

# TEACH A CHILD

words by Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner b. 1958

To the tune of "Il Est Ne Le Divine Enfant"

Teach a child the way to go;  
They'll not depart from it when they're older.  
Show them how to explore and grow;  
Seek out God and love and hope.

1. To the Places, God, they'll go,  
Minds set afire with curiosity.  
All the miracles your love grows  
In the cauldron of the world.

2. Of all things knowledge is the best;  
Can't be taken; its indestructible;  
Even frees those who are oppressed.  
Tyranny trembles at its sight!

3. Bless the ones who teach and guide;  
They've a mission and a sacred trust.  
Give them strength, may peace abide;  
As they reach out to ev-ry child.

4. Give us strength to do our part  
Even if we have to sacrifice.  
We know deep down in our hearts  
Children are God's greatest gifts!

Based on The Book of Proverbs 22:6  
Written in response to the education funding crisis in Ohio.  
September 2004

Additional Hymns Suggestions  
from the Ohio Conference School Finance Study Group

## New Century Hymnal

- #359 O God, Who Teaches Us to Live [St. Anne]
- #316 We Limit Not the Truth of God [works well with Ellacombe]
- #350 Now in the Days of Youth [Diademata]
- #582 O God of Earth and Altar [Llangloffan]
- #576 For the Healing of the Nations [Westminster Abbey]
- #579 Great God of Earth and Heaven [King's Lynn]
- #436 God of Grace and God of Glory [Cwm Rhondda]
- #570 We Shall Overcome [We Shall Overcome]
- #573 Lead On Eternal Sovereign [Lancashire]

## The Pilgrim Hymnal

- #259 We Limit Not the Truth of God [works well with Ellacombe]
- #436 O God of Earth and Altar [Llangloffan]
- #366 God of Grace and God of Glory [Cwm Rhondda]
- #441 Once to Every Man and Nation [Ebenezer (Ton-y-botel)]
- #426 The Voice of God is Calling [Meirionydd]

**A Prayer by Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner  
Pastor of United Community Church, Newbury, Ohio**

Loving God, We thank you for your most precious gift: our children. In their eyes we see bright hope for tomorrow. In their hearts we see courage and strength. We thank you God for those that help them know their potential: teachers, custodians, administrators, bus drivers, counselors, cafeteria workers, and secretaries. Bless these in their work, O God, especially those who have recently lost the jobs to which they are so dedicated. We are grateful, God, for those who have fought the long struggle for fair school funding. Bless them for their tireless work. Give them a special measure of hope today.

O God, we the people of Ohio come to you confessing that we have failed our children. We have not cherished them as the great gift they are, but instead have put them at the bottom of our priorities. Forgive us God, and help us to change.

We pray for our governor, legislators and courts. Give our leaders wisdom in how to change our system. Give them moral strength to do what needs to be done. But if they will not receive your wisdom, God, if they turn away from your call to do the right thing, if they continue to embrace the idol of politics as usual, then, God, we ask you: pour your mighty spirit upon every parent and grand-parent, every principal and pupil, every preacher and teacher until justice is done and righteousness and right-thinking guide our public policy. Give us courage so we will not fear those who try to stop us with money and political doubletalk. Give us tenacity so we will turn to the cause even those who try to tell us you can't fight city hall. Help us work and sweat and lobby and write until we know that true prosperity and a decent education waits on the road ahead for our children and their children.

O God, today we feel the winds of change beginning to blow — through Stryker and Lima and all the beautiful flat farmlands of northwest Ohio. We sense the winds of truth whispering through the rolling hills of the southeast, visiting Shadyside and Barnesville. The winds of healing are flowing through Fairview Park and Huron, Newbury and Ashtabula in the north and West Clermont and Bear Creek in the wouthwest. O God, let your winds of hope blow through our great cities: Cleveland and Cincinnati, Youngstown, and Dayton, Toledo and Akron and yes, even Columbus. Let the winds blow through every hamlet and hill, every city and township. Guide us all safely back to these places we pray in your many holy names. And let all the people say amen and amen.

**Offered as the Benediction  
Chalkboard Rally in Columbus, Ohio on May 5, 2004**

## WILL CHRIST FIND FAITH?

Luke 18:1-8, Deuteronomy 1:16-17

A Sermon by the Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner, Pastor, United Community Church, Newbury

October 2004

Jesus' powerful parables are woven from the very fabric of human existence. The people he describes are not lofty or angelic, but are fully human in all aspects. In the Gospel of Luke we are introduced to two such humans: a judge that "neither fears God nor had respect for people;" and a widow who is in dire straits. Their interaction has much to teach us about prayer and about the life of faith.

Like today, judges in Jesus' time made decisions that greatly affected people's lives. They have an important job. And in the very first chapter of Deuteronomy, God commands them to: "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging; hear out the small and the great alike..." But in spite of this charge, the unrighteous judge in Jesus' parable will not even hear the case of the poor widow. Why? Well, commentators suggest the judge may be waiting for a bribe. Surely one of the reasons the judge will not hear the case is the widow's lack of social or legal status. In those days when a woman lost her husband, she could not inherit the husband's estate. It went either to the man's sons or his brothers. As a woman, the widow had no right to any of the things she had worked side by side to produce. That is one reason a widow seeking justice is all too common in Jesus' time.

But in spite of the seeming impossibility of her situation. In spite of her lack of rights or status, the widow keeps seeking out the judge and begging him for justice. She becomes the proverbial "squeaky wheel" and finally the judge is worn down and gives her the justice she deserves. Jesus uses this illustration to encourage his followers to keep praying, keep seeking God's help even when things look impossible. If this unrighteous judge will finally give justice, Jesus says, "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" But it sometimes takes a great deal of faith to hold onto that belief doesn't it?

In spite of the many technological advances since the first century, some things have stayed the same in the years since Jesus spoke these words. In Ohio, the Supreme Court of the State, after telling the legislature and the governor for a decade that our current school funding is unconstitutional, released jurisdiction in the school funding case, essentially making it as if they had never heard the case. Why? I don't think they were waiting for a bribe per se. But did you know that in the last election more money was spent on the Ohio Supreme Court campaigns than the supreme court campaigns in all the other states of the union combined? Someone was willing to spend a lot of money to get the "right" judges on the bench.

Our teachers are asked to give our children a "competitive" education with old text books and inadequate materials. As in the parable, it is those without legal or social status, our school children, who are failing to get the justice to which they are entitled. The children in our cities and poorer rural counties are suffering particularly. And they suffer along side those who live on fixed incomes, our senior citizens who are asked to pay more and more property taxes while they struggle with rising prescription costs, rising health care costs and rising energy costs. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

As God's people, we are called to take up the cause of those suffering injustice, especially those without voice or political power. Theologian Alan Culpepper, in writing about our Gospel lesson has said, "From early in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition... no expression of faithfulness to God is more deeply rooted than the duty to care for the widows, orphans and strangers—the powerless and the homeless in our midst."

Many have worked for the past decade trying to ensure our children have a good education. The United Church of Christ has a Minister for Public Education and Witness, Jan Resseger, who works tirelessly throughout the country and with the U.C.C. Ohio Conference School Study Group. The Ohio Fair School Campaign, Project Chalkboard and many others have exhausted themselves in this struggle, but they are not the only ones who have worked. In spite of so many who have done so much good, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ring out: "It is still one of the tragedies of human history that the 'children of darkness' are frequently more determined and zealous than the 'children of light.'"

We as God's people have for too long, let too few do the important work of seeking justice for Ohio's children and senior citizens. Jesus' question at the end of our Gospel confronts us: "will the Son of Man find faith on the earth?" Will we who claim the name of Jesus follow him in doing what needs to be done, no matter what it might cost us?

Will we pray? Pray unceasingly for our children our senior citizens and our leaders? Will we join our voices with those who cry for adequate and just funding for our schools — demanding it be done without bleeding our senior citizens dry? Will we advocate for the children in the poor rural counties and the impoverished cities?

You may say to me, "Those with whom we are dealing have deep pockets and lots of political power." I quote to you this old American proverb: "A determined person can do more with a rusty monkey wrench than a lot of people can with a whole machine shop." Are we determined enough to follow Christ?

You may say to me, "You can't fight city hall. The state government is too big. It's too complicated." I quote to you a colleague, Rev. Hugh Latimer, who in 1538 in his second sermon before the king said, "The drop of rain maketh a hole in the stones, not by violence, but by oft falling." Are we willing to be persistent enough to follow Christ?

You may say to me, "It's too much. We're tired. We've tried for so long." And I will remind you of a great American who in 1779 as his ship was sinking was asked whether he had yet lowered his flag. It was John Paul Jones who, with fire in his eyes, said, "I have not yet begun to fight." Are we willing to not give up, no matter what, as we follow Christ?

The widow got justice because she did not give up. She knew that her cause was right, and she did not waver in her belief that God would bring justice. It is in such faith, such hope and such assurance that we too must go forward together in love and truth. Oh, we may not find justice today, or tomorrow. We may face temporary set backs, but God hears the cries of the children. God hears the cries of the widowed and the elderly. If we will speak with humility on behalf of those who have no voice, if we will give ourselves to God's project of seeking justice, nothing will stop us. Nothing can stop us, because we are the ones who follow Christ, the one who even death could not defeat. Nothing will stop us as long as we are on the Lord's side.  
AMEN

## **A LARGER VISION**

**A Sermon by the Rev. David Hill, Pastor, First Church, Oberlin**

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2: 1-4

October 2004

As I sat watching the evening news my eyes were drawn away from the talking heads in the main picture to the ticker tape tabulations at the bottom of the screen. The results of the latest round of school levy votes scrolled by, county by county. It would not be a good night for public schools. The vast majority of proposed levies throughout the state were losing at the polls. My heart sank as I thought of the immediate consequences: the elimination of art and music classes; pay to play athletics; dashed hopes for the addition of advanced placement classes and improved science labs; fewer teachers and larger class sizes; less available teacher time for those students that need it the most; the grim reality that these failed levies would disproportionately effect those communities already shouldering the harshest economic realities.

I have been a member of the Ohio Conference Study Group on School Finance for several years. I became involved with issues of public school financing while serving a church in a small village in a rural county in northeast Ohio where trying to pass school levies had become almost an annual (at some times a semi-annual) challenge. The schools in our town were not unlike those in cities and towns across the country. Classes were held in older facilities in desperate need of repair and renovation. Lab facilities for science classes were extremely limited; advanced placement classes almost unheard of. Although our schools compared favorably with others in our county, we were struggling to provide the basics of a sound public education with extremely limited resources. As time passed I busied myself with various efforts at public education advocacy only to watch as seminars and training events, public meetings, letters to legislators, rallies and appeals to the State Supreme Court seemed to fall on deaf ears. Despite repeated State Supreme Court decisions that affirmed that the current system for financing public education was unjust, inadequate, inequitable and ultimately unconstitutional little has changed. While charter schools and voucher programs siphon off much needed financial resources, our public schools are left wanting.

Where once one might have been merely discouraged, these days it is hard not to despair when facing the overwhelming obstacles facing a just solution to the financing of public education. How can we not but share the complaint of the prophet Habakkuk, "O Lord, how long shall [we]cry out for help, and you will not listen?" and concur with him that "the law [has become] slack and justice never prevails." It is difficult to maintain a belief in God's just rule when we are confronted daily with the perseverance of injustice in our world, in our nation, in the very communities in which we live. Where is God when all our efforts at advocacy have apparently failed and we must explain to our children why they will not be getting new text books this year, or why they must meet in a trailer turned classroom, or why their teacher will not have time to help them work through a difficult concept or problem, or why there will be no art classroom but only "art on a cart" - a roving wagon of paints and brushes that travels classroom to classroom, or why their favorite sport has been cut because the school had to reduce the number of teachers and coaches, or why they will spend more time drilling for tests instead being immersed in a full range of teaching and learning experiences. How long, O Lord, how long?!

Throughout the biblical story God has raised up prophets to speak out on behalf of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized and to hold accountable the rich, the powerful, and the elite. This has never been an easy task for those so called by God or a mission that elicited a great deal of popular support. God's Word is seldom a welcome word when it demands fundamental change in the way a society tends to those with the least. For every prophet recorded in the pages of scripture there were likely countless others that abandoned their calling in hopelessness or simply told God to "forget it" right at the outset. If God is truly in charge, why isn't our world more fair and just? When injustice persists what is a prophet to do?

Probably no prophet more than Habakkuk has dared to so directly address the discontinuity between God's realm and the world as it is. Habakkuk's complaint raises the fundamental question faced by generation after generation of prophets, "How long?" How long must we wait before justice is served, before things are set right, before your promised realm arrives? It is the question raised by all those who continue to "stand at [the] watchpost" and "station [themselves] on the rampart" awaiting an answer – some sign that our faith in God's justice is not unfounded. And to this question, Habakkuk gives us God's answer: "write the vision. . . make it plain . . . there is still a vision for the appointed time."

What is it that sustains those who long and work for justice and righteousness? Where do we find the strength to continue in our efforts? Are we not encouraged and emboldened in our task because somehow, through the eyes of faith, we have received a larger vision of the way things should be? And isn't this larger vision at the very heart of our labors and the greatest gift we have to offer to the world around us? One version of the Bible translates Habakkuk 2:3 as, "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie." Others have suggested that this passage may also be read, "For the vision is a witness for the appointed time, and a testifier of the end – it does not lie." This interpretation suggests that the very vision we have received from God of a more just world is in itself a commitment from God to making that vision a reality.

As we continue to labor for justice in our world, whether it be advocating for public education funding that is adequate, equitable, stable and just, or for racial equality, or an end to the tremendous disparity between rich and poor, let us be bold in proclaiming a different vision for our world. May we look beyond the injustice that we see and behold the world as God would have it be. Through what others would relegate to the sidelines, side bars, and mere ticker tape at the bottom of the TV screen may we discern God's continuing call to us to "write the vision" and to "make it plain," to shout it from the watchposts and ramparts. Let us not despair with the world as it is, but be energized and emboldened by God's revelation of the world as it could be.

In one of his poems, Wendell Berry once stated, "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts." To those with eyes to see and ears to hear, God continues to provide strength and encouragement through the vision of an alternative reality. In the face of injustice let us bear witness to a larger vision, a greater hope and a fuller life for all God's children. May we stand with the prophet Habakkuk, never so blinded by the glaring injustice in our midst that we fail to see God's promised realm already unfolding before us.

September 2004

Dear Ohio United Church of Christ Pastor,

I hope this letter does not find your community in turmoil over school funding, but I know for many of you it does. Because the state system for funding schools is inadequate and inequitable, and because the legislature has not been required to remedy what the Ohio Supreme Court has repeatedly said is an unconstitutional system, many local school districts are on the ballot this fall. A number of school districts are trying again after a succession of previous failures at the polls.

For several years, a study group in the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ has been providing resources to help our churches address the serious systemic justice problems posed by the school funding system. You may remember that in 2001, the Conference Annual Gathering considered the issue of school funding and declared that the Conference would advocate for a legislative remedy for Ohio's inadequate, inequitable, unreliable, and unjust method of funding public schools.

For this fall election season, the Ohio Conference Study Group has created the enclosed packet to help you and your congregation work with this challenge in your community and in our state. We have created a non-partisan packet that suggests how churches can support and challenge their members to engage their faith as they encounter issues outside the walls of the church.

This fall public school issues and especially school funding are important at the federal, state, and local levels. The ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* are being discussed in the presidential and congressional elections. Citizens will encounter school funding not only in the legislative election in Ohio, but also among candidates for the Ohio Supreme Court. And at the local level, your community may face a levy campaign that may feel divisive even within your congregation.

The enclosed packet contains complete sermons written by Ohio UCC pastors and tied to lectionary passages for Sundays in October. Perhaps these sermons will spark your imagination or illustrate a thought process or structure that you can adapt for your own congregation. Feel free to use them verbatim, or use them in any way you see fit. Also enclosed is a litany to celebrate educators, a hymn, three bulletin inserts to help members of your congregation with the issues, a brochure that suggests questions for discussion and for political candidates, and a petition urging a resolution to Ohio's crisis. We urge you to use these resources in the way that best suits your congregation.

Please let us know if you have questions, and let us know if the Ohio Conference Study Group can personally resource your congregation. Our study group always welcomes new members; please join us or invite someone in your congregation to do so. Additionally we ask you to share feedback about how you used these resources and what you found to be most helpful. If you communicate with me (866-822-8224 x 3711) or (216-736-3711) or <[ressegerj@ucc.org](mailto:ressegerj@ucc.org)>, I'll share your questions, requests, concerns, ideas, and suggestions with members of the group.

Wishing you God's peace in these difficult times,

Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness