

Shortly after Jesus departure from this world, but before there was anything called Christianity, there was The Way.

That's what the earliest followers of Jesus were called – The Way.

This of course referred to the way people were expected to live if you were going to be a follower of Jesus and the way he taught people to live.

Trusting in Jesus teachings and taking them to heart was The Way to God.

This of course referred to living a simple life, a life of compassion and sharing; clearly avoiding violence and greed. The Way was a group of people who were building the Kingdom of God in preparation for Christ's imminent return.

But they were also all -- Jewish.

The Way, while seeing Jesus as their Lord, teacher, and Messiah –they were also Jewish; and that meant the following The Way also included being Jewish.

You could not follow the way without first being Jewish.

To be Jewish one had to follow all the Jewish laws, especially the Holiness Laws that set the Jews apart from those around them.

Laws that defined what clothes they could and couldn't wear
and what food they could and couldn't eat.

Laws that said that all men had to be circumcised.
Not fun for an adult convert.

It included all those laws in Leviticus that proclaimed that to ignore them was an "abomination."

To be a follower of the The Way, one had to adhere to all of these.

Then things changed.

We often speak of Pentecost as the birthday of the church.

That was the day we will celebrate in a few weeks, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples.

But I would say that the birth of Christianity came a good time after that when Peter had this dream that we read about in the scripture. The birth of Christianity came with the move from The Way and became The Ways.

It was also about the same time that Saul, the evil persecutor of The Way, had a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and become Paul, the great teacher, Apostle and writer of the majority of our Christian scriptures.

The dream of Peter's that changed the Way to The Ways, and Paul's vision of the Risen Christ which made him the Apostle to the Gentiles; these combined provided for the birth of Christianity and it's spreading into all the world.

What happened in both of these events was a revelation that The Way Jesus had taught was not meant to be limited to just a small Jewish sect.

It was a revelation that there was room for other ways of worship, room for other ways of knowing the God Jesus revealed.

Through dreams and visions Peter and Paul came to see that the revelation of God that Jesus offered had relevance in a much broader context than just Judaism;

it also could be meaningful to people who followed other religious paths.

While Peter worked on getting the Jerusalem church and its Jewish adherents to open themselves up to those with other ways of worshipping God, Paul was out on the road traveling throughout the Roman Empire spreading the gospel among the pagan worshippers of the gentile world; trying to explain to them how the gospel was meaningful to them.

For example when he was in Athens and he spoke to the pagan worshippers saying:
Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is this God served by human hands, as though God needs anything, since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. [Acts 17:22-25]

What Peter and Paul found was that there was not just one way to God.

What this means for us today is that, well for starters, you don't have to be Jewish to be Christian.

But I believe that it also means that you don't have to be Christian to have a loving relationship with God.

Christianity in its early development moved far from its Jewish origins, becoming a mixture of Jewish, Pagan, and Persian faith mixed in with a large measure of Greek philosophy.

The complexity of Christianity with its teachings, dogma and creeds all developed within a few centuries after Jesus, moved a great distance away from the simple teaching of Jesus to poor illiterate masses as he taught them how they could have a better relationship with a loving forgiving and saving God.

What Paul found in the earliest days of the church was that these simple teachings of Jesus were just as meaningful to people of other faiths as they were to the Jews.
And this is still true today.

Jesus taught that God was loving, forgiving and saving; and he taught that **the way** to get to know this God was through living a life of compassion that he himself modeled for everyone.

Jesus Jewish disciples saw that his teaching and revelations of God brought fulfillment and meaning to their Jewish faith.
But Paul saw that it also brought fulfillment and meaning to the gentiles.

Of course the faith of the gentiles today includes Islam, and Hinduism and Buddhism and even new forms of paganism, and on and on.

I even think it might be fair to say that what Jesus revealed about God and our relationship with that God, might even bring fulfillment and meaning to another gentile faith – Christianity.

I think what was most important to Jesus was not, the methods or rituals that would produce a loving relationship with God and a life of compassion, but just that you got there.

That being said, even within Christianity there are a wide variety of ways that people use to help them grow in their relationship with God.

Today there is an abundance of very diverse worship styles.

There is the diversity of music; old hymns, new hymns, taize, praise music, chants, rock, rap, country, classical.

There is diversity in Eucharistic frequency and performance.

Some like silence --
others want to come into God's presence with singing
and dancing and the clanging of symbols.

Some want to focus on prayer, others on praise.

Some find meaning in the sacraments and others find
more meaning in the spoken word.

Here at our church we try to provide as
much diversity as we can in hopes of
addressing as many people's needs as we
can.

But honestly, sometimes it feels like we are that
Jack of many trades and the master of none.

But we try.

Why?

Because different people have different needs.

Just like different people respond better to different kinds of education; some are more visual, some more auditory, some need pictures, some need details and others just need the concept.

In the same way, different people have different ways worshipping God and the best way is whatever works best for a particular person.

But there is a measure of how effective a particular worship style is for a person.

That measure is how much that worship inspires them to love.

To love one another.

To love their enemies.

To love God's creation.

To love God.

The measure of how a particular worship style works for you is whether it inspires you to love.

If all that a worship style does is entertain you, or make you feel good, then it is just encouraging your more selfish tendencies.

As Paul pointed out in his letter to the church in Corinth:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

If a style of worship doesn't inspire love, then it is worthless, wor-ship-less.

But if that worship inspires you to reach out to others, to be more understanding, merciful, just and compassionate then it is good – it is good for you.

Whenever a new person visits the church I always try to send them a letter or email to welcome them and I always mention that, “I hope the service helped you to grow in your relationship with God.”

Another way of saying that is that I hope the service helped you become more loving.

That is one of my main goals on Sunday mornings.

But, that only takes care of Sunday mornings.

Whatever worship style, whatever WAY works best for you, you need to be doing it daily.
Not just on Sundays.

Oh, but more often than that, you need to do it at least the 5 times a day that is required by Islam.

Yes, even more often than that, you need to live every moment of everyday in a spirit of worship.

**Whatever way works for you, do it as often as you can.
Don't wait for Sunday.
AMEN.**