

“Become Like Jesus!”

The Apostle Paul provided clues about his life prior to his conversion in this Scripture. However, the common public understanding of Christianity is not familiar with Paul’s importance to Christian History, nor are most people aware of his two very different lives. His name was originally Saul of Tarsus. His father was a wealthy Jewish merchant, who purchased Roman Citizenship for his family. That fact enabled Paul to appeal his trial verdict to Rome. In today’s Reading, the Apostle’s clues about his former life included:

**** “I was circumcised when I was a week old. I am an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew.***

**** “I was a Pharisee, and I was so zealous that I persecuted the church.”*** On another occasion, he referred to himself as a “Pharisee of the Pharisees”! The Pharisees had been among the most active and powerful of the enemies of Jesus. It was Saul of Tarsus, who held everyone’s coats, so they could throw rocks when Stephen was stoned to death because of his faith in and service to Jesus. It was Saul, who was on the road to Damascus with authority to arrest and bring back Jews, who believed in Jesus.

Another clue in the Scripture about Paul’s former life was:

**** With reference to “obeying the commands of the Law, I was without fault.”*** It was the belief of the legalists, like the Pharisees, that they earned God’s forgiveness and love – which made them “without fault”. They especially hated Jesus because his message attacked their position. His gospel is God has already forgiven us and Agape Loves us by the Divine Parent’s free gift of Grace shown in sending God’s Son, Jesus Christ! Our Savior challenged their self-centered and self-aggrandizing view of themselves, which they had while they looked down and judged everyone else. Unfortunately, some rather prominent persons today think of themselves as 10 on the 10 scale and belittle and disrespect everyone else, while failing to actually do all they can do to help others. Saul had followed that path to success.

When Saul was on his way to persecute Christians – followers of Jesus – the Church, he had an extraordinary experience! The Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ appeared, challenged his persecution, and called him to the Journey to Generosity – The Way of Jesus! [The slide for the Consecration Sunday 2017 Theme was

shown.] Indeed, he was to become an Apostle for Jesus to non-Jews! His life was to become so changed, even his name was to be different – he would be Paul, a servant, instead of an enemy of Jesus Christ! By the way, what is being projected on the screen is the theme for this year’s Consecrating Stewards Program. That program will hit its highpoint on Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday, November 12th, when we will make our Faith – Promise Commitments for our General Fund for 2018 followed by the church provided Cotton Patch Café catered Consecrating Stewards’ and Thanksgiving Luncheon.

As discussed in our Consecrating Stewards’ Program insert, Jesus called his disciples to go out and do ministry, he instructed them and us to live a Journey to Generosity – The Way of Jesus. When the Risen Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus and called him to become the Apostle Paul, he was led to a dramatic transformation of the former persecutor’s life and identity! So, Saul went from someone, who believed he had earned God’s Love and Forgiveness, to Paul, who recognized he was on a totally different journey – The Way of Jesus – the Journey to Generosity. The Apostle eluded to this in **verse 9b**, *“I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.”* Believing this comes with the need to know all we can about Jesus’ example and to then follow that path. Paul understood this, so he wrote in **verse 10**, *“All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death”.*

Become like Jesus is what our Lord and Savior is calling us to do! So, what is Jesus’ Way – his example, which the Apostle Paul both sought to follow and called the Philippian Church and all of us to live? In a few minutes, our Youth will share their Witnessing Steward Testimony Alphabet Soup style. What they will be sharing are some of the ingredients of the insight and experience each of us needs as we follow Jesus’ and Paul’s call to become like Christ. As we consider Jesus’ example, let’s remember:

† He was humble – took on human form, even though the Universe was created through him – the Word.

† He was obedient to the Divine Parent’s Agape Love, even to death on the cross. Putting God’s Agape Love ahead of our personal wants and desires is crucial in our Journey to Generosity.

† He [Jesus] manifested God’s Agape Love – Great Generosity toward everyone – even those, who were outcasts in Jewish society – even those considered

to be sinners. It takes courage to go against the worldly pressures to chase after wealth, prestige, violence, and power and to go against the denigrating of those outcast by society. It is tempting to side with bigotry, hate, and prejudice, by praising those perpetrators of such practices as “fine people”. We are to, instead, treat all people as God Agape Loves us!

† He [Jesus] revealed the Divine Parent’s Radical and Extravagant Hospitality – Invitation and Welcome for all people. Living and communicating God’s Invitation and Welcome – God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love for all people calls for the committing of time, energy, and resources. As we do that, we deepen our own Faith Relationship with our God – we make it even more meaningful to ourselves as individuals and as a congregation. That is the central theme of our Consecrating Stewards Program each year. That is also a crucial aspect of our identity as members and friends of Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ. As our Consecrating Steward insert states in the last paragraph, “To accept the command of Jesus to engage in bringing wholeness to a fragmented world is to be on a mission that matters.”

Given all that, let’s follow Paul’s becoming like Jesus and join the Apostle’s commitment in verse 14, ***“So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God’s call through Christ Jesus to the life above.”*** The “life above” – the New Faith Relationship with God – the New Life in Christ – is the Life our Divine Parent and Jesus invite and call us to live so we become like Jesus! **Let’s be humble, obedient to God’s Agape Love, manifest that same Love, and be agents of the Almighty’s Radical and Extravagant Invitation and Welcome to everyone – to all people we meet and to all people we can reach.** Amen.