

CHAPTER TWO

Be A Voice for The Voiceless

A Story of God's Vision Coming to Life
by Rhonna Sanford

Scripture tells us in Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) “For I know the plans I have for you.” Declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

I grew up in a Christian home. My father is a minister, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. From day one, my brother and I were being taught about the Lord. Like most families, we laughed together, cried together, played together, prayed and worshipped together. I really can’t think of one moment in my life when I was without the Lord. (*Even when I wander off His path from time to time, He is with me still.*) My foundation was being laid. The Lord already had a plan for me, but no one at that point knew what it would be.

When I was about 12, I went to a family reunion. I was meeting some family members for the very first time. One of them was my cousin, Kim, who had a severe disability. She was both physically and mentally affected by disability. She was in a wheel chair, had to be fed, dressed, and attended to. She could do nothing for herself.

In my family, we love to play games. Everyone was playing softball at the reunion except Kim. I would watch her and wonder what she was thinking or feeling. It bothered me that I could play and she couldn’t. How did she play? *Did* she play? So, eventually, I stopped playing ball and went to sit with her. After a few minutes, I’d made up my mind that I was going to take her over to the merry-go-round and put her on it. Not once did it occur to me that I had no idea what I was doing, or that I might actually need to ask her Mom for permission. I didn’t have a plan on how to do it. I just

felt that it had to be done, so I did it. Well, it was harder than I thought it was going to be. I thought I was going to drop her. But, I was able to get her on the merry-go-round. Then I started pushing her around. She squealed! I thought... Oh NO... I'm going to get in soooo much trouble for this. Her Mom came running over and asked me what I was doing. I told her, "I was playing with Kim. I'm sorry if I made her squeal... Did I hurt her?" Barb, her mother turned to me and said, "No Rhonna Kaye, she's just happy!" What? Happy over a merry-go-round... Wow! That moment made me happy, knowing that she had experienced something that she had never known before. I knew in that moment that I wanted to help people with disabilities. It made a permanent imprint on me.

This wasn't the only experience that I had where I sensed God revealing His plans for my life. There were a few other times in my life when God honed me in on His path, not to mention that I would see people with developmental disabilities no matter where I was. It was as if God was purposefully making our paths cross to grab my attention. Each time, I would make it a point to go over and visit with them.

God's vision for my life became even more clear when, at age 18, I dated a young man who had a sister with Down Syndrome, Ann. I learned while with their family the anguish that others can inflict and the private heartbroken moments that no one knows about. I saw milestones being met and small victories being won, like tying shoes and combing hair.

I saw how their family was treated. They really weren't welcomed anywhere, even in church. They all took turns going to

church. They could never worship as a family, because someone had to stay home and take care of her. She wasn't welcomed. I would watch people stare at us when we would take her to a movie or a restaurant. It was while standing in line of a local restaurant that I found His voice for me. We were waiting to be seated. People would smile at the family, but as soon as they looked at Ann something changed. They would get a scowl on their face and quickly look away. Really? At first, I was trying to be polite about it all. You know, just smile! But when that would happen, I could see the hurt in her eyes. They treated her as if she had the plague. No one would talk to her, let alone touch her! The alienation that was felt by the family was more than I could bear. I don't know how they were able to withstand that kind of rejection and loneliness. In my head I was thinking, 'are you kidding me?' You're staring? She's just like us! Well, my heart broke and tears fell from my eyes. In this moment, my mouth opened and my brain shut off. Without hesitation, I stepped out from the line, whistled loudly, and got everyone's attention. Then I said the following...

"You aren't going to get mentally retarded by touching her or smiling at her!"

I'm not sure who was more horrified; her family, my boyfriend, the people in line, the hostess or me! You can only imagine the response. My boyfriend said, "What are you doing?" The people in line turned away. I was shaking from the frustration. Ann's mother smiled, and her father just shook his head. Ann, however, smiled and hugged me. The hostess came over right away and seated us. Imagine that!

After we sat down, I immediately wanted to replay the scene. It certainly wasn't, in my opinion, my brightest Christian moment. I knew better than to open my mouth, but I just couldn't stop myself. When you talk without filters, you learn to apologize often.

I was trying to figure out to whom I needed to apologize to first; his parents, my boyfriend, Ann, or the management of the restaurant? Or should I just whistle again and get everyone's attention and give one gigantic public apology? I started first with Ann. I took her hand and said, "I'm sorry if I did something that has hurt your feelings or made you uncomfortable. I just get very angry when people treat you that way. It hurts my heart!" Ann smiled her shining smile and said, "That's ok! I'm hungry and I want some chicken." We all chuckled. I then said to her parents, "Please forgive me. I now realize that there was probably a better way of getting my point across. It was never my intention to do anything that would make things worse for you. I really and truly could not stop myself. I am sorry!" Bob said, "Well Rhonna, I am sure there are better ways to make that statement, BUT I have to admit your way was quite effective!" Then we really laughed. I turned to my boyfriend, smiled and said, "I am sorry." He smiled back and said, "It's quite alright. I have a feeling that this won't be the last time we encounter this."

After the evening was over, I went home with a clearer vision, and a thankful heart. I knew that somehow, and in some way, I would end up helping people with developmental disabilities. I just wasn't sure how I would get there.

Then in 1989, God took all those seeds He had planted and brought me to Riverwood. Riverwood Christian Community is a residential facility for adults with developmental disabilities. It opened in 1986, and is sponsored by Christian Churches. People frequently ask me, “How did you end up at Riverwood?” The answer is very simple. I stepped in the door at Riverwood and I fell in love. I knew in that moment that this was where I was supposed to be. I knew that I was doing exactly what God wanted me to do. This is God’s gift to me. He wants me to share with you my passion for people with disabilities. When I was 12, my foundation was just being laid. I only knew that Kim was disabled, and I wanted to make her be happy for just a few minutes. When I was 18, God made things clearer to me. When I was able to advocate for someone with a disability, it empowered not only her, but me also. Now that I’m older, and my foundation is more solid, I realize that the only way I can truly make them happy is to give them Jesus. They need the Lord just like everybody else.

Scripture and Thoughts

It is refreshing to hear a story like Rhonna's and know that God has a specific plan for everyone. The author of the book of Jeremiah makes that clear (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV). This story of Rhonna finding her calling will do one of two things for you. It will either cause personal memories to come rushing back for you when you found your calling, or it will cause you to desire to know the plans that God has for your life even more.

The good news is that God's plans always include hope. Yes, God has specific plans for individual people. I also believe that God has specific plans for larger groups of people. The entire Old Testament is evidence of this. It is the story of the Israelites, God's people. God had a very specific plan for them. It was His plan to bless them and to bring them hope in the form of a future Messiah. His plans were often interrupted by the disobedience of the Israelite people. His plan eventually came to fruition with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus would end up being for ALL people as this plan of blessing and hope would spill over to more than just the Israelites.

Just as God had a plan of blessing and hope for the Israelites, I believe He has a plan for the disability community too. There probably isn't a people group in the world that is hungrier for hope than the disability community. Since the beginning of time people affected by disability have been overlooked, mistreated, abused, and pushed aside. This has come at the hands of not only society in general, but also the church.

People affected by disability make up one of the world's largest people groups. There are over 1 billion people in the world who live with disability. That number is overwhelming. What makes this people group unique is that it crosses all lines of race, religion, socioeconomics, geography, gender, you name it. Because this people group crosses all geographical boundaries you cannot simply send a missionary to a foreign country to reach them. They are literally in every community, if you are willing and able to see them. That is what makes disability ministry outreach so exciting. You don't have to spend \$3,000 on a plane ticket to go somewhere half a world away to have a short-term mission experience. You can live a long-term mission experience by simply reaching out to people affected by disability in your own community.

You could also conclude that this people group is, in fact, the world's largest minority group. Again, this people group is unique amongst all other minority groups because it has open enrollment. All other minority groups are exclusive to the fact that you are born into them. They aren't something that you choose. The minority group of people affected by disability is a group that you could join literally at any moment. Knowing the prevalence of this people group should make it no surprise to you that God has a very specific plan for them.

What exactly is the plan to bring them both hope and blessing? In Rhonna's story, she came to realize that the way to make people affected by disability truly happy was to "give them Jesus." It almost sounds too simple. The self-declared mission of Jesus in Luke 19:10 (NIV) was that, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

ALL people need Jesus. ALL people are lost without him. There is a misconception when it comes to people with developmental disabilities. Some would say, “God will accept them no matter what because they are developmentally disabled and probably can’t understand preaching anyway.” This is absolutely not true. Nowhere in scriptures do we see any exceptions made for certain IQ scores or intellectual capacity.

Jesus, much like Rhonna, was an advocate for people who lived with disability. Part of God’s infinite plan was to send Jesus to earth to model the behavior that He wanted His followers to emulate. Advocacy was a big part of that. We can see this in the way that Jesus treated people who lived with disability.

One of Jesus’ most well-known miracles was when he fed thousands with only a few loaves of bread and small fish. If I were to ask what happened directly before this miracle, I’m guessing most would not remember.

Jesus was up on a hill near the Sea of Galilee. People were rushing out to see him and hear from him as his popularity grew. Before the crowd grew too large, and the day too late, before everyone became hungry, Jesus did something significant.

READ MATTHEW 15:29-31 (NLT)

See what preceded this famous miracle.

A vast crowd brought people who were affected by disability to Jesus. I love what verse 30 says. “He healed them all.” (NLT) My first question would be why did this crowd specifically bring people with varying disabilities to Jesus? Nowhere in this passage did it say they brought people who were sick or dying to Jesus. In

this situation it was only people with disabilities. I believe the answer was because people knew how much Jesus loved people with disabilities. It was apparently a well-known fact. Jesus was a strong advocate for people affected by disability.

What was the result of his advocacy? Yes, ALL the people were healed. That is the obvious result. But don't miss what happened for everyone who witnessed Jesus advocating. Verse 31 tells us that "The crowd was amazed," and that, "They praised the God of Israel." They were amazed because the power of God was at work. A rich truth that I don't want you to miss is that disability is an opportunity to witness the power of God. Also, the people worshiped God. Is there anything better than that?

Jesus advocated for people with disabilities in what he said but sometimes even more powerfully through what he did. Consider the middle parts of Jesus' public ministry. You need look no further than the miracles that Jesus performed. Of the 34 miracles recorded in the Gospels, a whopping 25 of them were performed on people who lived with disability. That is nearly 75% of the miracles of Jesus. Enough said, right? Wrong. We should not only look at the target of Jesus' miracles but also the treatment of those miracles. Jesus operated without fear and with compassion. In a society where people affected by disability were either viewed as sinners, unclean, or both, Jesus did not shy away from them. Time and time again Jesus embraced people who lived with disability. He led by example.

To be a strong advocate you don't always need to have a strong voice. Sometimes your actions can speak louder than your words.

There will however be times when you will need to use your voice to advocate for others.

“Speak up for those who can’t speak for themselves. Speak up for the rights of all those who are poor.”

(Proverbs 31:8, NIRV)

Being an advocate for people affected by disability isn’t just a nice suggestion. Being an advocate isn’t something you could do if you wanted to make yourself feel good. Being an advocate isn’t something that is reserved for the professionals. Being an advocate is a command from God. This isn’t one of those grey areas in the Bible. This is a black and white expectation and command from God to all believers. There is no way around this one. It is our duty as followers of Jesus to speak up for those who live with disability who are often forgotten or abused by our society.

God has a plan for the disability community that surrounds you. It is a plan to bring them hope and blessing. It is a plan to give them Jesus. Sounds exciting, right? Here is the part of the plan that might scare you. The plan that God has is for you to give them Jesus. When you stand up and advocate for them, you bring them both hope and blessing. Your advocacy, like the advocacy of Jesus, should be done in both word and deed. Remember that uncomfortable feeling we talked about last week. This again is God challenging you to get out of your comfort zone and to join Him on