

“New Life – Its Fruit”

As I was organizing for the writing of this sermon, I spent a good amount of time seeking out a story about how an individual had experienced being radically transformed, along with coming to faith in Jesus Christ, living out the New Life in Christ, and producing the fruit of the Spirit, which comes from such a dramatic life change. (PAUSE) Frankly, it was very frustrating. That is not to say that no one has had such an experience but that google and Bing didn't seem aware of them. (PAUSE)

Then it hit me, I should use the story of the author of the very words in today's Scripture! (PAUSE) However, using the Apostle Paul's story also reveals (pause) both the temptation to (pause) and the actual sliding back, at least momentarily, to relive negative aspects of his previous life. Such as, he periodically fell back on his legalistic prejudices, especially with reference to women and with persons, whose sexuality was not

straight. (PAUSE) Even this Lectionary Epistle Reading contains such examples. (PAUSE)

So, lets recall the two very different lives of the author of today's Scripture. His first life was as Saul of Tarsus. Saul came from a rich merchant family in the city of Tarsus, which is located in the middle of the southern border of modern Turkey. His father purchased him Roman citizenship. At some point, Saul went to Jerusalem to become a young and ambitious Pharisee. He would later describe himself as **[Slide 1 from the sermon slides]** a Pharisee of the Pharisees. (PAUSE) The Pharisees were a party, which was aligned with the Teachers of the Law. They sought to enforce radical, legalistic obedience to the Law and all of their own regulations and demands from the general population. (PAUSE) The Pharisees and their legalistic allies were a very powerful force in the Jewish nation and community. So, Saul had fulfilled the negative aspect of the temptations of human desires, which he referred to as separating "into parties and groups". (PAUSE)

Saul of Tarsus clearly, **[Show Slide 2]** along with the rest of the Pharisees and their allies, became enemies of the early Christian community – the Church, which they fought and against whom they were jealous and angry.

In his ambition, Saul **[Show Slide 3]** participated in the immoral, filthy, and indecent action of encouraging the public to commit murder against early Christian leaders, specifically the newly appointed deacon, Stephen. Saul held everyone's cloaks to free them to be better able to stone Stephen to death! (PAUSE)

So, Saul **[Show Slide 4]** was among those doing things, which would lead to him not possessing the Kingdom of God, according to what Paul wrote in today's Reading. (PAUSE) Therefore, it was very fortunate for Saul that when he was on his way to Damascus to arrest and bring back some Jewish Christians, the Risen Jesus Christ confronted him, converted him, and soon made him the Apostle to the Gentiles – the non-Jews. (PAUSE)

In our Scripture, the Apostle Paul explained how that old life – the life of seeking to fulfill one’s physical desires and to force others to do your will (pause) is in conflict with the New Life in Christ – the Life of true freedom. (PAUSE) Although Paul was by no means perfect, his conversion meant a radical transformation of his life. He not only taught about this New Life in Christ but he also manifested many of its characteristics – the fruits of the Spirit. **Show Slide 5** Paul lived agape “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.” (PAUSE) For example, for Paul to get involved in converting Gentiles – non-Jews to Christianity, he had to be motivated by God’s and Jesus’ self-giving and suffering agape love because (pause) his Pharisee training and prejudices declared them to be sinners and religiously unclean! (PAUSE) Although the Apostle Paul frequently demanded early Christians recognize his authority, he was himself humble because he was a tent maker to relieve Christians from the responsibility of providing for his everyday needs. Unfortunately, (pause) his self-control still, at times, lost out to his old Pharisee – legalist prejudices. His

comments about the role of women and his attacks on gay persons are only a few examples. (PAUSE) As Paul reminded us in our Scripture last Sunday, we are no longer under the control of the Jewish Law – Jesus Christ has freed us! (PAUSE) Our Forgiveness and New Faith Relationship with God are not something we deserve but are given to us as a gift from our Divine Parent. To experience this, we need to stop rejecting it – to faith – to believe God’s Agape Love and Grace have brought about our forgiveness and the New Life in Christ. The Death and Resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, proves for us (pause) how God’s Agape Love is so great (pause) we have been forgiven by our Creator and are welcomed into the New Faith Relationship with God. (PAUSE)

[Show Slide 6] Paul’s continued explanation reminds us (pause) that both he and we, “who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death” our “human nature with all its passions and desires.” (PAUSE) It is when our passions and desires control us that we hurt and mistreat one another because our desires include having power over one another. (PAUSE)

[Show Slide 7] In today's Scripture, the Apostle Paul reminds us and himself (pause) how we are to live the New Life in Christ, writing, "The Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives." (PAUSE) I know this sounds contradictory but, if we are going to be able to produce the Fruit of the Spirit – of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control," then God's Holy Spirit will need to lead us – take charge of us. (PAUSE)

[Show Slide 8] So, comparing Saul of Tarsus – the younger, pre-conversion life of our Reading's author with the Apostle Paul, the converted Apostle to the Gentiles, we see the importance of our living out the fruitfulness of God's Spirit, which is manifested by us as we live the New Life in Jesus Christ. We need to produce the fruit of agape love, joy, peace, patience, etc. in our own lives. We will also need to starve off our urges to constantly fulfill our physical desires and to lord it over others. Only God's Spirit can enable us put the old life to death, so we arise in the New Life in Christ. (PAUSE) Since God's Holy Spirit gives us life – the

New Life in Jesus Christ, then we need to be guided in the living of our New Lives in Christ by the Holy Spirit. (PAUSE)

[Show Slide 9] The Apostle Paul also reminds us this New Life in Christ comes with a special Freedom because of Jesus Christ. (PAUSE)

“Freedom is what we have — Christ has set us free!” (PAUSE) The author further urges us, “Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again.” (PAUSE)

[Show Slide 10] The Apostle Paul then directly calls upon us, “As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’”

(PAUSE) Yes, agape love is the critical first part of what it means to live the New Life in Jesus Christ! (PAUSE)

This message and the sermons for the five Sundays in July will be focusing on the New Life in Christ. (PAUSE) As we approach those Sundays, let us intentionally seek to demonstrate the Fruits of the Spirit, especially that of agape love. Let's remember Saul and Paul's different lives and seek to pattern ours off of our Savior Jesus Christ, and yes, even off of that complicated and imperfect Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. Let all people experience God's Agape Love and Forgiveness, as we Radically Welcome everyone and (pause) invite them to live the New Life in Jesus Christ as we live that life of the Spirit's fruit. Amen.