

Pursued by God
27th Sunday of Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
October 4, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Philippians 3:4-14](#)
[Ezekiel 34:11-16](#)

Have you ever seen an ancient Greek vase? The ones that depict scenes from mythology or from poetry, with figures painted with red and black designs – many of these portray scenes of people pursuing their romantic interest. All around the outside of the vase, as you turn it, a story is revealed. First, you may see a person looking backward while running, and as you turn to see what is chasing, you see it is another person with their eyes set forward. As the vase turns, depending on its size, you may see a wedding scene on the other side – or the two may be revealed to be holding hands. For the ancient Greeks, love poetry both written and painted often followed the order of sight – flight – pursuit – capture. Sight – when the lovers first see each other. Flight – one of the pair, usually but not always a woman, is separated or flees from the other. Pursuit – the other of the pair chases after the first. Capture – the two are united, either in matrimony or just long enough to begin the chase again. And as Anne Carson puts it, “several poets admit they prefer pursuit to capture.”

David Fredrickson, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, noticed this pattern of flight-pursuit-capture showing up in Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. The city of Philippi, you may remember, is likely the first European city to hear the Gospel preached – it was a cosmopolitan city with a complicated history, and at the time of the letters of Paul, had been officially renamed “City of Augustus and Philip.” It makes some sense, then, for Paul to be using the poetry and language that people there were familiar with to emphasize his point. And so, David Fredrickson writes, “If verse 3:12 were pictured on a vase, we would see Paul striding forward and Christ fleeing, though displaying that

characteristic backward glance. Turning the vase around, another scene might appear. With their roles reversed, the hunter becomes the hunted. Paul has been captured by Christ. Christ's hand rests on Paul's wrist, and they turn to walk away together." Paul has been describing his pursuit of Righteousness (before knowing Christ) – his zeal for perfection. And in the end of the story, it is the Righteous Christ who has truly been pursuing him, calling Paul to follow Righteousness in a different way.

This echoes back to the Hebrew Bible as well – especially in Ezekiel's prophecy to the people returned from exile. After warning against the "false shepherds" – the kings and satraps that had taken Israel into exile – God promises that, "As a shepherd pursues the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness... I will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak." In the midst of a terrible situation, God promises to pursue the people, returning them to hope and shelter and nourishment. God will pursue us all, from wherever we have wandered, to take us by the hand, and lead us home.

Now, stated this way, it doesn't sound great. In our world today, we are all too familiar with the ramifications of people pursuing those who are fleeing – and most of our associations are not good ones. Yet, while Paul writes to conjure images of Greek poetry and vases, God's pursuit of us is also quite unlike our pursuit of love on earth. God calls to us, but also is with us no matter how far we roam. God gives us the space we ask for – but urges us to come back soon. Listen to these words of Teresa of Avila, writing in the 16th century:

This Beloved of ours is merciful and good. Besides, he so deeply longs for our love that he keeps calling us to come closer... for now, his voice reaches us through words spoken by good people, through listening to spiritual talks, and reading sacred literature. God calls to us in countless little ways all the time. Through illnesses and suffering and through sorrow, he calls to us. Through a truth glimpsed fleetingly in a state of prayer, he calls to us. No matter how half-hearted such insights may be, God rejoices whenever we learn

what he is trying to teach us.

One of the clearest ways that we hear God's voice calling to us is at the communion table. Here, we rest from our troubles and burdens, and enter into God's presence. Here, we realize it's never been a competition with others for God's affection – God loves us all. And here, we learn to show God's love for all in the pursuit of peace, of hope, of righteousness, and yes, of love. As we celebrate communion, we are united with all who have ever celebrated communion and all who ever will. It is like a wedding banquet, with everyone serving each other and being served – finding that in our mutual love of God, we also should share a love for each other.

There's a line in the romantic Biblical poem Song of Songs that Pastor Elana and I have written on our wedding rings. In Hebrew it reads, *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li.* (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.) In truth, you are God's beloved, and God is your beloved. Y'all are beloved of God, and God is beloved of y'all. Sometimes, God may seem out of sight – but if we look backward on our path, God is clearly there. Other times, we see God ahead of us, calling to us to follow. In either case, we are God's, and God is ours.

Back at the wedding banquet, we find people very different from ourselves, speaking languages we may not know, eating unfamiliar foods, telling strange stories of their lives. Yet, we are as equally strange to them – yet not to the One who loves all of us, individually and together. We are united in God's love for us, in God's pursuit of us, no matter how far we've roamed, or how long we have been in isolation.

So, what does this mean for our road ahead? I think that it is summed up beautifully with this prayer from the American monk, Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do

anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

So, my friends, may you know God's love for you at all times. May we celebrate Christ together at the table, with people we may never see – and yet are as deeply beloved as we are. And may the Holy Spirit guide us to follow God's path set before us. Amen.