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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, you may or may not know but Christianity was not always called "Christianity."

Yes, before it was called "Christianity," the religion of the early Church was known by another name.

Now, the word "Christianity" first appears in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch.

It appears in some of his letters, which Ignatius composed during the time when Emperor Trajan was in power, who ruled from 98-117 A.D.

Thus, the first known occurrence of the term "Christianity" comes around 98-117.

And so, yes, the term "Christianity" may very well have originated with Ignatius of Antioch.

And the word "Christian," that word which refers to one who is a follower of Jesus, appears a little earlier in history.

In the book of Acts, written somewhere between 80-90 A.D., we get the first occurrence of the term "Christian."

Indeed, it says in Acts 11:26, "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians."

PAUSE

But before disciples were called "Christians," followers of Jesus were called "people of the Way."

And before the Christian Faith was known as "Christianity" it was known simply as "The Way."

And it is in the Book of Acts where we see Christianity over and over again referred to as The Way.

You can check this out for yourself; the author Luke refers to the Way in Acts 9:2; 19:9 and 23; 22:4; and 24:14 and 22.

PAUSE

Now, in Greek, the word for WAY is "*hodos*".

Hodos translates as way or road.

And, so in that famous verse John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

So Jesus himself is the way or road. Jesus is the *hodos*.

PAUSE

But Christianity was more than a specific physical road or path in life.

It is not like the early Church was saying Christianity is Interstate 81 or the Pennsylvania Turnpike or even Progress Avenue.

But that would be cool, wouldn't it, if in fact the road to salvation travelled along Progress Avenue?

So Christianity is not a specific physical road or path in life.

Even though (pause)...EVEN THOUGH the Way is referred to in the Gospels as the specific road leading up to Jerusalem.

Jesus is depicted in the gospels as on a specific road.

Jesus is on the *hodos*, is on the road with his disciples toward Jerusalem.

And what happens at Jerusalem, of course, but it is the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Jerusalem is the place of Jesus' suffering and death, and the place of his rising.

So, in the early Church, the designation for Christianity as "the Way" was no doubt referring to the way of the salvation—the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

To follow Jesus is to follow in the way of salvation.

The Way then referred to the way of the salvation in Jesus Christ.

And Jesus was travelling the way of the salvation as he made his way with his disciples toward Jerusalem.

But I reiterate, the way of the salvation is not a specific road or path.

No, the way of salvation is a lifestyle, it is a choice.

The way of salvation is a choice.

PAUSE

And various persons, a whole host of individuals, have noted at one time or another in time, that in truth, "We are the choices that we make."

We are defined by the decisions we make.

We are truly shaped by what we decide to do or decide not to do, and we are truly shaped by what we decide to say or decide not to say.

We are truly shaped into the persons we are by what we decide to do and say throughout our course of life.

PAUSE

Now, I bring all this up today, because we have to believe that the reason Christianity came to be called "The Way" is because of passages like that of our First Reading today.

The Way may have come to be called as such because of passages like this from Deuteronomy 30.

PAUSE

Here, Moses is talking to the ancient Israelites.

And Moses says that he is setting before the Israelites two paths, two ways.

There is the way of life and prosperity.

And there is the way of death and adversity.

And the way of life and prosperity in this case is the way where one is obedient to the commandments of God.

If one obeys the commandments of God, by loving the Lord God, and walking in his ways...

If one observes God's commands, decrees, and ordinances, then that one shall know salvation, in terms of long life and numerous descendants and blessing in the Promised Land.

But if one turns away and is led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, well then that one shall perish, so says Moses.

And that one shall not live long in the Promised Land.

So there are two ways outlined in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

And, yes, this passage may have had some bearing on the origin of the name "The Way."

Again, the Way is not so much a specific road or path, as much as it is a lifestyle or a choice.

We are defined by the decisions we make in life, what we choose to do, what we choose to say.

That seems to be how Moses understood the Way, which is why he admonishes the Israelites to choose the way of life and prosperity, and not the way of death and adversity.

Choose life.

Choose to do what is right by the commandments of God.

Choose to be obedient.

Choose to love the Lord God.

Choose to walk in his ways.

PAUSE

And Jesus, in our reading from the Gospel reading from Matthew today also hearkens on this notion of choice.

Only for Jesus, it is more about the choices we make with respect to our emotions.

So it is not enough to choose NOT to murder another human being, so says Jesus.

No, we need to choose not even to get angry in our heart.

And it is not enough to choose NOT to commit adultery with another person.

No, we need to not even look on another person with lust in our heart.

We are defined by the choices we make, most specifically, we are defined by the choices of our heart.

PAUSE

Now, I don't know about you. But I find it quite difficult when it comes to choices of the heart.

My wife and I have a running dialogue about this actually.

My wife and I have been debating this for many years.

She believes that other people cannot make one feel a certain way.

Other people do not have the power to make us feel anger or hatred, or lust.

Because, ultimately, we have control over our own emotions. We have control over our choices.

But more and more, I am not sure that is the case.

More and more, I do think that we do NOT have a completely free choice over our heart's emotions.

PAUSE

Not long ago, I had had a conversation about this very topic with a Professor of Marriage and Family Therapy.

And I told her about my wife and my debate about whether others have direct influence over the emotions of our heart, or is it the case that we choose to let them have control over us?

Do we have free choice or not?

And this professor introduced an interesting thought.

She said that the fact that relationships by definition connect us in mysterious ways to one another might very well allow for the real possibility that others do indeed have influence over us.

And so our choosing freely the emotions in our heart may in fact only be an illusion.

That ultimately, we don't have free choice over the emotions of our heart.

That indeed those others with whom we are in relationship have some bearing on our heart's emotions.

It can't be helped. We are at least in part influenced, and under the power of others, because of mysterious nature of relationship.

PAUSE

But is this bad? No, I think this is actually good news.

It is good news because of what this also means in our relationship with God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

As our relationship with God deepens...

As we draw closer to our Lord Jesus...

If there is any truth to the idea that the mystery of relationships does indeed allow for the influence of others on our hearts, well then...

As we deepen in our relationship with God...

As we draw closer to Jesus...

Our heart becomes more influenced by our Savior.

Our heart becomes more attuned to the Way of Jesus Christ.

And this power over our hearts by the Divine, all starts with the fact that we did not choose Jesus, but Jesus chooses us.

Jesus chooses to be in relationship with us.

Yes, I do believe that we did not have the power to begin our relationship with God.

No, we don't have that power.

God chooses us.

We never came into this world with the thought in our heads that we were going to choose God.

Somehow, somewhere, because God is in relationship with us, even before we were born...

Because God is in relationship with us, God chooses us.

PAUSE

And so, yes, there is truth to the fact that we are defined by the choices WE make.

We are who we are because of what WE decide to do and what WE decide to say, day-in and day-out.

But there does seem to be a direct influence on our choices because of the power and nature of relationships.

Yes, we are defined by the choices we make, but there is also the profound truth that we are also defined, first and foremost, because of God's choice to be in relationship with us.

And that then is ultimately what salvation is about.

For we see, The Way is God's way, the way that God has made into our hearts even before we were born, so that God has chosen us.

There is something absolutely wonderful about a) being chosen by God before we were born, b) having our heart compelled by God's grace during our existence that our choices are more and more influenced by God as we draw closer to God, and c) that at the end we will be with God forever.

There is something so absolutely wonderful to be within God's sphere, that all of our time is carved out inside of God's time.

All of our time is inside God's time.

PAUSE

So, as we make your way in the world, and we choose what to do and what to say each and every day, let us be assured that in our ever-deepening relationship with Christ, our way in the world is firmly established in God's way of salvation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.