

“New Life in Christ – Stay on Course!”

Today’s sermon is part of a series of sermons on the subject of the New Life in Christ. The message last Sunday was also part of this series. In the sermon last Sunday, we looked closely at the dramatic transformation in the life of the author of the Letter to the Galatians following his surprising conversion. The radical change from the life of Saul of Tarsus – Pharisee of the Pharisees and persecutor of the early Christian Church to the Apostle Paul – Apostle to the Gentiles was quite extraordinary. However, Paul was a human being and just like all of us, he periodically fell back into the prejudices and way of thinking of his former Pharisee life. Further, although the history of Christian churches can be traced directly back to the work of the Apostle Paul, the common understanding of the church community and society is frequently more in line with those times when Paul backslid into his legalistic prejudices from his earlier Saul of Tarsus life.

For example, the societal understanding of the Christian Faith is that you have to earn God’s forgiveness and life after death. Indeed, many assume you must follow God’s Law – the Almighty’s Commandments or one will be condemned. For a large segment of those calling themselves Christians, that means women and non-straight persons must function in accordance with Old Testament Law or at least fulfill what was refined by the Apostle Paul’s writings about their roles in families, the Church, and society. Put in other words, many assume Christians must fulfill the Jewish Law requirements – must be good Jews to receive forgiveness and have life after death. The Apostle Paul may have seemed supportive of that view in some of his written comments but those occasions were times when he, a human being, allowed his Pharisee prejudices to intrude into his presentations. In fact, the Apostle Paul was very opposed to the view someone had to become a Jew or fulfill the Jewish Law to receive God’s forgiveness and life after death – to become a Christian. Paul’s repeated declaration was we are set free from the Old Testament Law and the requirements of Judaism by the Good News revealed through God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Out of God’s Agape Love for all of us, we are Forgiven, brought into a New Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent, made Citizens of God’s Kingdom – which includes life after death, and we are both called to and inherit the New Life in Christ. This is all God’s Gift to us – Grace! Paul declared we do not earn any of that. Unfortunately, people can, and often do, deny themselves some or all of those benefits of the Creator’s Agape Love by refusing to receive them!

At times, what the Apostle wrote about this, may have come across as requiring the earning of forgiveness and salvation but, the truth is, he was referring to the self-destructive actions and ways God’s Gifts are frequently rejected with their resulting negative consequences. Part of those negative consequences have brought harm toward others. Ironically, those, who seek to puff themselves up through their self-righteous religious beliefs and actions, often hurt – sin against other persons, while rejecting them as “sinners”! It is very tempting to allow such mistreatment by some pharisaic Christians to lead oneself to believe the Church and/or our Divine Parent cannot forgive us or give us God’s Radical Hospitality and Agape Love. Indeed, although some of what the Apostle Paul wrote in today’s Reading may seem to be supportive of the concept that one earns God’s forgiveness or condemnation, that was exactly the opposite of Paul’s intent. Instead, the Apostle was denouncing the pharisaic and self-righteous Christians’ actions – for example, those demanding everyone else become a Jew and follow Jewish Law and practices.

To help us better understand what Paul was trying to accomplish by what he wrote in our Reading, let’s jump in the middle of the Scripture and then back to the opening verses. The Apostle to the Gentiles was very passionate in his attack on those seeking to impose the Jewish Law and practices upon Gentile – non-Jewish Christians. He demonstrated that by taking over the physical writing of the letter from his assistant and personally putting down in **verses 11 through 13**, *“See what big letters I make as I write to you now with my own hand! The people who are trying to force you to be circumcised are the ones who want to*

show off and boast about external matters. They do it, however, only so that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even those who practice circumcision do not obey the Law; they want you to be circumcised so that they can boast that you submitted to this physical ceremony.”

What Paul wrote in the beginning of our Scripture was not a threat against those who had not earned God’s forgiveness but a warning because of the evil mistreatment the self-righteous put upon others – the Gentiles and other outsiders from the Jewish religion and cultural point of view. Those pharisaic supposed Christians rejected Paul’s Gospel of God’s Agape Love and Forgiveness being our Divine Parent’s Gift – Grace and they were the ones, who were themselves sinners – bringing harm to others. So the Apostle stated about them in **verses 7 through 8**, *“Do not deceive yourselves; no one makes a fool of God. You will reap exactly what you plant. If you plant in the field of your natural desires, from it you will gather the harvest of death; if you plant in the field of the Spirit, from the Spirit you will gather the harvest of eternal life.”* Planting in the field of natural desires was what those who rejected God’s Grace – Forgiveness as a Gift did when they mistreated others, who they denounced as “sinners”.

The Apostle Paul contrasted that pharisaic – Jewish Legalism, self-righteousness with his declaration of the Good News of God’s Agape Love being a Gift along with his celebration of the New Life in Christ, which we receive because of our Divine Parent’s Forgiveness, Radical Welcome, and Relating with us in the New Faith Relationship. Paul wrote in **verses 14 through 16**, *“As for me, however, I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for by means of his cross the world is dead to me, and I am dead to the world. It does not matter at all whether or not one is circumcised; what does matter is being a new creature. As for those who follow this rule in their lives, may peace and mercy be with them — with them and with all of God’s people!”*

According to the Apostle Paul, living the New Life in Christ – being a New Creature in Christ, is God’s Agape Love Gift to us! Living that New Life in Christ continues to be a blessing of “peace and mercy” for us, as we continue to trust – faith in God’s Agape Love and live out that faith in our New Life in Christ! That was what the Apostle was getting at, although some have misunderstood what he wrote. Their interpretation falls back to the pharisaic, legalistic, Old Testament type view of God. They see Paul’s comments as a demand that people earn God’s Forgiveness and life after death. However, in the full context, as we have considered this Scripture today, Paul was calling upon Gentile Christians, that includes all of us, to Stay on Course and to not give into the self-righteous demands of the pharisaic, Jewish Legalism aligned Christians. To continue trusting – faithing in our Divine Parent’s Agape Love and Grace Given Forgiveness, and to continue following the Freedom we have in Jesus Christ by living the New Life in Christ. That was what Paul was writing about when he said in **verse 9**, *“So let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up, the time will come when we will reap the harvest.”*

We are called to Stay on Course in the New Life in Christ – to not give up! What does that include? We are to follow Jesus’ example of living agape – self-giving and sacrificial love toward God, the community of believers, and toward all people. The Apostle Paul expressed this a little less formally in today’s Reading. He wrote in **verse 10**, *“So then, as often as we have the chance, we should do good to everyone, and especially to those who belong to our family in the faith.”* So, in our living the New Life in Christ, let’s Stay on Course! Let’s live our Freedom in Christ by living – expressing God’s Agape Love and Forgiveness – God’s Still Speaking – Still Working Agape Love and our Divine Parent’s Radical Welcome and Forgiveness toward everyone we meet. Amen.