

Imagine Saul, persecutor of the Church, Pharisee, keeper of the Law, defender of the faith, breathing fire against Christians. Can you see him standing and watching as Stephen is stoned to death, nodding in approval? What is your image of him?

Then, comes the call of Christ on his life. The call that challenged him and his faith. The call that challenged his understanding of God. A challenge so great that it called for a name change from Saul to Paul.

What image do you have of Paul? We all have heard a voice and have formed an image of the person. I recall hearing a deep, bass voice. My image was of a big, strong, vibrant person — a football lineman. Then, I met him. He was small, of little stature, a pip-squeak—far from the image I had had of him. What about Peter the fisherman? Want to look this morning at what we know about Paul and wonder if our image may be wrong.

He became a defender of the faith he once sought to destroy. We know he was born in Tarsus, he was of the tribe of Benjamin. He studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He was a young Pharisee rising up in the ranks far above his years (his own words). He agreed with the stoning of Stephen. He set out, with permission of those in authority, to destroy this new faith and put its followers, both men and women in prison. He was a legalist. His faith was exclusive. He kept the ancient traditions (maybe not all bad). He would be well acquainted with the Scriptures which would serve him well.

We read in II Corinthians 10:10, “For some say, ‘his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’” One of the earliest descriptions we have of him says that he was small in stature, bald headed, bow-legged, of vigorous physique, with meeting eyebrows, and a slightly crooked nose and full of grace. He would certainly not make a television evangelist today. It was not an image that would appeal to people. We know he had some form of physical ailment (partially blind and malaria are a couple of the ones that have been conjectured). But he was also friendly, humorous and “a servant of Christ”.

It is probably the last one that is most descriptive of Paul and one that he would be most proud of. He uses the term in Romans and Philippians. And in I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians he calls himself “an Apostle of Christ.” Either way his identity was caught up in Christ. He never sought to bring glory to Paul, only to Christ.

It was not as a Pharisee - he wanted to put that behind him as best he could—that he wanted to be remembered. Yet, his background and training played a role in who he was to become. The zeal he had learned as a Pharisee was now generated toward the message of the living Christ. Christ had become the leading force in his life. I am not sure we fully understand the change in this man of God. He went from a legalist to one who called for grace. He went from excluding people to including all. He went from a persecutor to a defender. He was willing to be changed. He was willing to be led by the Spirit of Christ. He now saw the world differently. He saw potential in all people. He was willing to give of himself for the sake of others and Christ. He stood against the ancient traditions that had been so much a part of his life. What a change!

Paul is an example of what Christ can do to a life. Meeting Christ is always a life-changing experience. It is a change that is difficult to explain unless you have experienced it. It should change our whole frame of reference and how we see the world and all peoples. It should influence how we react to people, things and situations. A few paragraphs later in Galatians Paul

gives us the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Do we see these in the pre-Christian Paul? Are these part of the image that we have of him? His school boy friends would not understand the new Paul.

I imagine Paul would say something like, “If Christ can change me, he can change anyone.” God is in the business of changing people, unexpected people. Moses, David, Gideon, Jeremiah, Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Mary to name a few. None of these would have been the world’s first choice - but they were God’s.

Christ brings us to a new level of faith, trust and grace. Peter started eating with Gentiles and eating foods that he had always considered unclean. Those who were outside were now encouraged to come inside. The disciples’ whole view of the world was being and is being challenged and changed.

Christ comes and challenges and changes our world view. We are called to be like Christ. Now, there are some people that we imagine could never be changed. We are as skeptical of them as the early Christians were of Paul. They did not trust him. But, his life was forever changed. His whole perspective changed. Paul chose the way of love (he did write I Corinthians 13). He chose love. We see his caring and concern for all people in the letters he wrote. He could say “be like me, for I am like Christ” (I Cor. 11:1). He wanted the best for all. He wanted the whole world to follow after Christ.

As we come to this table we are reminded of the change that is ours in Christ. Our sins have been forgiven. Paul’s sins were covered and forgiven by Christ — all his past was gone and in Christ he became, and we become, a new creature(s). They now say of him, “The man who formerly persecuted us is preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” What a change!

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988