

Are you a Disciple or an Admirer?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

4th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 8, Yr. C. June 27, 2004. Text: Luke 9:51-62

The first line of today's Gospel tells us that "as the days drew near for him to be taken up," Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." He had a goal; and he was determined to reach that goal.

He "set his face." Isn't that a great phrase? The other night we were at an age-8 baseball game with the grandchildren. The look of determination on the faces of some of those scrappy little guys as they got up to the plate was a perfect illustration (at a little kid's level, of course) of what it means to "set your face." Stance, expression... everything about the most serious of those 8-year old ball players said, "I'm gonna swing this bat and get a big hit!"

Aspen is full of young musicians right now. (Welcome again to those who are in church this morning.) These young people have the same kind of grit. You just don't become an accomplished pianist, or violinist, or horn-player without "setting your face."

A compliment people often give – whether to musicians or athletes or scholars or whatever – is to say that they're *focused*. They have their eyes on a destination in life – no matter how distant it might be – and they're going to reach it. *Focus, commitment, dedication, "stick-to-it-ivity"* —whatever you want to call it— this is a virtue we admire... in young people and adults alike.

When Luke tells us that Jesus "had set his face to go to Jerusalem," he meant that Jesus was resolved to do God's will – no matter what that meant. He'd already told his friends that he was going up to Jerusalem —and to death. Jesus had enemies; and he had no illusions about what was waiting for him in the capital city. He knew that there was going to be an encounter between the love of God and the powers of this world's darkness. And he knew that he'd have to die for the love of God to triumph over evil.

But if you read Luke's gospel carefully – and much of it is a narrative of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem and the cross – you'll see that neither his disciples nor the people in the villages along the roads he traveled were listening carefully to what he was telling them. They refused to believe that what was going to happen when he reached the Holy City would be anything but an easy victory. —So people were tagging along. He picked up a crowd who came along with him, eager to see this new prophet whip the Romans.

The character of Jesus as we see him in the gospel is always consistent. He's never "wishy-washy." He's never half-hearted. He's never indecisive. —Jesus is always *focused*. God had summoned him to walk the way of the cross, and he was doing it. He had to go south from his home in Galilee to get to Jerusalem, and the shortest route took him through Samaria. Samaritans and Jews were what we'd call "religious cousins," but they had about as much affection for each other as Iraqi Muslims have for Israelis. So Jesus sent out a couple of his disciples, James and John, to find a place he could spend the night in a Samaritan village. These men discovered that the Samaritans wouldn't even give him a back room and a pallet to lie on —because his destination was Jerusalem.

James and John were enraged. Insulted. (Keep in mind that that these two brothers fully expected to be VIPs – princes or generals or cabinet members at least – after Jesus' coronation in Jerusalem.) —They said to one another, "Don't these filthy Samaritans know who this is that's looking for rooms? These people aren't showing any respect. We should nuke 'em!"— So they went back and suggested that Jesus call down fire from heaven to burn up those Samaritans, the way Elijah had destroyed the soldiers Ahab and Jezebel had sent to arrest him seven hundred years earlier.

But Jesus had "set his face." He had a destination, a goal, a purpose. He wasn't going to be distracted by hostility from Samaritans or anybody else, and the very suggestion of getting some kind of violent

revenge on his enemies disgusted him. He scolded the brothers and said, “*You guys don’t know what kind of Spirit you belong to. The Son of Man hasn’t come to destroy people but to save them!*”

I said that Jesus had been picking up a crowd as he moved along. Most of them were just admirers, what we’d call “fans” in our day, like the people who trail around the country after their favorite college football team. But some of them wanted more than that. They wanted to form a serious bond with Jesus and join his band of disciples. —What do you think was motivating these people? Not to be too cynical, but most individuals who want to get on a bandwagon – political or otherwise – are people who want to get some advantage for themselves. When we feel that a regime change is in the wind, we know it can be pretty profitable to be pals with the new king –or president or whatever.

Jesus invited everyone into relationship with him, but he was never interested in merely casual or opportunistic followers. He had no time for “fair-weather friends” —people who wanted to follow him around just to “ooh-and-aaah” over miracles or hear a few memorable sermons. And Jesus made no glib, shallow promises to the crowd. He was the total opposite of popular so-called “spiritual leaders” we see all around us who draw big audiences and make big money by offering everybody Seven Easy Steps to Peace and Happiness or Forty Days to a Totally Transformed Life. (“It’s only \$25 for my last book, and you can get the whole set of lectures on DVD for another \$75.”)

To the man who said that he would follow Jesus anywhere, Jesus said, “*Oh, you will, will you? ...Even if you have to sleep by the roadside? ...Even if nobody in town will rent you a room because you’re with me? Keep in mind, my friend, that the Son of Man – on this very journey – has not even had a place to lay his head!*”

The level of devotion Jesus asked for was total. To the man who said that he’d follow Jesus after he had buried his father Jesus said, “*Leave the dead to bury their own dead.*” To the one who just wanted to run back to his village and say good-bye to the old folks at home Jesus said, “*Nobody who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.*” This is the message: If you really want to be a disciple of Jesus and not just an admirer, not just a “fan,” he expects you to “*set your face,*” just as he set his own.

You know, **Jesus has always attracted more admirers than he has disciples.** Admirers of Jesus are everywhere. They have very positive things to say about him, like “He was a wise man, a good man, the best man who ever lived.” Or “He was noble, kind, compassionate, self-sacrificing, and full of love for everybody.” (After all, what’s *not* to admire about Jesus???) **But admirers are not the same as disciples.** You know what the difference is?

- Admirers just want to observe. They want to watch, and listen, and applaud. **Disciples want to get involved.**
- Admirers want to appreciate Jesus. **Disciples want to imitate Jesus.**
- Admirers can lose interest fast when they’re no longer being entertained or stimulated... when they’re not hearing something “new”... when there’s no immediate gratification. **Disciples want to go where Jesus goes, even if the path is strewn with broken glass.**
- Admirers have no responsibility to Jesus. They’re passive except for cheering when they’re happy. **Disciples accept a responsibility to Jesus. They know their job is to reproduce the life of their Master.**

We’re living in a “spirituality marketplace.” It’s part of our consumer driven age, an expression of our demand for choice, for celebrating our personal “preferences.” Preachers and gurus and spiritual entrepreneurs of all kinds – Christian and pseudo-Christian and non-Christian – are making big bucks from their books and lectures and DVDs. We all probably have friends who are shopping and hopping from here to there and back again. Last time we talked to them they were Episcopalians, but now they’re into Tantric Buddhism. Next month they’ll be trying Scientology.

I want to tell you something, and when you hear it you'll know in your heart it's true: The greatest peace, the most "centered" place, is found when you *commit to a way of life* and *stick with it*, not looking around all the time for something else.

Jesus Christ is not looking for more admirers. He's has plenty of those. Jesus is looking for disciples, ...somebody who's ready to *commit*, ...somebody who's able to be *focused*, ...somebody who can "set their face" and keep going, all the way.

To steal a line from an old love song, and a love song is really appropriate here: ***"Is that somebody you?"***