

“Behold Your Little Ones”

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A bishop told me about extending a call to a woman in his ward. Together they read from the Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi, chapter 17.

They read how the Savior invited the Nephites to bring their children to him, how Jesus prayed for the children and blessed them, and how angels appeared and ministered to them within the fire that encircled them. Those familiar words are powerful, poetic verses.

Then, interestingly, the bishop said, “Sister Breinholt, the Savior cannot personally be in our ward every Sunday. But through inspiration from our Heavenly Father, we are calling you to do for some children of our ward what the Savior would do for them if he were here. We are calling you to serve as a Primary teacher!”

When I heard that extraordinary experience, I wanted to study those verses again to understand better what the Savior did with the Nephite children and what he would do for our children if he were here. The Savior’s example and the bishop’s admonition apply to all of us—whether we love and serve children in our families, as neighbors or friends, or at church. Children belong to all of us.

With that in mind, let us examine together some verses in the seventeenth chapter of 3 Nephi [3 Ne. 17]. Let us discover together the pattern the Savior gave us.

His invitation in verse 11 [3 Ne. 17:11] was neither casual nor inconsequential. “He *commanded* that their little children should be brought.” (Emphasis added.) And notice what verse 11 *doesn’t* say. It doesn’t say never mind the little ones because they aren’t accountable yet. It doesn’t say the children were to be taken elsewhere so they wouldn’t disrupt the proceedings. And it doesn’t imply that the children won’t understand. But it *does* teach that children need to learn the significant things of the kingdom.

God’s children share with all of us the divine right to spiritual enlightenment.

“So they brought their little children and set them down upon the ground round about him, and Jesus stood in the midst.” (3 Ne. 17:12.) Do any of us ever consider serving children to be beneath us? Clearly the Savior felt that the Nephite children were worthy not only to be in his presence, but they were also worthy of his time and his attention. The children needed *him*, and he stood right in their midst.

Verse 12 also indicates that Jesus waited “till they had *all* been brought to him.” He wasn’t looking for a representative sample, and he wasn’t content with just some of the children. He wanted them *all* to be there, and he ministered to them *all*.

Then Jesus prayed unto the Father so powerfully that “no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things.” (3 Ne. 17:17.) And the children were there! They heard that prayer; they saw that event, and they were affected by it. Children can understand and should witness marvelous events—events like priesthood blessings, special ward and family fasts, the testimonies and prayers of their parents and leaders, and gospel discussions with people they love.

“He took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.” (3 Ne. 17:21.) Jesus was ministering to a group of about 2,500 men, women, and children. Consider how much time it must have taken for him to bless and pray over each child, “one by one.” He must have held many of them in his arms or on his lap. And he wept because he was overcome with joy.

“He spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones.” (3 Ne. 17:23.) Jesus specifically directed the attention of the multitude to the children. To me, the word *behold* is significant. It implies more than just “look and see.” When the Lord instructed the Nephites to *behold* their little ones, I believe he told them to give attention to their children, to contemplate them, to look beyond the present and see their eternal possibilities.

“And as they looked to behold ... they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them.” (3 Ne. 17:24.)

I can't help but wonder what would have happened if the multitude had just looked and not *beheld* with spiritual eyes. Would they have seen the angels descend? Could they have watched their children encircled about with fire? Would they have been able to observe as the angels ministered to their children? It's significant to me that later the Savior gave the most sacred teachings only to the children, then loosed their tongues so they could teach the multitude. (See 3 Ne. 26:14.)

Is it any wonder that following the Savior's visit to the Nephites, they lived in peace and righteousness for two hundred years? Because of miraculous instructions, blessings, and attention they and their children received, righteousness was perpetuated by their children's children for many generations.

Let us not underestimate the capacity and potential power of today's children to perpetuate righteousness. No group of people in the Church is as receptive to the truth, both in efficiency of learning and with the greatest degree of retention. No group is as vulnerable to erroneous teaching, and no group suffers more from neglect or abuse. Children cannot provide for themselves. We, the adults of the world, must open the way for them. Our little children worldwide deserve to be “remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way.” (Moro. 6:4.)

Jesus gave us a clear pattern to follow in fulfilling our responsibility to nurture and teach children. Our challenges differ from those of the Nephites because we live in a different time. But the Savior's way is timeless. In his church, there can be no other way. As he demonstrated, *our* physical presence and attention is vital to the children in our families, church, and communities. We can know their needs and minister to them *when we spend time with them*. We can *behold* our children in their eternal perspective and see that they *all* know of the Savior and learn the significant truths of his gospel. We can help them witness marvelous spiritual events. They can hear our earnest prayers in their behalf. We are their ministering angels on earth if we follow the Lord's example.

One busy Sunday with the meetinghouse hallway crowded with people, a bishop noticed a little boy sitting on the floor crying. Disregarding his busy schedule, the bishop immediately focused his attention on the weeping child. He sat right down on the floor and held the little boy close until the crying subsided and the boy was able to explain what was wrong. Then, comforted, the child went off down the hall holding the hand of his earthly ministering angel.

I sense that the Savior would have done that too.

A young Latter-day Saint mother from Alaska, living in Russia temporarily, visited the home of a member family with two small sons. She learned that the children read and love the scriptures and hunger to know more. Then she attended the small branch and found that because the Church is so new there, they had no experience in teaching the children at church on Sunday.

She said, “Knowing what the children were missing, I had an overwhelming feeling that I should help.” And she added, “I felt I would be held accountable if I did not.” So she did. Not long after, she was called as the district Primary president to become an earthly ministering angel to these children.

A friend of mine received an invitation to the temple wedding of a young man she had taught in Primary. When she responded to the invitation, she asked, “David, you moved away, and I haven’t seen you for years. Why did you think of me?”

“Sister McMullin,” he said, “you taught us about being clean and worthy to receive the priesthood. You taught us about scrubbing our hands and wearing clean clothes when we would pass the sacrament. You taught us about being clean inside too. When I was faced with temptations and decisions in my dating years, your voice would come into my mind: ‘A deacon is clean inside and out.’ I am worthy to go to the temple because of you. That’s why I want you to come with us.”

A sister missionary in New Guinea with her husband wrote us of teaching little children the gospel under a tree at a large coconut plantation. After the lessons, the children line up for drinks of scarce and precious, cool water from a plastic jug which these earthly ministering angels fill and freeze before they come.

I sense that the Savior would approve of that too.

Each of us, whatever our circumstances, can help a child in a particular, important way that no one else can. We can give them life-giving water, food, love, comfort, and more importantly we can offer the “living water” of the gospel. (See John 4:10–14.)

As we minister to children with the same devotion and commitment demonstrated by the Savior, we bless them with love, security, faith, testimony, and the courage to resist evil. These are preventive measures that will help stem the raging tide of today’s epidemic immorality. The gospel can, and must, become a way of life for them today. Imagine what tomorrow’s Church could be like if we fulfill the needs of our children today. Imagine what it will be like if we don’t.

Sisters, by ministering to children we too can help the gospel live for many generations, for in our hands are our most valuable and our most vulnerable resource—our children. Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.