

Melissa Maltman

Mark 5: 38-39

5-27-18

It takes a lot of courage to be a human being. My nephew Jericho is turning soon and we are have a first birthday party for him on Monday so I couldn't help but think how he, and my own daughters when they were just babies, did not know that it takes a lot of courage to be a human being.

Looking into a babies eyes, it is easy to see that he does not know anything about arthritis or depression. A baby does not lay awake at night worrying about his relationships or his job. There is no fear in those sea-blue eyes. He sleeps and eats and sighs when he is full. His world is as wide as his mother's arms, and as safe. That is all he knows.

As my nephew grows, he will learn more. He will learn that bees sting and roses have thorns, and that other children push and throw rocks. He will learn that having a fever is like being set on fire and that when your parents decide to move, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. All of that is part of growing up. It is not the only part, by a long shot, but it is the hard part, and it is part of how we learn what it is to be a human being.

Year after year, we add to our experience of the world, pushing against our limits to find out what will budge and what will not, and gradually we gain a sense of our own power. We find that we can make certain things happen and we can prevent other things from happening; we can make friends and we can make enemies we can say yes, and we can say no.

Some of us get so carried away with this discovery that we begin to think we are in control of our lives. We come of age and we decide what we want to be. We open bank accounts and make five –year plans. We take our vitamins and work out three times a week at the gym. We space our children two years apart and raise them by the book, and nine-tenths of the time it actually seems to work, enough of the time so that we convince ourselves it is true; that if you just do everything right, then everything will turn out all right, that human beings really can take charge of their lives.

Until something happens. The job is lost, the doctor finds a spot on the x ray, the child's grades go down and down, and it is like being trapped inside a fine automobile when the Brakes fail. In a split second everything changes. One moment you are comfortably and safely in command of your journey, and the

next you are being flung down the road in an expensive piece of machinery that will not stop.

“I’ve lost control!” That is what good people say when bad things happen to them. “I’ve lost control of my life!?” I have said it myself, but it is not true. Human beings do not lose control of their lives. What we lose is the illusion that we were ever in control of our lives in the first place, and it is a hard, hard, lesson to learn – so hard that most of us have to go back to the blackboard again and again, because we keep thinking that there must be some way to work it out, some way to master the human condition so that there are no leaks in it, no scares, no black holes.

As far as I know, it cannot be done. Maybe that is why it is called the human condition. Like Asthma, being human is a condition we live with – a wonderful condition in most respects – but one with certain built –in limitations. Some things will budge for us and some will not. We cannot fly (unless we are in a plane). We cannot live forever. We cannot control everything that happens to us. That is the human condition and it can be frightening, because what that means is we cannot choose all the circumstances of our lives. All we can really choose is

how we respond to them, and that is why it takes a lot of courage to be a human being.

The Bible is full of this. Jesus and his disciples are out on the lake when a heavy storm blows up. Eight –foot waves swamp the boat, lightning pops overhead with a sound like a bullwhip. The disciples are terrified. The wind and the sea are beyond their control, while Jesus lies sleeping on a pillow in the stern.

“Teacher,” they cry, “do you not care that we are perishing?” Waking up, Jesus says, “Peace! Be Still!” and the squall stops just like that. “Why are you afraid?” he asks them. “Have you Still no faith?”

A man possessed by an unclean spirit lives in a Gerasene graveyard. No one can control him. His ankles are scarred from the fetters he has snapped in two. Everyone is afraid of him until Jesus shows up. “Come out of the man,” he says to the unclean spirit, and the man’s sanity is restored.

Or take this story, which follows on the heels of these other two in Mark’s gospel. Jesus crosses the lake again and has not been on shore five minutes when one of the leaders of the synagogue, Jairus by name, falls at his feet. He too is suffering from the human condition he too is up against something he cannot control – not a storm this time, or an unclean spirit, but a threat against the life of

his child. His little girl is close to death and there is nothing he can do, nothing but lie in the dirt and beg: “Come and lay your hands on her,” he beseeches Jesus, “so that she may be made well, and live.”

But before Jesus can follow him home, the worst possible news comes. It is too late; she is gone. Only Jesus ignores this version of the truth. Turning to Jairus, he delivers the shortest sermon of his career: “Do not fear,” he says to the grief stricken man, “Only believe.”

It is not just a word for Jairus; it is a word for all of us who suffer from the human condition, who are up against things we cannot control. Only believe what? That our prayers will be answered? That thing will turn out the way we think they should? That we will get what we want? That is the way it seems to work in the stories. People call on Jesus and they get what they want. The storm stops, the demon departs, the little girl gets up and walks around. So naturally, we try to figure out what those people did right so that we can do it too, so that the same thing will happen to us.

Only that is not what the stories are about. They are not stories about how to get God to do what we want, which is just another way of trying to stay in control. Instead, they are stories about who God is, and how God acts, and what

God is like. Mark wrote them down for one reason and one reason alone: “This is no ordinary man.” He tells us every way he knows how. “This man is the son of God. Believe it.”

Mark wanted people to believe that so they would have strength to meet the days to come. He wanted them to believe that Jesus was who he said he was so that later, after he was gone, they would not lose heart. He wanted them to believe that even when he was not around to talk with them face to face anymore, that he still had the power to calm their storms and send their demons away and restore the dead to life in new and different ways.

New and different because his own death changed everything, by its very ordinariness. He was nailed to a cross, he bled and died, in very short order. Those who came expecting mighty acts from him went away disappointed, because there at the end he was up against the human condition just like the rest of us. That is what he consented to do, so that God could show us the possibilities: how one human being, willing to lose control of his life, might receive it back again, not for a time, but for all time, and for all humankind as well.

“Do not fear,” he says, “only believe.” Only believe what? He does not say, but those are the two choices, apparently when human beings discover that they are not in charge after all. They can fear, or they can believe. They can panic and fall overboard or they can ride out the storm. They can despair or they can wait, very quietly, for sanity to return. They can be afraid of they can believe. Judging by my own experience, it is almost never a matter of either/or. I do not know anyone who believes all the time, but I do know how both fear and belief feel, and that there is a difference between the two.

Fear is a small cell with no air in it and no light. It is suffocating inside, and dark. There is no room to turn around inside it. You can only face in one direction, but it hardly matters since you cannot see anyhow. There is no future in the dark. Everything is over. Everything is past. When you are locked up like that, tomorrow is as far away as the moon.

People can stop by and tap on you walls. They can even bang on the door to show you where it is, but when you are afraid you cannot open up. They might not be who they say they are. They might just make things worse. It is safer to stay where you are, where you know what is what, even if you cannot breathe, even if you cannot move. That is how fear feels.

Belief is something altogether different, although belief is not what some would have us believe. Belief is not a well-fluffed nest, or a well-defended castle high on a hill. It is more like a rope bridge over a scenic gorge, sturdy but swinging back and forth, with plenty of light and air, but precious little to hang onto except the stories you have heard: that it is the best and only way across, that it is possible, that it will bear your weight.

All you have to do is believe in the bridge more than you believe in the gorge, but fortunately you do not have to be in it all by yourself. There are others to believe it with you, and even some to believe it for you when your own belief wears thin. They have crossed the bridge ahead of you and are waiting on the other side. You can talk to them if you like, as you step into the air, putting one foot ahead of the other, just that: just one step at a time.

It takes a lot of courage to be a human being, but if Jesus was who he said he was, the bridge will hold. Believing in him will not put us in charge, or get us what we want or even save us from all harm, but believing in him, we may gradually lose our fear of our lives. Whatever the human condition we find ourselves in, we may finally learn to live it, maybe even to love it, if only because he lives and loves it too.



