



Sarah Crosby: The Way of Necessity

Acts 11:1-18

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Here at Washington Street, we talk a lot about finding ways to use your gifts in the life of the ministry and community. Every time we have someone new join the church, you are offered this challenge as a congregation, that we must adapt our ministry to accommodate and include the new gifts, passions, and ideas of those whom God has placed in our midst. We even hired a staff member in recent months whose sole purpose revolves around this work – helping you identify your gifts, and then finding ways to help you use your gifts in our mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to know God's Love*. This is the work of stewardship – identifying how your gifts can be used for God's work, and then following through in faithfulness.

I know that most people are not keen on talking about stewardship in the life of the church. For most people, they hear the word stewardship, and think, "Here we go again; the pastor's after my money." You're not entirely wrong, but you're not fully right, either. See, I don't just want your money - I want everything you have to give. Truly, if you have something that can help this church in its mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to know God's Love*, I want it. Of course, when I say I, it's like using the royal 'we.' I, as your Pastor, and as a leader in this church, want what you have so that we – this church, this faith community, this family – can be all it has been gifted to become.

I say that unashamedly, because that is the Biblical call on all who should choose to proclaim Christ as Lord and King. Hear a few scriptural claims, which call for you to give all you have for God's will:

Matthew 22:37 says, "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, and *all* your mind." ... The Lord doesn't want a little of your devotion, Christ wants it all.

1 Peter 4:10 says, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." ... Whatever you have been given, use it to serve one another.

Matthew 19:21 says, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." ... Jesus says all you need to be faithful is me – Christ; sell the rest, give it away, leave it all and follow me.

Such complete dedication is echoed in 1 Corinthians 6:20, which says, "You were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God with your body." ... Not just your possessions, but God wants even your physical being, and all of it.

Following the Biblical invitation, we are not going to shy away from talking about stewardship simply because we've always been told that stewardship is just a call to give our money – and we'd rather not talk about money. Instead, we are going to speak of the Biblical truth around stewardship, which calls us to give far more than just money. We're going to look at how the Bible invites us, out of faithful discipleship, to give of everything we have been given, for the purpose of following Christ.

This month, we're going to consider stewardship by learning about some of the saints who have come before us. I believe that, for the same reason we invite our children to be in worship with us, we learn best by modeling the life and behavior of the faithful who have come before us. Much like the mentor program this church has run in years past, we learn faithfulness through the witness of faithfulness that has been modeled by our predecessors of the faith.

Today, we are looking at stewardship as *The Way of Necessity* as we consider the faithful witness of Sarah Crosby.

Sarah Crosby was part of the early Methodist Movement in England. Crosby was introduced to the teachings of John Wesley in the 1750s. To note, there was no official Methodist Church yet, but Wesley's Methodist movement was underway as a hope of reforming the Church of England to be more attentive to the needs of the poor, to speak God's truth to those who were not welcome in the wealthy churches, and to spread Scriptural holiness across the nation.

Crosby had connected with some other females who studied Wesley's writings and the scripture together, and who also worked together to assist the poor and disabled. With her growing knowledge and influence, she became a class leader in 1752 (that is, she became a small group leader).

In 1961, she went to Derby, England, to lead a class meeting. Generally, these class meetings would have no more than 30 people present. They were intended to be small groups, where the class leader could address and speak to each person individually. However, on this occasion, some 200 people showed up.

At the time, women were not allowed to be preachers. Yet, in that moment, when these some odd 200 people had come to gather in Christ, such a large crowd would not permit a normal small group meeting to take place. So, as Crosby describes the event, I quote, "[I] gave out a hymn, and prayed, and told them part of what the Lord had done for myself, persuading them to flee from all sin."ⁱ ... Let's not be shy about claiming what this says: she led worship and she preached. She followed up this meeting by writing to Wesley, explaining what had happened, and inquiring if she should have done something different. Wesley responded, "I think you have not gone too far. You could not well do less. ... The Methodists do not allow of women preachers; ... But I will just nakedly tell you what is on my heart.' ... I do not see that you have broken any law. Go on calmly and steadily."

Crosby did what was necessary in the moment, even if such an undertaking were not permissible by the church at the time. "Rising to the occasion because we must, and giving of ourselves to others even when we haven't planned ahead for it, is often the Christian way of life."ⁱⁱ Sometimes stewardship is not something we plan for, it's something that is necessitated by the situation. Crosby was gifted with the ability to speak, to lead, and to connect her life with the call of the Biblical text – and in a moment of necessity, *unexpected* necessity, she was able to respond.

Crosby's response was to some extent chastised. I mean, in his response, Wesley said, "The Methodists do not allow of women preachers." He goes on to say, "neither do I take upon me any such character." ... Well, thanks Wesley. I'd read the rest of what Wesley had to offer, but it would likely come across as little more than some good ole' fashioned, 18th Century mansplaining. He might have told her to carry on, but it wasn't without some shame.

Yet, for as much grief as she received, she was encouraged to keep preaching, and she did. It's recorded that in 1777, she preached at some 220 public meetings in one 12-month span. And even if the church didn't approve of her preaching, and wouldn't ordain her to be clergy, she was right to preach. Her preaching was a faithful response to God as a steward of the gifts God had given her. And, if we were to look at the Biblical text, we would find she was not the first who responded to God's will as a faithful steward, even though it meant going against the rules of the church, and the practice of the tradition. Let's consider the connection of Sarah Crosby's story with our text from Acts this morning.

Acts is an account of the early church, offered by the apostle Luke, which tells us of the earliest days in the life of the Christian Church. Today's story comes from Acts 11, but is a story that is repeated – previously found in Acts chapter 10. Acts 10 offers a fuller account of the story. Here in chapter 11, we are reading the condensed version, where-in Peter has been called to testify about what had taken place in chapter 10.

We read in verse 1, "All the apostles and believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had accepted the word of God." This is the problem for which Peter has been called to testify. Up to now, the new Christian Church was reserved for Jewish converts. The earliest Christian church had maintained many of the rules, customs, and traditions of the Jewish community – which included *excluding* those outside the tradition of their faith.

Verse 2 tells us that Peter has gone to Jerusalem to give account for what happened, because the circumcised believers criticized him for going to eat with the uncircumcised men. Yes, Peter has been called to speak on his own behalf as to why he was willing to extend table fellowship to people who were not Jews – that is, the uncircumcised, who are the Gentiles. It's amazing that even some 2000 years later, we are still calling people to account for why they are willing to share at table with people who were not previously included in the life of the church – such criticism finds good company in the first leaders of our Church.

Peter defends himself, giving this account (I'm paraphrasing): "I was in Joppa – and I had a vision. A blanket from heaven came down, and on it were all the animals of the earth. I heard a voice saying, 'Go kill the animals, and eat them.' But I would not, and I said back, 'I can't do that – I've never let an unclean thing touch my mouth.' I mean, these animals were unclean, I wouldn't dare eat them. But, again, this voice said, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' We went back and forth three times, and then the sheet of animals was taken back into heaven." ... What God has called clean, you must not call profane. His vision is calling for him to expand his limited understanding to be faithful to God's limitless grace.

Peter goes on then to say at that very moment, as the sheet was removed, three men from Caesarea arrived at the house where he was staying. These were Gentiles – they were not Jews – they were not men of the Jewish tradition or culture. Yet, the Spirit led him to see them as being no different than himself, and he went with them. They told Peter they had received a message by God to come and find him. After arriving at the house, as they sat at the table, Peter began to speak to them, and in their midst, the Spirit fell upon them, just like at Pentecost.

Peter is a leader in the early church. He is a Jewish man, who was called to follow Christ, and came to know Christ as the Messiah – the Son of God. As a leader in the church – as the foundation, or the rock

of the church – he knew the rules that governed the early church (even if they were unwritten). He knew that Gentiles were not invited into the church. He knew, from his days of Jewish obedience, that Gentiles were outcasts. They were not part of the welcomed body in the faith tradition. And I'm sure he knew this trial would take place if he broke with tradition. He knew that by breaking bread at the table with Gentiles, that his fellow leaders would have concern.

After describing what happened, he gives his rationale, "In that moment, I remembered the word of the Lord, how Christ said, 'John was baptized with water, but you will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Peter responded in the way of necessity, because he saw the presence of God in the gift of the Spirit. If we go back to chapter 10 and read the full account, we find that after seeing the gift of the Spirit fall upon the Gentiles, Peter ordered they be baptized. He didn't just go with them – he didn't just preach for them – he didn't just break bread with them – he baptized them in the faith community.

Peter went against tradition because God had gifted him with the ability to speak God's Word, and to see the presence of the Spirit in the lives of others. And in that moment, what was necessary was to respond by using his gifts to share God's love with another, even if it meant he would be taken to trial and held accountable for his work. He responded in the way of necessity, because sometimes we are the right person, in the right moment, in the right place, with the right gifts, that by responding as stewards, God's love may be made known.

Sarah Crosby had a Biblical backing that called her to upset the rules that existed, that called her to use her gifts of preaching in the presence of eager others, and to proclaim God's great love and the need for repentance. Stewardship is not always something we can plan for, or program, or schedule, or spend time running SWOT analysis on before choosing to respond. Had Crosby left that meeting and called Wesley for guidance, some 200 women may have walked away that day having been failed because *she* had refused to respond with the gifts she had been given. Sometimes, God doesn't want us to wait – sometimes God shows up when it's not convenient or helpful for us – sometimes God doesn't give us time to find a way out. Sometimes, God just wants us to acknowledge that we have the gifts to serve in the *way of necessity*, and to respond in faithfulness in the here and now, and to trust ... *and to trust ...* that the God who has gifted us, the God who has empowered us, the God who has called us, will be with us as we respond as faithful stewards, and that through our faithfulness, the love of God may be made known.

So, whatever your gifts, may you have your eyes open, and your spirit willing, that when necessity calls, you may respond in faithfulness. For the glory of God, may we learn from the saints who teach us that stewardship is sometimes about *the way of necessity*. Amen.

ⁱ Sarah Crosby. 18thcenturyculture.wordpress.com Retrieved October 11, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Sarah McGiverin. Sarah Crosby – The Way of Necessity. umcdiscipleship.org. Retrieved October 11, 2018.