

Why Am I a Christian?

Romans 2:9-11; 14-15

Christian theologian C.S. Lewis once said that Christianity is unique in the teaching that God sent someone to proclaim a message of love and salvation; unique in teaching that this one somehow brings new life; unique in teaching that Jesus was both God and human; unique in teaching that this man's death ended in resurrection; unique in teaching that this man, as the Christ, is actually part of the unity and trinity of God.

In all these aspects, not one of the four other major world religions, only Christianity looks to a person and claims that this person was the bearer of life and love in God's name. And as I start this set of messages on world religions, it seems appropriate for me to ask, "Why am I a Christian? And I'll invite you to ask the same question of yourselves.

First, I am a Christian because I was born into a Christian family. Quite frankly, there were no other religious options available to me. All of the faith communities where I grew up were Christian churches of the Protestant or Roman Catholic varieties.

I believe in the reality of free will. But really, I've not been as free as I once thought I was. I didn't ask to be born. I didn't choose my relatives. My parents were not perfect, but

they did believe in God and wanted their children to share that belief. When I'm asked how I became a pastor, I joke about having been a teacher and looking for a job that paid more money and required less work!

I often wonder how much my maternal grandmother's prayers impacted my move into ordained ministry. Maybe I didn't choose the ministry: maybe the ministry chose me?

There are certainly many ways people become Christians. In my case, I'm a Christian mostly because I've never been anything else.

Second, I am a Christian because I've received love and have been affirmed by the Christian community. It was the church that passed on God's message that "You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The Church has given me a place where I can become what I was created to be. There are no perfect churches. And if there were, then you and couldn't belong to it. Churches have faults, but they can also give people a foundation of faith to build on.

Third, I am a Christian because I am a disciple (an active learner) of Jesus and his teachings. I am a Christian because Jesus' teachings remind me that I am loved by God. More importantly, his teachings remind me that I am a person worth loving. Of course, Jesus taught us that EVERY person is

loved by God and that every person is worth loving. This is the message we offer to others as we say, "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!"

One pastor said that when he first became a Christian he lived ten miles from the nearest sin. He went on to say that he was more interested in friendship than forgiveness. I believe his comment is truly profound. Most people have a vivid memory and can tell you (If they trusted you enough to tell you!) all about their faults, their foibles and their failures.

Most people are looking for true friendship; the kind of friendship that's loyal, lasting and genuine. We're looking for a friendship that accepts us just as we are, without forcing us to change "right now."

It is in the church that I've found people who welcome me, love me and put up with me as I keep on learning how to be a follower of Jesus. And it is these relationships that have made the love of God tangible in my life. These relationships, based on the example of Jesus' love, are a big part of why I am a Christian.

Fourth, I am a Christian because I believe the way of Jesus is the way of truth and life. Notice this: I did not say that Christ is the ONLY way. What I said was that Jesus' way

is the way of truth and life for me as a Christian. Christ is the way. Christ is my way. Christ is OUR way.

The Christian church has insisted that Jesus is the ONLY way. But even the apostle Paul had difficulty insisting Jesus is the ONLY way for all people, of all times and in all places. The book of Romans is Paul's book of theology, teaching serious truths about Christian faith.

It is in Romans, chapter two, that Paul wrote, *There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. (Vs. 9-11)*

Paul goes on, *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) (Vs. 14-15)*

A hundred years ago, E. Stanley Jones was a missionary in India. His approach to evangelism was a roundtable discussion where all religions were represented. His approach was founded on these convictions: A. All religions share a

common search for God. B. There is some truth in all religions. And, C. You tell me your experiences of God and I will tell you mine.

As we recognize other ways people come to God, practice their faith and love their neighbors, we realize that there is no simple test to determine if we're "in" or "out." And this is just one of the reasons that in the United Church of Christ we do not give you a "test" of faith. Instead, we ask each person for their testimony of faith.

It is in this fashion that I intend to take a look at the four other major world religions to see what we can learn as we interact with the beliefs and teachings of our sisters and brothers around the world? Gandhi once said, "I might have become a Christian, but for the Christians that I have known."

And I say, "May we, who we who call ourselves Christian; May we become what we call ourselves! I want to be able to see and accept the truths we can find in other religions. I pray this for myself and for all Christians. Pray with me, *God, help me see what you want me to see. Jesus, help me love myself and others as you want me to love. Holy Spirit, help me live in the power of faith, in the optimism of hope and in the joy of love. Amen.*