

Imagine being thousands of miles from home because you felt compelled by the Holy Spirit that this was part of your mission, and not knowing if you would live or die.

Such was the situation for a young woman named Sarah Corson who for years has worked with Servants in Faith and Technology to help people in need in 80 countries.

Her story is shared in a book called "Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship." And while she and her husband are still alive today, that decision to follow Christ and where He was leading them certainly proved for her to be very costly.

One evening, she was outside a mission site in a village. The air on the porch was chilly, and suddenly she heard a crash. Turning quickly she could see in the moonlight that a soldier had slid into their water barrel. Sarah was paralyzed with shock as she looked out over the clearing that separated their temporary home from the jungle. About thirty soldiers were rushing the house.

Their host country had just held elections, not the usual custom, and the military did not agree with the results. It had taken over one week before, exiling the newly-elected president and repressing any resistance, real or imagined. Since Sarah was in such a remote frontier village, she had not expected the fighting to reach her. While she stood there, frozen in fear, watching the soldiers surround their house, the message her neighbor woman had brought her that day flashed through my mind.

"Sister, keep your team in the house," she had urged. "I just came from the market over near the military camp. I overheard two soldiers saying the Americans were to blame for the resistance to their takeover. They said they would not rest until they had exterminated every American in this zone."

Sarah wasn't there for politics so she didn't think she'd be noticed. She was wrong.

In her fear though, she put her trust in God. "God! If I have to die, take care of my family. Please take away this fear. I don't want to die afraid. Please help me to die trusting you." She prayed; she was suddenly aware of the presence of God.

She found herself stepping up to the closest soldier and speaking words she could never have thought to say, "Welcome, brother," she called out. "Come in. You do not need guns to visit us."

At that the soldier jumped, dropped the bullet he was putting into his gun, and shouted, "Not me. I'm not the one. I'm just following orders. There's the commander over there; he's the one."

Sarah raised her voice and repeated, "You're all welcome. Everyone is welcome in our home."

At that the commander ran up to her, shoved the muzzle of his rifle against her stomach, and pushed her through the door into the house. Thirty soldiers rushed into the house and began pulling everything off the shelves and out of drawers, looking for guns. They herded the team members into the kitchen where they sat quietly by the glow of the two candles used for light.

The soldier who led the attack turned his gun on Sarah and demanded angrily, "What are you Americans doing down here trying to stop our revolution? Seventeen Americans would not be living in this poverty if they did not have political motivation."

"Sir," Sarah responded truthfully, "We have had nothing to do with your revolution. We are here for two reasons. We are teaching self-help projects to the hungry and we are teaching the Bible."

"That tells me nothing," he responded. "I have never read the Bible in my life. Maybe it is a communist book for all I know."

"You have never read the Bible in your life? Oh, sir, I am so sorry for you! You have missed the best part of your life. Please let me tell you what it says."

He made no objection. He had to stand there with his gun on Sarah and her team while the other soldiers ransacked the house looking for the guns they did not have.

She picked up a Spanish Bible and turned to the Sermon on the Mount. "We teach about Jesus Christ," she said, "God's son who came into this world to save us. He also taught us a better way than fighting. He taught us the way of love."

"Because of him, I can tell you that even if you kill me, I will die loving you because God loves you. To follow him, I have to love you too."

"That's humanly impossible!" he burst out.

"That's true, sir," she answered. "It isn't humanly possible, but with God's help it is possible." "I don't believe it."

"You can prove it, sir. I know you came here to kill us...but you cannot make me hate you. I will die praying for you because God loves you and we love you too."

The soldier lowered his gun and stepped back. Clearing his throat, he said, "You almost convince me that you are innocent, but I have orders to take everyone in the house and the ham radio. I will let you get some warm clothes and a blanket. You will be sleeping on the ground."

They marched Sarah and her team two by two at gunpoint down a trail to where a truck was waiting on the one little road that came into the village. She saw that others in the town had been taken prisoner also. The district superintendent of the church, the

leaders of the youth group and other leaders were lined up at gunpoint, ready to be loaded on the trucks with them.

Suddenly the soldier changed his mind. "Halt," he commanded. "Take only the men. The women will come with me."

He led them back to their home, saying, "I don't know why I am doing this. I was about to take you into a jungle camp of over a thousand soldiers. I cannot take you.

"In our army no one breaks an order," he continued sternly. "I have never broken an order before, but for the first time tonight I am refusing to obey an order. If my superior officer finds out that you were in this house when I raided it, and that I did not take you, I will pay for it with my life." He strode to the door, stopped, and looked back again. "I could have fought any amount of guns you might have had," he said, "but there is something here I cannot understand. I cannot fight it." He left, and no one knew what happened to the others who were taken. No one knew what would happen next.

The local people insisted Sarah could not have a service in the church on Sunday because the soldiers considered any meeting held to be for the purpose of political agitation. "Soldiers will be there if you have a service. They will take more prisoners," they told Sarah. All agreed to pray at home on Sunday.

But on Saturday night a messenger came to her door. "I bring a message from the man who commanded the attack on your village Thursday night," he informed them. "He says he will be at your service on Sunday. However, he has no vehicle on Sundays so you are to bring the church's jeep and get him. He said to tell you that if you don't come he will be there anyway, even if he has to walk the ten miles." It sounded like a threat.

Sarah sent a message to everyone in the town that night, telling the people they did not have to come. But everyone did. The next morning she took the jeep and went to get the commander. He came with a bodyguard. The two of them marched coldly into the church and sat down, still holding their rifles. The women on the team came in, the bell was rung, and all began to sing. The church was packed before the first hymn was over. The people came pale and trembling, but they came. They had felt that their faith was at stake, and they were determined to attend, even if it meant imprisonment.

Since the leaders of the church had been taken by the military, Sarah led the service. She tried to do just what she would have done had the soldiers not been there. It was church custom to welcome visitors by inviting them to the platform, singing a welcome song, and waving to them. Everyone would then line up to shake the visitors' hands, hug them, and say some personal words of greeting.

How, though, she wondered, could she ask these people to hug the very man who had taken their husband, son, or brother prisoner? That was asking too much. She decided that she would ask them to sing a welcome song but that she would stop there and leave out the hugging.

The soldiers were surprised when Sarah asked them to come to the platform to let the people welcome them. "Welcome us?" they asked in amazement. "Well, all right," they shrugged. They came forward and stood very formally with their guns across their backs. The people stood, singing weakly and waving their hands timidly. She expected them to sit back down, but no. The first man on the front seat came forward and put out his hand. As he bent over to hug the soldier Sarah heard him say, "Brother, we don't like what you did to our village, but this is the house of God, and God loves you, so you are welcome here." Everyone in the church followed his example, even the women whose eyes were red from weeping for their loved ones whom this man had taken prisoner. They too said words of welcome. The looks on the soldiers' faces became ones of surprise, then incredulity.

When the last person finished greeting them, the head soldier marched to the pulpit and said in a very stern voice, "Now I will have a few words. Never have I ever dreamed that I could raid a town, come back, and have that town welcome me as a brother. I can hardly believe what I have seen and heard this morning," he said to the congregation.

"This is the first church service I have ever been to," he continued. "I never believed there was a God before, but what I have just felt is so strong that I will never doubt the existence of God again as long as I live."

He turned from one side of the congregation to the other. "Do all of you know God?" he asked. "If you know God, hang on to him. It must be the greatest thing in the world to know God." As he spoke in an urgent voice he motioned with his hand, clenching it as though to hold on to something, while in his other hand he held a gun.

"I don't know God," he confessed in a low voice, "but I hope some day I shall, and that some day we can once again greet each other as brothers and sisters, as we have done this morning."

He met up with Sarah again for a lunch the next day, prepared by many of the village people who remained. Sarah wasn't able to follow up with him after that though, as her bishop arranged for her and others to get safely out of the country. Eventually most everyone who was taken was release.

Often Sarah thinks of the soldier and his 30 men who stormed out of the jungle ready to kill them. Within fifteen minutes he had changed his mind and risked his life to save them. How? Sarah thanks God for putting divine love into her heart for a person she could not love on her own.

She closes by saying she cannot forget the last thing the soldier said to them as he left: "I have fought many battles and killed many people. It was nothing to me. It was just my job to exterminate them. But I never knew them personally. This is the first time I ever knew my enemy face to face. Now I believe that if we knew each other, our guns would not be necessary."

What both Sarah and that soldier eventually came to have in common was a knowledge of God, and that knowledge came to convert the soldier and gave Sarah the understanding of what God's will was for her.

In our first reading this week, Solomon, who is associated with writing the book of Wisdom, ponders on knowing the will of God. He has prayed for wisdom, and received it from God, so he can rise above the worldly concerns and govern the people in ways that would benefit them spiritually. Notice the answer to his question is not "no"; no one can of course fully know God's will. But God has granted us his Wisdom, the same Wisdom that spoke to Sarah and that soldier, and this gives us knowledge of God. It sets our hearts on fire with the love of God, and that love is so powerful it brought enemies together in a small village who had only known hate.

This Wisdom though comes with a cost as we hear in the Gospel. If we are going to follow Jesus on the road, we have to calculate the cost as Jesus tells us. And the cost is putting God first, which is what Sarah and that soldier did.

The takeaways for us are first, asking ourselves what is our priority in life, and then asking ourselves are we willing to pay the cost for following Jesus.

With respect to priorities, the words of Jesus sound harsh don't they? Hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. Of course God wants us to love one another, it's a commandment. And Jesus loved Joseph and Mary. The word hate at the time of Jesus does not have the deep meaning of animosity and loathing that we would use it for, rather it's best translated as to prefer something less. And when we think of it that way, we have to be honest about ourselves about where does God rank with the other things, events and people in our lives? All of us have things in life in common such as money, power, the physical desire to be with a person in a relationship; honor and people around us. And individually they can be good things; one can do good things with money; family members can help us a great deal; power can be used to help a group or business grow; attraction between two people can lead to love and a relationship; having honor can mean we are respected. But we also have to look at how each of these things rank in our lives. If money is the center of our world, we will never have enough and be happy. If power is the center of our world, we'll never let go when it's time to let go or see the gifts of others. If the desire to be with a person is at the center of a person's world it can lead to sensual sins and abusing the human body; If honor is our center can we admit when we can't do something or have failed or will we do things just to build up our ego. And if people or family are the center of our world, a person might become overbearing or not be able to let go or be too attached. But what happens when God is at the center, is everything falls into place. A person begins to see that all they do is to glorify Him and help point the way to Him through their words and actions, and the Holy Spirit helps them to see how to treat others and use the gifts they have been given.

Of course with that though there is a cost. Being committed to a prayer life and coming to Mass; being committed to being a parent and to a marriage through the highs and lows; working removing things that are sinful in our life; dealing with the challenge to evangelize through being involved in a parish or testifying to what our faith teaches even if people hate us or mock us for it. Discipleship involves so many costs but that is how we get to heaven.

God puts us here to be on a mission. It all goes back to the question of the soldier to that congregation: "Do all of you know God? If you know God, hang on to him. It must be the greatest thing in the world to know God." Hopefully we truly want to know God not just fulfill a Sunday obligation. That is the wisdom we hopefully want. And if we are going to try to do His will but worship something other than God such as the body, the bank account, the ego, or whatever it might be, we'll fail on that mission. So what holds you back? Let go of those things. Detachment, as that soldier and Sarah found in their own way, was the key to freedom and they key to our mission. So may we become detached from whatever holds us back so we can be truly free to move forward on our journey to sainthood.