

June 26, 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 9:51-62

by [LaDonna Sanders Nkosi](#) in the [Jun 08, 2016](#) issue

Seven times now, I've boarded a plane for the 25-hour trip to South Africa. For me, there's nothing like this mission trip—the people and places, the worship and music, the deep connection and hospitality. It is the spirit of ubuntu, which Desmond Tutu says “speaks of the very essence of being human. My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life.”

On my first trip, we met with churches and organizations working on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Over the years, partnerships have strengthened, children who once lived in orphanages are now in university, and we've seen HIV/AIDS decline. “It's time to come home,” I recently wrote to our partners from the mission field. “I have set my face for Chicago.”

There is wisdom in knowing when your mission in a place is over, when it's time to move on. This week's Gospel text says that “when the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Setting his face to Jerusalem marks a shift and a turn. It is significant enough for the text to mention it three times. One translation says “he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

To set one's face means to move with a firm purpose and intention, with determination and courage. There is a certain boldness and immovable attention to Jesus' assignment to go to Jerusalem, to complete the task of his earthly ministry—to move toward the end of his larger assignment for the salvation of humanity.

Up until this point his ministry was focused in Galilee, where he healed people, raised at least two of them from the dead, freed the Gerasene demoniac, and multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed the masses. The marked shift came at the Transfiguration, when Jesus' true identity as God's son was revealed. After the healing of a demon-possessed boy, he sets his face to Jerusalem.

Jesus sends messengers ahead of him—emphasizing again that his face is set in a new direction—to the village of Samaria. But the people there do not receive him. Some interpreters have suggested that the people in Samaria don't receive Jesus because he is headed for Jerusalem in particular, that their rejection is based on

cultural boundaries. The Samaritans, that is, take offense that Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem. So James and John respond by offering "to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them," as Elijah did in 1 Kings 18.

Jesus' rejection in Samaria is due to his setting his face toward Jerusalem, but I don't think it's because of cultural barriers between the two places and people. I think it's because, while the messengers Jesus sent ahead choose to stop in Samaria, it isn't their true destination. It isn't Jesus' destination, either. Sometimes what we perceive as rejection is really a path being cleared to the purposed destination. The disciples are ready to call fire down on Samaria, but it isn't even where Jesus is supposed to be. His face is set for Jerusalem; it is time for him to be "taken up."

John's Gospel records a different journey to Samaria, saying that Jesus "must needs go through Samaria" for an encounter with a woman at a well (4:4). So it's not that Jesus has a problem with Samaritans. In Luke 9, his face is set for Jerusalem and for his divine assignment there. Therefore the people of Samaria cannot receive him.

James and John lose track of their purpose here as well. Jesus just sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (9:1). Now they want to call fire down on Samaria. This is not their purpose, and Jesus tells them so: they are there to bring life, not death. Jesus reminds us in this text to stay focused on our purpose, on what we're here for.

Life circumstances can certainly bring us out of focus, off our purpose. Is our direction in line with God's purpose for our lives, our assignment for these times? How can we recalibrate, get back on course? Where is God calling us to set our faces?

I have loved being in the mission field in South Africa. On many occasions I've even considered moving there permanently. But I now realize that my ultimate assignment is as a bridge builder between the two nations, to create and nurture partnerships between churches and communities in the United States and South Africa. If I stayed in South Africa, I would not be able to fulfill God's call.

So as our most recent mission came to a close, I set my face to Chicago—and everything else had to line up with that. The South Africans blessing me and sending me back home was not a rejection. It was their confirmation of the fact that my face was set in another direction, for another purpose.