

Fan or Follower

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 24
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 13, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Are you a fan of God, or are you a follower of God?” That challenging but at the same time intriguing question was posed by a woman named Alexie Torres-Fleming. And she posed that question to herself. She asked herself, “Are you a fan of God, or are you a follower of God?”

If you were here in this worship last Sunday, you may recall I mentioned in my sermon I had originally planned to tell a story I’d recently read in a journal. I’d cut the article out (this story about Alexie Torres-Fleming) and stapled the pages together, only to discover that what was on the back of that article was really what I needed speak about in last week’s sermon. And it turns out that this story I had initially stapled together for last week’s sermon actually belongs in this sermon today. Such is, what I hope, the prompting of the Holy Spirit for those of us who preach and teach. May Isaiah’s words from our first lesson be true for me today so that, to quote Isaiah, *I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

Alexie Torres-Fleming was born in the public housing projects of the South Bronx, in New York City. South Bronx itself is possibly the poorest congressional district in the entire United States. Her family raised her with much love and encouragement. All who nurtured Alexie (parents, relatives, teachers, mentors) instilled in her, whether implicitly or explicitly, the idea that to succeed, she would eventually have to leave the South Bronx, escape from the ghetto and the poverty and the people. They convinced her that in order to “make it” she would need to leave her old world. And so Alexie did. Got a solid education. Good job on Madison Avenue. Nice apartment on 31st Street. All the things that should have brought contentment and fulfillment.

But Alexie said that, in the end, she simply felt empty. There was no contentment or fulfillment. Now, she had a faith in God, she gave God praise in worship, she expressed her belief in Jesus Christ at her church. But she struggled during that time, realizing that while she might very well be a fan of Jesus, she wasn’t so certain she was a follower of Jesus. This period was a moment of great insight into herself, and she acknowledged that her Lord was calling her to real discipleship, but she wasn’t entirely certain what it would look like.

As we look at today’s Gospel lesson in Mark, where Jesus asks the disciples who they believe him to be, I think Alexie’s question is the very crux of the matter. Fan or follower? Jesus begins by asking the disciples a general question about the general population around them: *Who do people say that I am?* The disciples detail the public opinion poll on Jesus—some folks think he is the prophet Elijah, back from the dead. Or his kinsman John the Baptist, recently executed. Or some other prophet.

Jesus poses the next question, and this one is pointed at **the disciples’** beliefs, their reflections on Jesus: *But who do you say that I am?* No public opinion poll is being asked for here. Jesus wants

to know what his closest friends think of him. Peter pipes up, seemingly without hesitation, *You are the Messiah*.

What happens next is that Jesus describes what it means to be the Messiah. Jesus begins to tell his disciples that, as the Messiah, he will go to suffer and die. Of course, it is Peter, again without hesitation, who becomes the naysayer to Jesus' prediction about suffering and death. That kind of Messiah is not the kind Peter ever expected to honor or revere, much less follow. Peter's concept of the Messiah, the anointed one, was someone who was a king or victor or mighty ruler. His was a concept that was geographical and political in nature. The Messiah, as hoped for by Peter and the Jewish people, was the one who, blessed by the Lord God, would wrest power from cruel oppressors, and establish a mighty reign in which Israel would at last be vindicated and live in peace and prosperity. That's the Messiah Peter was expecting. That's the Messiah Peter was looking for. That's the Messiah Peter was willing to follow. It turns out, while Peter had the right title, he had the wrong concept, the wrong understanding.

Jesus rebukes him, tearing down the concept of Messiah so carefully constructed in the disciples' minds. Essentially, Jesus' rebuke here is like the question Alexie Torres-Fleming asked herself centuries later: "Are you a fan, or are you a follower?" For Jesus begins to describe what those who claim to be followers of this particular Messiah must do: Deny themselves. Take up their cross. Lose their life in order to have life.

These are hard words for a fan. They are hard words for us. They go against much that we've been taught and witnessed in the world around us. We've been taught to seek to satisfy our own desires, and call that freedom. We've been taught to grasp for possessions and status, and call that success. Looking at our own individual lives, we may find it quite difficult to imagine what it is we must lose in our life in order to gain life. Jesus' words simply go against the grain for those of us who would prefer this earthly life to be less, not more, challenging. After all, fans have it easy, just watching from the sidelines. For followers, it's a different story.

Here is how Alexie Torres-Fleming began to answer her own question. Here is how Alexie, by God's grace and transformative power, moved from being a fan of God to being a follower of God. First, she began to involve herself in charity work, food pantries, soup kitchens and the like. But it somehow didn't seem to be enough. She found her soul still empty, joy and peace somehow still eluding her. So Alexie returned to her childhood congregation. But believe me, this wasn't in order to find some sweet escape behind sanctuary doors. While she had been gone, her childhood congregation had become deeply committed to the war against drugs in that neighborhood. Committed enough to organizing the people of that neighborhood to fight the crack sellers and crack houses. A fan doesn't like to be in that kind of situation. Only followers need apply.

And that is what Alexie did. She joined her fellow parishioners and marched down to the crack houses and prayed and sang right there at those houses. There were repercussions, naturally. Her church building was torched in retaliation. Yes, life didn't become less, but actually much more challenging. Please note I'm not suggesting she became a follower, a disciple, in one single moment. It was a journey for her. It spanned across time. Being a follower of God encompassed a whole range of moments in her life where Alexie was alternately frightened...and outraged... and ready to run away...and courageously steadfast...and terribly uncertain what to do next...and more sure about something than she'd ever been before. Her journey from fan to follower led eventually to her giving up her Madison Avenue job as she puts it, "to the utter dismay of my family and

friends.” She moved back to the South Bronx, found a little apartment, and taking her savings, established an organization called *Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice*. That was 15 years ago. That ministry has since worked with thousands of residents in the South Bronx, raising up young people to be prophetic voices for peace and justice in those broken places. It devotes itself to leadership formation of these young people who help rebuild their neighborhoods. She did indeed deny herself, lost her life, and then gained it, as she came back home to be a follower of Jesus, as she went to the place Jesus was calling her. Alexie says that it was then she finally began to feel peace. She states, “I can go to bed at night and have deep peace knowing that I am the person I am supposed to be, in the place where I am supposed to be.”

Perhaps we need to remember that Jesus’ journey to the cross and his own death was the place where **he** was supposed to be, as well. Sometimes we struggle with the event of the cross, wishing it hadn’t had to be that way. But maybe it was supposed to be that way. That’s where God needed to be, to experience and know the range of moments in our lives where we alternate between being strong and weak, faithful and guilty, courageous and terrified. Only the Messiah who would hang on that cross could lay claim to the entirety of our lives (the good, the bad, and the ugly) and bring us with him into the new life of Easter morn. That’s the kind of Messiah Jesus was supposed to be. And Alexie articulated that same truth when she said that somewhere she had read, and held onto these words: “...you cannot redeem what you will not assume.” Isn’t that the truth of the incarnation, and of the crucifixion? God redeemed what God assumed.

Peter eventually had to answer the question for himself—fan or follower? It was a journey for him, as it had been for Alexie. We read the witness of the gospel stories and it’s clear Peter faltered in his journey on more than one occasion, but ultimately journeyed to the place he was supposed to be, and became the person he was called to be—a bold witness to Jesus as Lord until his own martyrdom. No sideline fan was Peter.

Classes for those seeking to join Trinity began today. Maybe when I speak with that class next week I will tell them that people shouldn’t join Trinity in order to find a nice, safe place to escape from the world. Rather, here is a community where a person will be strengthened through word and meal, fellowship and prayer in order to be more ready to **go out in** the world. Then maybe I’ll tell them they join with us as we struggle on our own journeys from fans to followers. We who have been here at Trinity awhile cannot boast at having it all figured out, our discipleship all neatly wrapped up and tied in a bow. Rather, we are much more like Peter, prone to gaffes and faltering ourselves. Thank goodness for God’s forgiving love covering us all!

I do not know where your South Bronx is, but in our journeys we will find them, and then must ask God for great courage and the Spirit’s power to enter into them. We will have to do some soul-searching to discover just what things we must lose in our life in order to gain that life that is with God, in order to find ourselves in the place where we are supposed to be. But Jesus makes it clear that, wherever we are supposed to be, it won’t be on the sidelines. **AMEN.**