***The Way***

A Sermon Based on Acts 11:19-26

Lawrence Park Community Church, Sept 17, 2017

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If you go to high school, in Toronto, you will probably study Shakespeare, maybe in Grade eleven. You will read *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, or maybe *Romeo and Juliet*.

In *Romeo and Juliet,* you will find one of the most famous lines in English literature. “What’s in a name?” asks Juliet. And she answers, “That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”

Was Juliet correct? Do names really not matter much? Perhaps, considering how tragically things turned out for her, perhaps names do matter. For example, consider our church’s name, Lawrence Park Community Church. It matters. You can learn a lot from our name!

How so? Well, first, you will notice that even though we are a United Church of Canada congregation, you wouldn’t know that from our name or any sign on our church grounds. We are not Lawrence Park “United,” Church. Here’s why. When the founding members of this church started meeting together, at Blythwood Public School, during World War II, they decided to join a denomination. So, first, they asked the Anglicans if we could form an Anglican congregation. They said no, that if we wanted to join we’d have to amalgamate with an existing Anglican church.

But the pioneer members of this congregation wanted to stay together. So, next, they asked the United Church whether or not they could form a new congregation. And the United Church said “sure.” And so, this congregation became The United. Not our first choice. Not a matter of great conviction. But convenient. That’s why, even today, you can tell by our signs that being United is not our priority.

Another thing about our name. One reason that pioneer members didn’t want to join another congregation was that they wanted to stay in this neighborhood, here. They wanted a church members could walk to. To emphasize that, they named it Lawrence Park *Community* Church.

Of course, nearly 75 years later, most of our members don’t live within walking distance anymore. We mostly drive in—even if we could walk. Meanwhile, ironically, the words “community church,” have come to be associated, mostly, with conservative, evangelical or Fundamentalist churches. Definitely not us. This is no one’s fault. It just happened. But as a result, I get emails all the time from organizations that presume we’re very conservative, emails that promote pro-life causes, or that take issue with the gay agenda, or that mobilize people to vote for social conservatives. So, names do matter.

One more thing. Our name doesn’t include the word “Christian.” We’re not Lawrence Park “Christian” Church either. How does that make you feel? Do you self-identify at work, or on your street, or in your Shakespeare class as a Christian?

In fact, the name, “Christian,” also has an interesting story. According to our scripture, it was in Antioch, about twenty-five years after Jesus’ crucifixion, that the name Christian was first used.

What is more, this name, “Christian,” also didn’t originate with Jesus’ followers. In the book of Acts, these earliest disciples of Jesus called themselves, “The Way.” For example, in Acts 9, Saul is given arrest warrants for people who belonged “to the way.” In Acts 19, when silversmiths who made idols, in Ephesus, lost business because people were converting to Christianity, the author of Acts says, “no little disturbance broke out concerning The Way,” that is—people rioted. Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

So, the earliest followers of Jesus called themselves “The Way,” while outsiders called them Christians.

The name “Christian” also had unintended consequences. First of all, the word “Christian,” is a job title, not a personal name at all. It is, properly, “Jesus the Christ,” which means, “Jesus the anointed one,” or, “Jesus, the one anointed to be the Messiah.” “Christian” is a title like, “General,” or “Prime Minister.” As a title, “Christian,” isn’t very personal, not very warm, and it doesn’t say much about the people so described.

But second, what followed was worse. People soon began to argue about what the title “Christos” meant. Was Jesus, if anointed, therefore merely a man? Or was he perhaps adopted by God when he anointed, at his baptism maybe? How was being a “christos,” related to being divine, if at all? Or perhaps as a “son of man”—another title—the christos was not divine. Maybe more like an angel? A spirit guide in the flesh (at least sometimes?). And from there the arguments became even more erudite and abstract. Was Jesus one person (human and divine) or two persons, a human and a divine one? Did he have one nature or two? Was Jesus derived from a substance or not? Was that substance—in terms of Greek philosophy--divided or not? Eternal or created? A member of a Trinity (whatever that might be) or not?

And so, focussed on the title and what it might mean, for four hundred years Christian leaders argued about what, exactly, Jesus was. Church historians call this, not surprisingly, the “Christological controversies.” At the time, and depending on what side of these arguments you came down on, you might be celebrated or excommunicated, ordained or thrown in jail, walk to your local community church or run for your life.

And as long as that sort of theological controversy was where the action was, Christians were distracted from the main event, from . . . following Jesus “in the way.”

The Way. Early in the history of the church, non-Christians were amazed by what the followers of The Way were all about. They fed not only their own poor, but all who asked. They visited prisoners and opened their homes promiscuously to all in need of shelter. Members of The Way treated slaves as if they were free people, people of different ethnicities as if they were all kissing cousins, and they treated women as individuals in their own right, rather than mere property. Followers of The Way loved their neighbors, refused to engage in violence or fight in Rome’s wars. They were willing to go to jail in order to practice freedom of religion, and they spoke prophetic truth to corrupted power. The Way was a revolution in ethics and morality whose effects we still feel today.

Look, at the beginning of this new church year, what I’d like to focus on is not the fact that we’ve arrived, because we haven’t. I don’t want to focus on the theological distinctives of our church, either, because to the degree that we do, we’ll disagree with each other. What I do want to focus on is the fact that we’re on a journey. We’re all following the way of Jesus. We’re learning as we go, helping each other as we stumble, and encouraging each other whenever we succeed. We’re doing it for the sake of our neighbours here in Lawrence Park, in the City of Toronto, and even all through Canada. Whatever we put on our signs, what we really are is followers of The Way.

And sure, it’s some hike—part adventure, part fun, and part pure slugging. But we have each other for company, and the example of Jesus to inspire, so . . . well, this year, let’s go. Along the way.