship placement in a church with another student.

Since I would be leaving soon for internship... I asked [my friend] about the highlights of his time there. He related many of the experiences he had...but one story sticks with me....

My friend noticed in this congregation's worship service, that, before a volunteer would read the day's assigned scripture readings, he or she would bow to the cross before entering the lectern. This surprised my friend since the

congregation...didn't seem to practice any other "high church" liturgy.

The practice remained a mystery until it became the subject of discussion between my friend the intern, and an elderly [member] living in the nursing home who he apparently was visiting. The elderly [member] said, "Oh! I know what you mean. You know why we do that, don't you?"

My friend shook his head, perking his ears.

"That lectern used to have a metal bar, back in the 60s. It was a framework around the lectern, and unless you were a child reader, you had to bow down before you went up to read!"<sup>1</sup>

Once the bar had been removed during a renovation, readers no longer had to bow to access the lectern, but the practice of bowing continued. Since the origin of the practice had been forgotten, some may have assumed bowing was out of respect for the scriptures, while others had no idea except "that's the way we've always done it."

In a similar situation, Jesus and his disciples got into trouble for not following a religious practice even though many had forgotten its meaning. Some religious leaders criticized them for not washing

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their hands before eating, for they were told they were eating with defiled hands.

What's wrong with washing hands, you might wonder? We see signs in bathrooms in restaurants reminding us to wash hands before leaving. Some signs even give specific instructions on how many times to wash hands, just in case you weren't sure how it's done. During the flu season, we're often reminded of the importance of washing hands to prevent illness. So, why does Jesus pick this health-related practice to ignore?

Mark, the narrator, gives us a hint about the religious practices of the religious leaders, for he says that they thoroughly washed their hands, their food from the market, cups, plates, and kettles.

Once again, we might wonder, *So what? Good health practices suggest we should wash our plates and food, so what's the problem? Why does Jesus continue down this road of argument?*

Jesus turned the argument upside-down as he quoted from the prophet Isaiah catching everyone off guard, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Ahh, this isn't

really an issue about washing hands; it's about something else.

At this point I imagine people leaning forward, wondering where Jesus was going with this conversation with the religious leaders. Jesus took the opportunity to give an example of how some people quoted from the Ten Commandments about honoring one's father and mother but then did nothing to help care for them. Jesus drove the point home as he said, "It's not what goes into a person that defiles him, such as food not properly washed, for it ends up in the toilet—but it's what comes out of his mouth that can defile." In other words, our actions, what we do, defines who we are, not our ritual ceremonies.

One writer suggested this conversation had to do with how people were treating one another. The hand washing purity laws became more important than treating one another with respect:

Given our human [tendency] for justifying ourselves and for scape-goating others, the purity laws lent themselves to a spiritual... hierarchy between the ritually "clean" who considered themselves to be close to God, and

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the “unclean” who were shunned as impure sinners who were far from God. Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty, polluted, or contaminated... Jesus...demolished these distinctions of ritual purity as a measure of spiritual status.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the leaders had taken the health practice of washing hands and turned it into a religious ritual to exclude certain people.

Jesus’ words prompted me to wonder what we do that might leave out some people. One new pastor encountered this issue as she served communion. Although she had been taught in seminary that people were to kneel as they walked forward for communion, the church she served stood to take communion. She wrote about her experience of trying to change this practice:

When our first Lent together rolled around I thought to suggest...that for the season leading up to Holy Week and Easter perhaps we could celebrate the sacrament instead by kneeling at the altar...Lent, after all, is a season of penitence, and kneeling would seem especially appropriate then.

And so on the first Sunday in Lent we knelt for communion.... Winifred, the matriarch of the congregation, sat on the right hand side near the back. She was a round faced woman whose wrinkles had been etched from years of smiling. Indeed, she was not young and her knees were not what they used to be. After most of the rest of the congregation had come forward, Winifred made her way to the front as well and knelt with all the rest. I remember wincing to watch as she struggled to get up again. And it hit me that this was why the people...did not kneel to receive the sacrament. They did not do so out of kindness. If Winifred could not kneel, then no one would. The next week we quietly returned to standing as the bread and wine were shared.<sup>3</sup>

What might we do that leaves someone out?

What prejudices might you have that keep you from accepting someone who lives differently than you do?

For example, for many years some branches of the church had strict regulations about who could be ordained into ministry—at that time mostly white males. Gradually we Disciples of Christ began to recognize the gifts of women, such Clara Hale Babcock who in 1888 was the first woman ordained

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in our denomination, long before many other churches ordained women.

She held pastorates in four churches, conducted numerous evangelistic meetings and personally baptized at least 1,500 people.

In her obituary...it was remembered that “her converts and acquaintances esteemed her highly for her strong intellect, clear presentation of the scriptures and effective appeal on behalf of Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Early in our movement we Disciples also recognized the value of African-American leaders, with Preston Taylor being hired in 1883 as a national evangelist, and Sarah Lue Bostick among the first African American women ordained in the late 19th century.

We Disciples have also recently affirmed the leadership of LGBTQ members as they explore their call into ministry. We have found a good balance

between affirming their leadership and allowing each congregation to make up its own mind whom to call in ministry.

Some may applaud our hospitality and welcoming spirit, while others may feel uncomfortable welcoming someone who differs from themselves. Through our baptisms we have all been washed and welcomed into God’s family, for we all differ in our skills and talents, our backgrounds and struggles, our sins and mistakes. But through God we have been washed and welcomed. It’s not whether we follow certain purity regulations, how we wash the dishes, or whether we’ve washed our hands the right way. It’s through God’s welcoming of us that inspires our actions to care for one another. So, wash up. Celebrate God’s hospitality. And welcome those searching for a place to belong.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel D. Maurer, <https://clergystuff.com/nl-y2-mark-program-year-what-defiles>

<sup>2</sup> “From Ritual Holiness to Human Compassion: Jesus and the Politics of Purity,” [www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090824J.shtm](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090824J.shtm)

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<sup>3</sup> Janet H. Hunt, [http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/08/what-matters-and-what-doesnt\\_25.html](http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/08/what-matters-and-what-doesnt_25.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.discipleshistory.org/history/people](http://www.discipleshistory.org/history/people)