

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 27, 2010 (Proper 8, Year C)

I'm not sure who first said it but it's become quite a cliché: "Life is a journey, not a destination." The quote is often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous New England transcendentalist. But it became even better-known when Steven Tyler of the Boston-based rock band Aerosmith sang this line in the 1994 song "Amazing." It's hard to think of two more diverse personalities coming to the same conclusion, that "life is a journey, not a destination."

It fits this morning because we begin what's known as the "journey narrative" in Luke's gospel. And it opens with that wonderful phrase that Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem." This image is unique to Luke and it evokes a certain resoluteness. Jesus will not be denied as he moves ever closer to the death and resurrection that will usher in the salvation of the world. You can almost see the steely gaze upon his face as he sets it toward Jerusalem. Regardless of what he may encounter along the journey, Jesus is always focused on the big picture of his ministry. He is able to see beyond the anger and opposition that his gospel of love and inclusivity brings out in those who are threatened by it – the religious elite, those wedded to the status quo. It's this opposition that does, eventually, get Jesus strung up on a cross in Jerusalem. But of course that's not the end of the story.

To "set his face toward Jerusalem" evokes the fullness of Jesus' ministry. Along the journey Jesus will encounter opposition but also discipleship; condemnation but also acceptance; death but also resurrection. In Luke's gospel the journey begins and ends at the Temple in Jerusalem. And throughout the summer months we will hear stories that take place as Jesus slowly and unwaveringly makes his way toward the fulfillment of his calling. We'll encounter some well-known passages along the way – the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the story of Mary and Martha. But with every step we move closer to the realization of Jesus' destiny as the Son of God.

Now, setting your face toward Jerusalem is markedly different from "leading with your chin." That refers to a boxer who's destined to be knocked out – something that is generally precluded by resurrection. Normally, depending on whether a boxer is right or left-handed, you'd say that "he leads with his left or his right." To say "he leads with his chin" means that he always leaves his chin sticking out, inviting his opponent to knock him to the canvas. That's not what Jesus does; for while he sets his face toward Jerusalem he leads with love. Even in the face of hostility and oppression, Jesus leads with love; not his chin.

But that doesn't mean things are easy for either Jesus or those of us called to be his disciples. We get some tough sayings from Jesus this morning. Sayings that sound nothing like the Jesus we know and love. Along the journey, Jesus meets some potential disciples who come to him with reasonable requests. "Jesus," says one, "I really want to follow you but my father just died

and I need to go bury him. Would you mind waiting for me?” Another one says “I’m really excited to be following you but let me just say goodbye to my folks and I’ll be right there.” To the one, Jesus says “Let the dead bury their dead.” To the other he says “No one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” Ouch. Where’s the sensitive Jesus? The one who loves the little children and chases after us like lost sheep? Surely he would wait for a guy to bury his dad; or for someone to go give his mother a goodbye hug.

Perhaps this is all hyperbole – phrases used by Jesus to make a larger point. I’m not sure. But what we do know is that these sayings highlight the urgency of God’s call. Nothing can stand in the way of Jesus’ ministry. And nothing – neither work nor family nor anything else in the world can come before our relationship with Jesus Christ. *That* relationship must come before all else. Which is tough. And it’s especially tough to hear in a community and culture that so values *both* family life and vocational success yet puts precious little emphasis on faith. Never mind that quality family time and success in the workplace are often at odds with one another.

But when we respond to the urgency of God’s call; when we seek first the Kingdom of God, all of the fruit of the Spirit that we hear about in the letter to the Galatians comes to bear. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is all good stuff. That’s the stuff that Jesus so desires for us. And when we put Jesus at the center of our individual lives, all of our relationships become infused with the fruit of the Spirit. And we can bring love, joy, peace, etc, etc. into our family life, into our work life, into every single aspect of our lives.

And so we’re left with a choice. Will we, along with Jesus, turn our own faces toward Jerusalem? Will we join with one another to both reach out to a broken world and allow Jesus to reach out to us in our own brokenness? Or will we allow the myriad distractions of this life to continually keep us from embracing the urgent call of Jesus Christ? And in the process fail to allow God’s love and forgiveness to pervade our lives. The distractions aren’t usually as dramatic as the burial of a father – and, yes, that is allowed. The distractions and temptations are often much more subtle than that. Like the pull of the television or the Sunday morning lacrosse game or giving in to the lure of advertising.

With apologies to Emerson and Aerosmith, the Christian faith is both a journey *and* a destination. We encounter Jesus along the way; we journey with one another; we meet God and we meet strangers; we journey with friends and those who challenge our sense of Christian charity. But in the end we seek the Kingdom of God; a place that embodies the fruit of the Spirit; a place where we are never again alienated from God’s love; a place where relationship with Jesus Christ is the very meaning of life.