

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 10, 2016  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 9:1-19  
Psalm 33:1-11  
Revelation 5:6-14  
John 21:1-14

The ancient church father Tertullian once said: “The blood of Christians is the seed of the Church’s growth.”

Indeed this has been true historically, dating all the way back to the first century and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The pattern is very real, and begins just prior to the passage we’ve read today. It begins in chapter 7, where Stephen holds the religious leaders accountable for Jesus’ death, and is stoned to death by a violent mob as a young man named Saul watches on and approves.

Stephen’s death becomes the catalyst for a great persecution that erupts against those who believe in Jesus. At the center of this storm is this young man Saul, from Tarsus. He is hell-bent on tracking believers down and punishing them. We are told at the beginning of chapter 8, just subsequent to Stephen’s death:

*Saul was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail. [8:3]*

As we join the story this morning in chapter nine, we learn more of Saul’s activity:

*Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath. He was eager to destroy the Lord's followers, so he went to the High Priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them -- both men and women -- back to Jerusalem in chains. [9:1]*

This story from Acts 9, then, shows us Saul's zealous pursuit and arrest of Christians.

Or does it?

If you look more closely, you will discover that this is NOT a story of Saul pursuing and arresting Christians. *This is a story of Christ pursuing and arresting Saul!* Saul, in his zeal to hunt down followers of Jesus, discovers on the Damascus road that Jesus is hunting *him!*

I like how Eugene Peterson tells this story in *The Message*:

*When he [Saul] got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"*

*He said, "Who are you, Master?"*

*"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down." [Acts 9:3-5]*

There is a great bit of irony at work here. The stoning of Stephen and Saul's zealous pursuit of Christians launched a great persecution that forced believers to flee from Jerusalem and spread out to Judea and Samaria. Forced to leave home base, the Christians all became missionaries! And now, Jesus is going to use the very man whose persecution started the spread of the Gospel outward to be a vital

part of continuing that message! He will be the one who will take the message to Gentiles, and to kings (cf. 9:15).

Saul's zealous pursuit of Christians becomes the zealous pursuit of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, as he sees that the One whom he pursued was actually pursuing him!

And what is true of Paul is also true of each of us. Evangelical Christians often speak of "coming to Christ," or "finding Christ," or "accepting Christ." But if we learn anything from Saul of Tarsus, we learn that we don't actually "find" Christ -- Christ finds *us*. We do not "come" to Christ -- Christ comes to *us*. The only sense in which we find Christ is in response to his relentless pursuit of us.

I was reminded of this truth this week when I read again the story of Francis Thompson. Francis Thompson was the son of a British doctor who grew up in a Roman Catholic home. In many respects, his early life appeared to be one failure after another.

He studied for the priesthood, but did not complete his studies. He joined the military, but was quickly released. He studied medicine, but failed his medical exams. Depressed, ill, and poor, he became addicted to opium.

During this time, Thompson submitted two poems for publication to Wilfred Meynell, a London magazine editor. Meynell recognized Thompson's literary

talent and published the poems, which won the commendation of Robert Browning.

In one of his poems, Thompson tells the story of a fugitive sinner seeking to escape the relentless pursuit of God's love on his life. One of the stanzas goes like this:

*I fled him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after,  
But with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat -- and a voice beat  
More instant than the feet --  
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."*

[Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*; quoted in *The One Year Book of Poetry*, compiled and edited by Phillip Comfort and Daniel Partner]

The poet speaks of himself here, and we recognize in these words the famous "hound of heaven."

I love this story, and this poem. I love it because most of us, I suspect, are not like the Apostle Paul, but more like the disciples in our Gospel lesson today. We don't have any vendettas against Jesus. We're not angrily pursuing an agenda to bring Jesus down. We're more like Peter, James, John, and the others, who have

failed Jesus, and our sense of guilt and shame and fear drives us to the place where we feel that our only option is to return to old ways of being and doing.

We remember bygone days when we heard Jesus calling us, inviting us to walk with him on his journey. We felt the rush of what it was like for him to pursue us. But after trying and failing so many times and in so many ways, we're pretty sure the chances are good that Jesus has moved on to other things.

Our feelings may be captured in the words of a gospel song, the lyrics of which read like this:

*I've heard his love is patient, that he always hears a prayer,  
And that his love will follow you, despite the miles --  
But my best years of life I wasted, why would he even really care?  
What have I to give that he would find worthwhile?  
Tell me -- I just want to know --  
Tell me how far will he go? Will he still reach to me in spite of where  
I've been?* [Phillips, Craig, and Dean, *He'll Do Whatever It Takes*, from the album *Favorite Songs of All*]

And as we step around the corner from these questions, we find Jesus waiting for us. And he says, "Let's have breakfast, and talk."

And we discover again that his pursuit of us is relentless, that his grace reaches lower than our worst mistakes, and that his love runs faster and farther than our ability to run away.

This is the Easter message, friends. Wherever you are, wherever you have been, whatever direction your life has taken, life isn't about the "finding" of

something, it's about *being found*. And the One who pursues you is Jesus, the Living One.

On this third Sunday of Easter, hear this invitation: In the Name of God, stop running! His love is here to catch you, to embrace you, and forgive you. His love is bringing healing to you in this moment, and giving you a new start.

As we come to the table this morning, let us open our hearts to his power and goodness. Let us rest in his love. And let us go forth renewed and strengthened in our Easter faith -- as those who have stopped running, and are resting in the joy of being found.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.