

“Rejoice in Every Good Thing”

Chieko N. Okazaki

My dear sisters, you cannot imagine my joy at being here—seeing your faces before me, feeling surrounded by song, and sensing the network of electronic and satellite systems that link us to other congregations of women all over the world. But these are the visible connections. Invisible but just as tangible are the connections of spirit and sisterhood that unite us now and during this coming year in which we celebrate the sesquicentennial of Relief Society. Wherever you are, whatever you are wearing, whatever language you are hearing, you are part of a powerful force of joy, peace, and goodness. We are here to rejoice together “in every good thing.” (Deut. 26:11.)

It is the strength and joy from a Christ-centered and Christlike life that gives us reason to rejoice.” (Alma 26:35.) Let me name three blessings from our faith in Christ for which we can rejoice: (1) Let us rejoice in our sisterhood. (2) Let us rejoice in our diversity. And (3) let us rejoice in our charity!

First, let us rejoice in our sisterhood. Look around the room you are in. How many are with you? There may be thousands, as there are in this tabernacle. If you are one of many, give thanks to our Father. If you are one of few, praise him! There were only twenty in Nauvoo in 1842. Be the Nauvoo generation in your ward or branch. Remember you are not alone. You are one of a sisterhood of three million women. As one women’s history scholar has commented:

“Sisterhood [is] the bonding among women on both personal and public levels, from simple friendships to massive organizations. In this sense Mormon women have a complex and vital heritage of sisterhood.

“Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, women have been a crucial part of one another’s lives—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, socially.” (Jill Mulvay Derr, “Strength in Our Union: The Making of Mormon Sisterhood,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, pp. 154-55.) Let us rejoice in the unified sisterhood we share.

Second, let us rejoice in our diversity. I grew up a Buddhist, the daughter of a Japanese plantation laborer in Mahukona, a tiny village which no longer exists, on the big island of Hawaii. My first exposure to Christianity came during the annual Christmas pageant organized by Captain Beck, who was in charge of the plantation. Every year, there was a little nativity play, the singing of Christmas carols, and wonderful presents from a mysterious fat man in a red suit and a white beard.

When I was about seven, Captain Beck asked me to be the angel in the nativity play. I didn’t know what an angel was, but I was proud to be chosen and worked hard on my speech. And it *was* hard work. My native language was a combination of Japanese and pidgin, and here I had to memorize strange, seventeenth-century King James English. I was just a skinny little seven-year-old in a white cheesecloth costume with crooked tinsel wings and a wobbly tinsel halo on my head. But when the big night came, I was ready.

“Fear not,” I said. “For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. ... For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10.) I didn’t know who David was or Christ. I only knew

Buddha. I didn't know what swaddling clothes were or why the baby was in a manger. I didn't know what shepherds were or why they were afraid or what good tidings were. It was only later, when I became acquainted with the Church at age eleven and joined the Church at age fifteen, that I realized that baby was the Son of God and that the good tidings were those of the gospel. Then I understood my "reason to rejoice" in Christ, the Lord.

Again, look around the room you are in. Do you see women of different ages, races, or different backgrounds in the Church? Of different educational, marital, and professional experiences? Women with children? Women without children? Women of vigorous health and those who are limited by chronic illness or handicaps? Rejoice in the diversity of our sisterhood! It is the diversity of colors in a spectrum that makes a rainbow. It is the diversity in our circumstances that gives us compassionate hearts. It is the diversity of our spiritual gifts that benefits the Church.

When I was on the Primary General Board, Patricia Kelsey Graham, a friend and a former board member, wrote a song for the new children's songbook that I just love, called "We Are Different." Listen to its message about knowing, helping, and loving, as Kerstin Larson and Maryanne Featherstone sing it for us, accompanied by Sister Graham:

*I know you, and you know me.
We are as diff'rent as the sun and the sea.
I know you, and you know me,
And that's the way it is supposed to be.*

*I help you, and you help me.
We learn from problems, and we're starting to see.
I help you, and you help me,
And that's the way it is supposed to be.*

*I love you, and you love me.
We reach together for the best we can be.
I love you, and you love me,
And that's the way it is supposed to be.
(Children's Songbook, p. 263.)*

Did you get that message? Being different—but still knowing, helping, and loving—is the way it's supposed to be!

As a Relief Society General Presidency, *we* are different. Elaine, Aileen, Carol, and I are married and single, homemakers and professionals, far travelers and homebodies, converts and fifth-generation members, high school graduates and graduate-degree holders. We have given service to our community and to the Church. But we know each other, we help each other, and we love each other. That's the way it's supposed to be. We rejoice in our diversity and enjoy a unified sisterhood. Do the same in your own wards and stakes.

Third, let us rejoice in the great gift of charity that we have been given. I do! Our callings give us many opportunities for service. The sesquicentennial this next year will see many compassionate service and community service projects. Make these personal! Get involved! Don't leave all of the decisions to the ward and stake leaders. I want you to remember that the Relief Society began because one woman—a Miss Cook—we don't even know her full name—talked to her employer, Sarah M. Kimball, and the two of them devised a way to provide shirts for the men working on the Nauvoo Temple. Be a Miss Cook! See a need. Talk to your sisters in the Relief Society. Combine your strengths. Find collective ways to serve that you individually feel good about.

Service should be as different as the needs of your community and the talents of your sisters.

Remember, our real calling to be a compassionate Christian came when we stepped out of the waters of baptism. The gift of the Holy Ghost is ours by right of confirmation. We don't need to check it out of the meetinghouse library. We don't need a bishop's assignment to be kind. We don't need to sign up to be thoughtful. We don't need to be sustained by our wards to be sensitive. Rejoice in the power you have within you from Christ to be a nucleus of love, forgiveness, and compassion.

Do not feel that your gift is insignificant. Mother Teresa says, "I'm a little pencil in the hands of God. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything—and it's really hard—sometimes it's a broken pencil. He has to sharpen it a little more. But be a little instrument in His hands so that He can use you anytime, anywhere. ... We have only to say Yes to Him." ("Love: A Fruit Always in Season," *Daily Meditations*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 243.)

Sisters, we are mighty together. There is consolation in our caring. There is strength in our sharing. There is power in our commitment to righteousness. I invoke upon us all the blessing of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, because it captures the desires that we, as a presidency, have for you, the sisters of the Church:

"That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

"May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

"And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God."
(Eph. 3:17–19.)

Let us come unto Christ. Let us rejoice in him, the giver of all good things, and rejoice in those good things he has given, including the diversity and the unity of our sisterhood, and in our chance to be his hands in doing his compassionate work upon the earth, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.