

“COURAGE”

Scripture lesson: Mark 4:26-34; II Corinthians 5:6

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A few years back, two similar stories with very different outcomes made the news. The first was about Kenneth Wright, a high school football star, avid wrestler, boxer, hunter and skin diver. Kenneth broke his neck in a wrestling match and was left paralyzed from the waist down. He underwent therapy and his doctors were hopeful that one day he would be able to walk with the help of braces and crutches. But apparently, this former athlete could not reconcile himself to his physical disability. He talked two of his best friends into taking him in his wheelchair to a wooded area where they left him alone with a 12-gauge shotgun. At 24 years of age, he took his own life.

Jim McGowan is also a paraplegic. Thirty years ago, at the age of 19, Jim was stabbed and left paralyzed from the middle of his chest down. Ever since he has been confined to a wheelchair.

Jim made the news when he made a successful parachute jump, landing on a target in the middle of Lake Wallenpaupack in the Poconos. Jim lives alone, cooks his meals, washes his clothes, and cleans his own house. He drives himself in his specially equipped automobile. He has written three books and did the photography for his first book by himself.

Both of these men faced the same problem. One gave up. The other didn't. What was the difference?

Hopefully, few of us will ever find ourselves confronted by this kind of serious disability, but all of us can expect to face difficult circumstances in our lives.

- Not all of our dreams will come true.
- We don't hit a home run every time we come up to bat.
- The salesperson doesn't make a sale on every call.
- A lawyer doesn't win every case.
- A teacher can't reach every child.
- Businesses and marriages fail.
- People leave us, plans go awry.

At one time or another, all of us can find ourselves in that place where life seems to whisper in our ear, "Give up. What's the use?" When we hear that whisper to give up, how do we stand up?

Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "We are always of good courage." This is an amazing statement when you know the circumstances of Paul's life. Here was a man that knew more than his share of failure and hardship – including failure with the very people to whom he addresses this letter. If anyone has ever had reason to give up on people, it has to be Paul when it comes to these fickle, ornery people in Corinth. Paul had brought them the Gospel, brought them into relationship to Christ, only to have them turn their backs on him and look for a new leader.

Why bother with people like that? Who needs them? It was enough to make Paul doubt, not only his friends, but himself. But instead, Paul writes, “We are always of good courage.”

Two people face similar circumstances, one gives up, one stands up. What’s the difference? Maybe it is found in this little word “courage.”

Courage is that reserve of moral strength upon which we can draw in times of crisis. It is the ability to face difficult situations with resolve and confidence. Courage is what keeps us going when we are tempted to turn tail and run. Courage is what Jim Gowan had.

The opposite of courage is discouragement. The prefix “dis” comes from the Latin for “apart” or “asunder.” To be discouraged is to be deprived of that confidence and hope with which to face life resolutely. Discouragement is the demon that whispers in our ear, “What’s the use, give up.”

There came a time when the disciples of Jesus must have grown discouraged. At first, things had been easy enough. Crowds turned out to see Jesus wherever they went. They were on the winning team. But then things began to change. Powerful people got upset with Jesus and began to plot against him. Storm clouds began to gather. It looked like a good time to jump ship.

Jesus must have sensed their growing discouragement. He also knew that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better. And so, he called his disciples aside one day and did what he often did. He told them a story.

He told them a story about how a farmer scatters seeds in the field, and then goes to sleep, goes about his daily business. All the while the seeds sprout and grow. The farmer doesn’t see this happen. He doesn’t really understand how it happens. The rhythms of nature have their own time. All he knows is that he must sow the seed and then wait patiently. The time of harvest will come. There is a time for sowing and a time for waiting.

Part of courage has to do with patience and persistence. And that can be a hard lesson to learn in the hurry-up world in which we live. The first time I ever tried to cook canned biscuits, I read the directions carefully. It said to pre-heat the oven to 375 degrees, put the biscuits on an ungreased cookie sheet, and bake for 20 minutes. I figured that if it took 20 minutes at 375 degrees, then it should take no more than 10 minutes if I turned it up to 475. So, I turned up the oven and popped in the biscuits.

Those of you who know about these things know what happened. The biscuits came out kind of burned and hard on the outside, and raw and doughy on the inside. I guess that is where the expression “half-baked” comes from. A half-baked idea is one that hasn’t had time to be fully thought out.

There are things in life which can’t be hurried up and when we try to, we mess them up. Impatience can sow the seeds of discouragement.

Of course, we are living in this MTV, instant message world where everything is done instantly. News has been reduced to sound bites, fast food has replaced the family table, and calculators have replaced multiplication tables. When our idea of a good breakfast is a Pop Tart, it’s hard to see why we would wait on anything. The message sent in our culture seems to be, “If at first you don’t succeed, give up. It’s not worth the effort. Move on.”

John Killinger tells the story about the days of the great western cattle ranches. When there was a wild horse that needed to be broken in, sometimes they would harness it to a little burro. Bucking, raging, convulsing like a drunken sailor, the two would then be turned loose on the desert

range. They could be seen disappearing over the horizon, the big steed dragging the little burro along and throwing him about like a bag of cream puffs.

They might be gone for a day, but eventually they would come back. The little burro would be seen first, trotting back across the horizon, leading the submissive steed in tow. Somewhere out there in the wilderness that steed would become exhausted from trying to get rid of the burro, and in that moment, the burro would take charge and become the leader.

In life, more often than not, the battles go to the determined not to the outraged. The battle is won by those who are patient, not those who are simply dramatic.

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground and should sleep and rise day and night, the seed should sprout and grow, and he knows not how.” When life whispers to us, give up, sometimes we just need to slow up. To realize that things don’t always happen on our timetable. We plant the seeds but must await the results, trusting that God can use and bless our efforts. Courage grows from those seeds of patience and hope.

Jesus then told his disciples another story: “The kingdom of God is like the mustard seed. It is the smallest seed on earth, yet when it is sown and grows up it becomes the greatest of all shrubs.” If you didn’t know anything about seeds and plants, and someone showed you a tiny seed and then pointed to a great tree and said, “That comes from this,” you might think them crazy.

I bought an iPhone a couple of years ago. It is not much larger than a credit card and fits into my pocket. Not only is it a phone but it also gives access to the internet, it has a calculator, a maps program that locates and gives directions, it can take pictures and movies. The list goes on and on. An iPhone can do more than what it would have taken a whole room of computers to do a few decades ago. Looking at those first computers, if someone had said, “Soon there will be an instrument the size of a card that will do more than all this equipment does now,” what would people have thought? It sounded crazy.

If impatience can be a source of discouragement, so can skepticism. “It can’t be done, there is no use trying.”

Paul Longmore is the author of a scholarly and much lauded book with the title, *The Invention of George Washington*. And yet, Longmore has no use of his hands. Nor can he sit up. His back is severely curved. He wrote this book with his mouth, a pencil clenched in his teeth, pecking out one letter at a time on a computer keyboard.

Longmore says it didn’t take a great deal of courage to write a book with his mouth. It was just one of those problems that the physically challenged have to deal with – like how to eat a sandwich or take a bath. Through trial and error he solved these problems.

“What takes courage,” Longmore says, “is living with hope in a society that seems bent on discouraging people who have disabilities.” His college counselors told him, “Why do you want to do a PhD, no one is going to hire you to teach.”

“I want to be a scholar,” Longmore told them.

“Better forget it, son, it’s too tough. They aren’t going to hire you, find another way.”

When life whispers in our ears “give up,” what is also being said is, “You can’t do it.”

History is full of people who said it couldn’t be done. One of them won a Noble Prize in chemistry this past week. Experts said that iron ships would never float. When Joshua Coppersmith

tried to sell stock for the telephone in Boston, he was arrested for fraud. “It is impossible to transmit the human voice over a wire,” is what the experts said.

We are easy prey to that kind of skepticism. “I’m just one person, what can I do?” “My efforts are like a drop in the bucket.” But if you have ever left a faucet dripping all night with the drain closed, you know what happens. The drops will eventually fill the sink to overflowing – one drop after another and another.

Jesus said, “Look at the mustard seed, it is the smallest seed on earth, but when it is sown, and grows, it is the greatest of all shrubs.”

I don’t know that I have anything to contribute that will revolutionize the world. I guess if the truth be known, I am just a drip. But somehow, if I can be a drop in the bucket of God’s kingdom, then I would have done something. Because God has a way of blessing and using our efforts far beyond what we may ever know.

This past week Stephen Jobs, the inventor and founder of Apple computers, died. I was watching a video of the commencement speech that he gave at Stanford University in 2005. In it, he told about his own college experience. He dropped out, partly because of finances but also because he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do and didn’t want to waste his parent’s money.

But when he dropped out, it gave him the freedom to drop in on different classes. One of the classes he went to was on calligraphy – learning how to write with beautiful scripts. He learned all about serifs and sanserifs and different fonts and spacing, all those things that produce such beautiful text. At the time, this class wasn’t part of any plan. To some it must have seemed like a total waste of time. I mean calligraphy? What’s the point in that? Nobody writes that way anymore.

But Jobs said that when they were creating the first Mac Computer, he decided to use changeable fonts with the correct line spacing. The result, of course, is that this has now become the standard. We have all these beautiful fonts to choose from by connecting the dots back to Jobs taking a course in calligraphy.

Jobs went on to say that you can only connect the dots by looking back, not by looking forward. Something which may seem so inconsequential can, looking back, become something of great consequence when we connect the dots. “We are always of good courage,” Paul wrote, “for we walk by faith and not sight.”

None of us will ever see the end of our efforts. We can’t connect the dots of our lives looking forward. As parents we do our best, we try to plant those seeds of wisdom, respect, and values not knowing the results, but trusting that our efforts will bear fruit. We must walk by faith and not sight.

If impatience and skepticism are the seeds of discouragement, then faith sows the seeds of courage. With patience, persistence and hope, we sow the seeds of our lives trusting that God will connect the dots. God will use our efforts to produce a harvest of good.

“We are always of good courage,” Paul wrote, “for we walk by faith and not sight.”