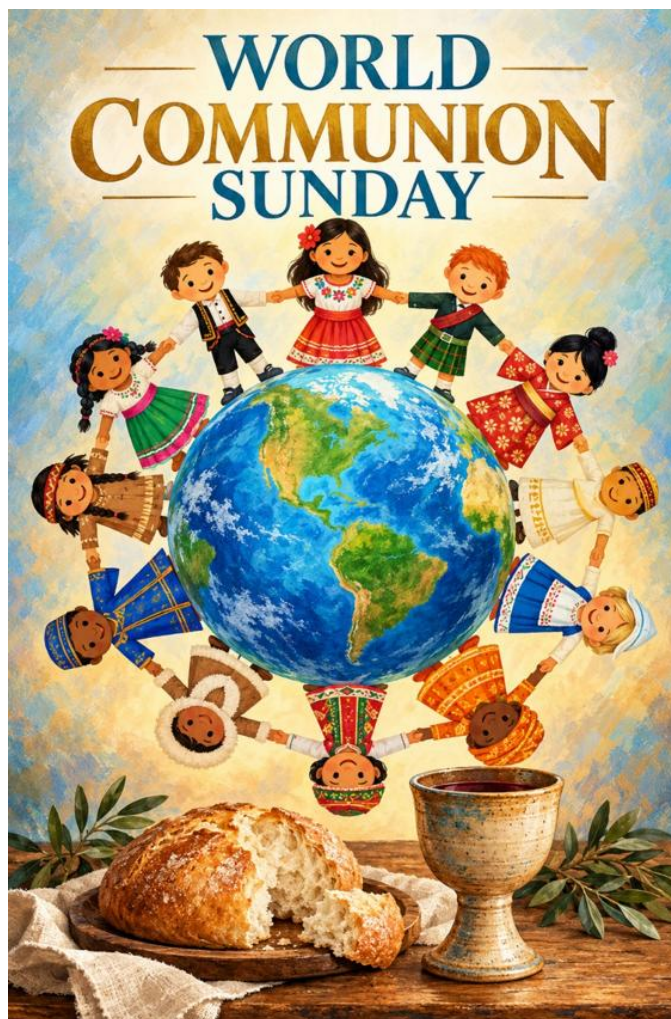




Holy Transformation
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; October 4, 2026
 19th Sunday after Pentecost
 Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14

More than anyone other than Jesus, the Apostle Paul shapes the history of early Christianity—a remarkable thing when you remember that Scripture introduces him as a young man who approves of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Later, Paul is given permission by the high priest to pursue others who belong to “the Way.” But on his journey to Damascus, he encounters the Risen Lord and is struck blind for three days—until a disciple, Ananias, appears and his sight is restored. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul is baptized, and once he regains his strength, he begins to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who will listen. Paul leads mission trips, establishes churches, writes letters of encouragement, and performs miracles. He is also beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. Along the way, Paul undergoes a holy transformation to become a powerhouse of faith and practice. God working. God transforming. How can we talk seriously about being made new without talking about God? And if it’s a model of faithful behavior we’re after, the Apostle Paul surely gives us much to consider.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday—a day that reminds us that we do not live out our faith in isolation. We belong to something larger than ourselves—a worldwide communion of people who, despite our many differences, gather around the same Christ, hear the same good news, and come to the same table. World Communion Sunday has a meaningful connection for us because it originated in Shadyside Presbyterian Church in 1933. Three years later, it was adopted as a denominational practice and eventually grew into an ecumenical observance embraced by many Christian traditions. What began as an idea in one congregation became a celebration of the unity of Christians around the globe.

I love that history because it reminds us that significant change often begins in a particular place, with particular people, and then reaches far beyond what anyone could have imagined. Shadyside wasn't trying to create something for themselves alone; they had a vision of Christian unity that they wanted to share with the wider church. Paul's transformation led him in much the same direction. After his conversion, he came to see that the gospel was meant to be shared—not only with his Jewish brothers and sisters, but with Gentiles, too. His transformation changed not only what he believed; it changed the way he saw other people and his place among them.

Paul's story is remarkable because he went from trying to silence the gospel to spending his life giving it a voice. But Paul isn't the only person down through the ages whose life took an unexpected turn. Another well-known example is C.S. Lewis, the beloved author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*. Lewis once described himself as “the most reluctant convert in all England.” Raised in the Christian faith, he rejected it as a young man and became a committed atheist. Yet something in him continued to hunger for what he called “joy”—a longing for something beyond the material world. Through books, friendships, deep conversations, and his own searching, seeds of faith slowly began to take root.

One of the people who helped Lewis on that journey was his Oxford colleague J.R.R. Tolkien. They talked late into the night about faith, reason, morality, and the gospel. Lewis eventually came to see that the Christian story was not simply another beautiful myth but, as Tolkien helped him understand it, the story that was true. Lewis later described the moment of his conversion which happened on a motorcycle ride with his brother, Warnie, heading toward Whipsnade Zoo. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis wrote: “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.” He said it was less like a dramatic emotional experience and more like waking from a long sleep and suddenly realizing he was awake. Paul's transformation was sudden and dramatic; Lewis's was gradual and reluctant. Their journeys were very different, but both remind us that our past is part of our story, but it does not have to determine our future. God can meet us exactly where we are, work with whatever we bring, and continue shaping us into who we are to become.

And that brings us to Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, through which he invites us to consider where we are on the journey of faith. Do we sometimes feel imperfect, unfinished, as though we have not yet become the people we hope to be? If so, we're in good company, because Paul feels

the same way. He writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal...” Paul knows that he has not yet arrived. He knows that he is still becoming.

When we become believers, we are declared righteous because of what Christ has done. It’s not our efforts at law keeping, self-improvement, or discipline that put us in right standing with God. Interestingly, a mark of Christian maturity is to acknowledge our imperfection. It turns out that being imperfect is a good place to start because it is the only place we have.

Paul also invites us to reflect on *where we have been*. In his letter, Paul defends the rights of Gentiles to be Christians. He opposes those who are teaching that it’s necessary to *first* become a Jew, to *first* be circumcised. For Paul, circumcision is of no value unless it is *circumcision of the heart*. Faith is what is essential. Claiming the authority that has been given to him, Paul reviews his credentials: Jewish by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure Hebrew, and in addition to these inherited privileges, he has excelled in everything Jewish. In essence, Paul says, “If you want to play the game of works righteousness, I can play, and I can win.” But in the next breath he acknowledges that none of his credentials give him reason for boasting — only Christ is cause for that.

Finally, through the life of Paul, we are encouraged to take stock of our lives and consider *where we want to go*. To make his point, Paul uses the metaphor of a runner pressing on to win the prize, straining forward to what lies ahead. We can almost feel the heart pump, the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache. Is he contradicting himself and now saying that faith is through works? No! For Paul, faith involves running, wrestling, striving, and fighting. Trust in God’s grace does not make Paul *less active* but rather sets him free to run the race with his eyes on the prize. Come what may, Paul presses on. He pursues his goal while, at the same time, he recognizes that it will only be through God’s grace that he will ever reach it. What a wonderful word for the church to hear today.

Christ is the blueprint for Christian behavior, and Paul, who models his own life after Christ, becomes a model for the church at Philippi. He becomes a model for us as well and, down through the ages, other models — like C.S. Lewis — have followed. Now, it’s our turn. Now it’s up to us to show to the world what Christianity looks like. With the privilege of belonging to Christ comes tremendous responsibility because we are the hands and feet and compassionate heart of Christ for the world. And we will always be in process. Such is the story of the life of every believer: we slip, we fall, but we rise again to join the race. We press on, urgently pursuing the goal — which is — ultimately to be transformed into the likeness of Christ our Savior.

Followers of Christ can be found throughout the world. We speak different languages, worship in different ways, and gather in all kinds of places — churches, cathedrals, storefronts, outdoors, and in homes. To celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, as it is also

called, some share beautiful bread; others share crackers or wafers. Some drink wine; others grape juice. Different though we may be, we're on the same journey trying to learn what it means to live in the world as the body of Christ. And today, as many of us gather around tables and altars and communion rails near and far, with thankful hearts, may we remember that the table does not belong to us. The Lord's Table is bigger than any denomination, any nation, any language, or any culture. It is Christ's table, and here, there is room for everyone. Thanks be to God.