

## Is that Somebody You?

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

*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 8, Yr. C. June 27, 2010. (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 expression? Like other grandparents (and parents, too, of course) Joan and I have seen our share of Little League baseball games. The look of determination on the faces of some of those scrappy little guys when they come up to bat is a perfect illustration (at the little kid level) of what it means to "*set your face.*" —Stance, expression... everything about the most serious of those pee-wee ball players says, "*I'm gonna swing this bat and get a big hit!*"

Aspen is now playing host to hundreds of young musicians for the next eight weeks. Those gifted young people have the same kind of grit. You just don't become an accomplished pianist, or violinist, or horn-player, or singer without "*setting your face.*"

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

When Luke tells us that Jesus "*had set his face to go to Jerusalem,*" he means that Jesus was resolved to do God's will – no matter what it might cost him. He'd already made clear to his friends that he was on his way up to Jerusalem and certain death. Jesus had enemies; and he had no illusions about what was waiting for him in the capital city. He knew that there was about to be an encounter between the incarnate love of God and the powers of this world's present darkness. And he knew that he was going to have to lay down his life, if the love of God was going to triumph over evil.

When we read Luke's gospel carefully, we see that much of it is a narrative of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem —and the cross. He's always on the road, passing through countryside, towns, and villages. And as he keeps moving onward, we detect that neither his disciples nor the people who he spoke to along the road were really "*getting*" what he was telling them.

They knew he was going to Jerusalem, but they refused to believe that his journey to the capital was anything but a kind of victory parade. They figured that Jesus was so brilliant, so gifted, so charismatic, so awesome in everything he did and everything he said —how could he *not* be acclaimed by the leaders of the nation when he arrived on their doorstep? Some of the villagers tagged along, falling in behind Jesus and his disciples as they hiked along the road to Jerusalem. They wanted to be there to see this new prophet put a whipping on the Romans.

The character of Jesus as we see him in the gospel is always consistent. He's never wishy-washy. He's never indecisive. —Always focused, his "*face is set.*"

He believed God had summoned him to walk the way of the cross, and he was doing it. The shortest route to Jerusalem took him through Samaria. As you know, Samaritans and Jews were ethnic cousins, but they had about as much affection for each other as Palestinians have for Israelis these days. So Jesus sent some of his friends on ahead to see if they could find everybody a place to stay. They

discovered that no Samaritan would even give Jews going to Jerusalem so much as a pallet to lie on out behind the house.

James and John were enraged. Indignant. Insulted. They said to one another, *“Don’t these filthy Samaritans know who this is that’s looking for rooms? These people aren’t showing us any respect. We should nuke ‘em!”*—So they went back and asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to burn up those Samaritans.

But Jesus had *“set his face.”* He had a destination, a goal, a purpose. He wasn’t about to be distracted by hostility from anybody, and the very suggestion that he take violent revenge on his enemies disgusted him. One version of this story says he scolded James and John and told them, *“You men don’t know what kind of Spirit you’re made of. The Son of Man has not 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 Boston people who came out to Denver this past week to watch the Red Sox play the Rockies. But a few of the people who joined him were more than merely “fans.”

A handful were deeply serious about forming a bond with Jesus and becoming like him. What do you think motivated those serious people? I guess I’m cynical, but most people who want to get on a bandwagon – political, religious or otherwise – are looking for some kind of personal advantage. When we feel that a régime change is in the wind, we know it can be profitable for us if we’re pals with the new king – or president, or bishop, or whatever.

Jesus invited everybody to have a relationship with him, but he was never interested in merely casual or opportunistic followers. He had no time for fair-weather friends —the kind of people who wanted to follow him around so they could go “oooh” and “aaah” over his miracles or clap after his sermons. And Jesus made no glib, shallow promises to the crowd in order to curry favor. He was the total opposite of the successful politicians and so-called spiritual leaders we see today. He refused to exploit his popularity for political or financial gain, and he never soft-peddled the cost of discipleship.

To a 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 100%. To the man who said that he’d follow Jesus after he’d buried his father, Jesus said, *“Come with me and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”* To one who just wanted to run back to his village first and kiss mom and dad good-bye, he said, *“Nobody who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.”*

This was the clear message: If you really want to be Jesus’ DISCIPLE, not just a fan or an admirer, he expects you to *“set your face”* the same way he set his own. The truth is that Jesus has always attracted more admirers than disciples. More fans than followers. Then and now.

Admirers of Jesus are everywhere, and they always have nice things to say about him, such as “*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 *disciples*. Here’s the difference:

- Admirers just want to observe. They want to watch, 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... or when they’re not hearing something new... or when there’s no immediate personal pay-off. —Disciples want to go where Jesus goes, even if the path leading there is paved 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 are a little, rather conventional Christian church in a very sophisticated town, in a world which has truly become a “spiritual marketplace.” This spiritual marketplace is an inescapable aspect of our consumer-oriented age, an expression of our demand for choice, our need to celebrate our personal preferences. Having freedom to choose is a good thing, not a bad thing. —But what do we choose? And why do we choose it?

Around us and among us one may find preachers and gurus and spiritual entrepreneurs of many kinds: Christian, pseudo-Christian, and non-Christian; teachers of eastern religions, advocates of western secularism, or even people trapped in the lunacy of cults. It’s a “carnival of souls” out there.

We all have friends who are shopping and hopping from one to another and back again, looking for somebody to provide the custom-crafted spiritual high they’re after, and who will give them absolute certainty that they are now, *finally*, on The One True Path. —Last time we talked to those folks, they were Episcopalians, but now they’re into Tantric Buddhism. I guess next year they’ll be studying Scientology. After that, who knows? (Maybe Wicca?)

I want to tell you something this morning, and when you hear it you’ll know in your heart that it’s true: The greatest peace, the most “centered” place, is found only when you commit to ONE Master and stick with him. You will never find peace if you’re always looking for someone or something new. ...A new teacher. ...A new hero. ...A new “way of life.”

For me, and for many of us here: Jesus is The One. He’s not looking for another admirer. He has plenty of them, and always has. But Jesus is always looking for another *disciple* ...somebody who’s ready to commit ...somebody who’s able to be focused ...somebody who can “*set his face*” (or “*her face*”) and keep going with him the whole way, no matter how tough things might get along the road.

To steal a line from an old love song, and a LOVE song is exactly what’s appropriate here: “*Is that somebody you?*”