

Nothing Before It's Time, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 19071007
Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4 and Luke 17:5-10
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 7 October, 2007

The phrase, "Nothing before its time," indicates a need for patience and long-suffering. It comes from God's encounter with the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk was tired of seeing destruction and violence all around him. He asked God to put an end to it. God told him that there is a vision concerning God's realm which awaits its time. God said, "If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."¹

That does not give us consolation when we are in the midst of adversity. We echo the prophet's words, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"² That is a cry of frustration we all have made at one time or another. It is not comforting to say to someone who is recovering from an operation, or to someone who has lost a job, "Be patient, suffer a little longer." To say to a person suffering from a disabling condition and crying out, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help," "Just make the best of it," simply adds to their frustration.

Bill was paralyzed for months and became very angry. He gave people a hard time when they came to see him, especially those who wanted to pray for him. He lashed out at people who tried to help him when he finally got into a wheel chair. He was angry at God, angry at himself, and angry at others who wanted to help. I can't stand here and tell such a frustrated person to be patient: "Oh, it'll be okay in month or so. Just bear the pain." What I can do, though, is tell myself to be patient while working my hardest for fulfillment of the vision that awaits its time. The vision is God's vision, and it is a vision of health and wholeness. What you and I need to know is that people who have disabilities are people with talents in other areas, and that they can be giving people and that they are whole people.

How do you look upon a person who is mentally retarded? Unless you have been fortunate enough to live closely with a person like my sister Chip, you probably feel very sorry or perhaps you recoil in fear. You may wonder how her parents kept her instead of institutionalizing her. You may feel bad she "would never amount to much." Yet, what Chip meant to me was a larger vision of God's world. Because I knew she was a beautiful person with talents and love, I learned that all people have talent and are capable of loving.

Jean Vanier³ tells the story of Johnny who has Down's Syndrome like my sister Chip. Johnny loves to go shopping, but not because wants to buy anything. When the residents of his group home go shopping, Johnny goes along. In the store, he goes to each shopper and introduces himself, then moves about the store introducing customers to one another. Eventually, everyone in the store has met everyone else, having been distracted from shopping by a smiling handicapped boy with a different agenda. As they meet and begin to talk to one another, Johnny simply stands back and smiles. Johnny has completed his unique mission. That is wholeness, and it represents more health and sense of mission than we often express ourselves. Johnny has a sense of God's vision and embarks on his mission to fulfill that vision.

"Nothing before its time" is not entirely true. The vision mentioned by Habakkuk is already fulfilled. It is emerging and every once in a while it breaks out in full bloom. It is not present everywhere yet, but God's vision is coming. It is not tarrying. When we see Johnny as a whole person, giving love and fellowship to preoccupied shoppers, we see the vision's fruition. That is the first aspect of the vision: persons with disabilities are whole people. There are three additional aspects of the vision that awaits its time.

The second aspect is the vision of a church that fully accessible to all God's people. The church

¹Habakkuk 2:3

²Habakkuk 1:2

³Founder of L'Arche, communities for people with developmental disabilities

building is a place where the encounter between God and humans takes place. Therefore, there should be nothing to prevent persons with disabling conditions from coming here. We know about physical barriers in our church building. I am reminded of it everytime I see some of our older members climbing the steps from downstairs. If a person in a wheelchair can make it into our sanctuary, she cannot lead worship from the chancel, because there are only steps to get up here.

What about other barriers? Do we unknowingly prevent people from coming here to worship God because of attitudinal barriers? Are there subtle ways we tell people they are not welcome here, or cannot take part to the full extent that others do? That is where the vision still remains merely a vision. That is where we must pray to our God to make the vision a reality in all its fullness. In what ways can we fully incorporate blind, deaf, or mentally retarded people into the church program? We must eliminate all barriers to allow all people to come here to encounter God.

The third aspect of the vision is that it awaits its time in society as whole. God's vision of society is one which accepts all people. My daughter Emily was young and wanted drink water. I said, "There's a fountain, get a drink." She said, "Daddy, I can't. I need you to lift me up. It's too high!" She was no shorter than a person in a wheelchair.

A member of one of my former churches, Doug, was blind. He taught me many things. One thing was this. Do you know why people who have disabling conditions don't like be called "Handicapped?" The word handicap implies a person with a cap in hand, asking for money to survive. That is not what persons with disabilities want. They want to be productive and meaningful members of society pulling their own weight. All they ask is for society to stop putting barriers in their way of being self-sufficient.

The World Health Organization offers three definitions for us to use.⁴ "Impairment" is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function. "Disability" is any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity. It's a functional loss. "Handicap" refers to further difficulties placed before such a person by society through architecture, communication levels, and attitudes. The vision of a barrier-free society awaits its time.

The fourth aspect of the vision awaiting its time is our acceptance of our own disabling conditions. Everyone is disabled. It's just that some persons' disabilities more obvious than others. What disables you from being whole? What are the things we need overcome in order to be fully human? Habakkuk had a difficult time standing by and seeing the destruction and pain in those around him. Do we recoil and turn our eyes from those suffering? Yet, what people suffering disabilities need most is to know they are loved and accepted. They need to know they can be hugged and touched. There was nothing my sister Chip liked more and there is nothing most people like more than to be greeted and welcomed like old friend. At the moment when we hug them or shake hands with them, the vision comes alive.

We have our own disabilities, and one great disability is the lack of faith— lack of faith in the vision and lack of faith in ourselves. The vision awaits its time. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. He answered by saying that *he* could not increase their faith, *they* had to. If they had faith as small as a grain of mustard seed, they could overcome all obstacles. Jesus was chiding them because they did not have faith in God or in themselves.

When we can increase our faith, then we can accept our own ministry, our own share of fulfilling the vision. Every person, no matter what their disability, has a ministry to perform. For Johnny, it was introducing shoppers to each other. For my sister Chip, it was folding church bulletins and volunteering for the Red Cross. Each of us, with no exception, is called to ministry.

Nothing before its time? Maybe. But the time for the fulfillment of God's vision is now, and we need faith to perceive that vision and the courage to overcome our own disabilities and take our part in God's ministry.

⁴http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/disorders/impair_dis_disab.htm