

“EXERCISING OUR FAITH”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

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In spring of 1831, Sarah Joiner attended a meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for foreign missions in Boston. At this meeting she met a young Congregational minister named David Lyman, who asked her to consider that she might have a call to work in the mission field as did he, and, by the way, unmarried missionaries being not allowed in foreign missions, they should maybe get married. How could you say no to such an enticing offer! Sarah and David married 3 months later and on the third day of their married life, they left all familiar behind and set off to Hawaii.

Now in those days, missionary appointments were for life. David and Sarah knew when they left New England that they would never be back, never see friends and family again. That's daunting enough for me. But Sarah's life in Hawaii—I bought a copy of her journal and collected letters last week while visiting old churches in downtown Hilo—Sarah's journal made me feel I had never done a serious day's work in my life. David and Sarah—neither of them trained as teachers--opened and ran a boys' school. Sarah also taught both adult and children's religious education classes—classes of 50-200 students. She visited the sick, instituted a fine carpentry program for the boys at the school, taught sewing classes for the local women, and kept house for herself, David, their 8 children, and a myriad of guests who she had to house, feed, and take care of at the drop of a hat. Oh, and she taught herself chemistry for fun!

What captured me most about Sarah Lyman's journal though, was her degree of introspection, that she struggled mightily through her life with whether or not she was worthy of this special discipleship, this call to the mission field. I thought about Sarah as I considered the gospel reading for today: Jesus walking along the seashore, going up to some unknown fishermen and asking them, “Leave your nets. Come and follow me.” David Lyman walking up to an unknown young woman at a meeting and asking her, “Leave all you know behind. Come with me and we'll follow Christ together.”

Come with me. Let's be Christ's disciples together, you and I. What does it mean to you when I say that? I would guess that among us all, if the question were put to you all individually, there would be variety of answers given. And I would also guess while laughing about and affirming that variety in the group of us, there is inside at least some of you here at least a vague unease about our variety. If the greatest weakness of the conservative church is hubris and a certainty that they know all that is important to be known about Jesus, the weakness of the progressive church, all of us, is that so many of us are insecure that we know anything important about Jesus. Us, disciples, really? But we don't understand the resurrection, and we really don't know the Bible all that well, and we are uncertain of how to pray and what to pray and what it even means to pray. There are certainly people out there “better” than us, more pious than us, less conflicted than us. We're not sure, some of us, where the church fits in our lives; we're not sure we've even really begun to understand how to follow Jesus and keep up with work and tend our families. Don't I have to be a better Christian to be worthy to be called a Christian at all? Does any of that sound familiar to you? Us, disciples, really? I think it would be a great name for a new church

start. But seriously, I don't want to make too light of what I know is a genuine struggle of authenticity for many in our progressive church.

Does it make you feel better to know that Sarah Lyman, a woman who gave up family, friends, all she had known to go to a completely different place, Sarah wondered if she were good enough, committed enough, Christian enough for the work before her? And certainly the apostle Paul struggled with those same questions, and I would guess that Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John, even as they said yes, and dropped their nets, and followed after Jesus, they thought, "What am I getting into?" and "Sometimes I really don't understand this guy at all." "What am I doing here?"

So maybe, to begin with for Us Disciples Really, maybe the place we are supposed to start, maybe the place we're supposed to live our lives, is in that place of tension about who and where we are in our discipleship. It's like Jesus' stories that are designed to make us uncomfortable time and time again, maybe uncertainty about our "realness" as disciples is that which makes us ask ourselves the important questions over and over. Is this enough? Can I do more now? Where do I want to go now? What have I learned that I didn't know before? How does my life serve God? What would I like it to be? How do I get there from here? Maybe we could think of ourselves as truly engaging these questions rather than just being insecure....

Another point looking at the first disciples and Sarah Lyman and ourselves. Have you noticed in the Bible how often the disciples are wrong, how many times they don't understand, how many times they, in fact, fail Jesus in significant ways at crucial times? And Sarah Lyman, as much as I admire her courage, her faith, her stamina, her love and commitment, at the same time, I have to tell you that like most good Congregationalists of her day, she was—to say it politely—culturally myopic. She couldn't figure out how to lead people to Christ without making them look like New England Congregationalists. She was racist, calling the native Hawaiians "savages" even while learning to love them. At moments, reading her journal, I am awed by her; other times, I want nothing to do with her. The original disciples lived their faith imperfectly; Sarah Lyman lived her faith imperfectly; we live our faith imperfectly, all of us real disciples. Even when we're trying to do better. And the truth is that we will never even know all the mistakes we make, all the ways we get Jesus wrong. Again, that's just part of the deal. Our history in the church is so mixed. Committed Christians gave us hospice and hospitals and the slaughter and plunder of the crusades. Christians have educated the poor, fed the homeless, given the native people clothes and taken their land, and targeted Jews for annihilation. All in the name of Christ. Sometimes we get it really right. Sometimes we get it really wrong. We can choose to be either terrified, and paralyzed by that. Or we can be freed by it.

Like the generations before us, we can only do the best we can—to live our lives, to raise our children, to give back to the community, to make a difference—to dare to call ourselves disciples and take whatever is the next step forward for us. Sarah Lyman, though struggling with her limitations, got up every morning and did the best work she knew to do. And so can we. We are disciples really—despite our doubts and our conflicts, our imperfect understanding. Jesus didn't call Peter and Andrew and James and John, or any of the others, expecting them to be perfect. He called them, saying simply, "Follow me." And they did it every day—good days and bad days, flashes of insight, moments of missing the point all together. We can do the same. Even us? Disciples? Really? And it will be enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.