

“Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me”

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We need to reach out to the youth who feel alone, left behind, or outside the fence.

God loves children. He loves all children. The Savior said, “Suffer [the] little children ... to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”¹

Children today find themselves in many different and complex family configurations.

For example, today, twice as many children in the United States are living with only one parent than were 50 years ago.² And there are many families that are less unified in their love of God and willingness to keep His commandments.

In this increasing spiritual commotion, the restored gospel will continue to carry the standard, the ideal, the pattern of the Lord.

“Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. ...

“Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. ... Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and to teach them to love and serve one another [and] observe the commandments of God.”³

We recognize the many good parents across the world, of all faiths, who lovingly care for their children. And we gratefully acknowledge the families in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are wrapped in the care of a father and mother converted to the Savior, who are sealed by the authority of the priesthood, and who are learning in their family to love and trust their Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

But my plea today is for the hundreds of thousands of children, youth, and young adults who do not come from these, for lack of a better term, “picture-perfect” families. I speak not only of the youth who have experienced the death, divorce, or diminishing faith of their parents but also of the tens of thousands of young men and young women from all around the world who embrace the gospel without a mother or father to come into the Church with them.⁴

These young Latter-day Saints enter the Church with great faith. They hope to create the family ideal in their own lives at a future day.⁵ In time, they become an important part of our missionary force, our righteous young adults, and those who kneel at an altar to begin their own families.

We will continue to teach the Lord’s pattern for families, but now with millions of members and the diversity we have in the children of the Church, we need to be even more thoughtful and sensitive. Our Church culture and vernacular are at times quite unique. The Primary children are not going to stop singing “Families Can Be Together Forever,”⁶ but when they sing, “I’m so glad when daddy comes home”⁷ or “with father and mother leading the way,”⁸ not all children will be singing about their own family.

Our friend Bette shared an experience she had at church when she was 10 years old. She said: “Our teacher was sharing a lesson about temple marriage. She specifically asked me, ‘Bette, your parents weren’t married in the temple, were they?’ [My teacher and the rest of the class] knew the answer.” The teacher’s lesson followed, and Bette imagined the worst. Bette said, “I had many tearful nights. When I had heart problems two years later and thought I was going to die, I panicked, thinking I would be alone forever.”

My friend Leif attended church by himself. Once, while in Primary, he was asked to give a short talk. He had no mom or dad at church to stand beside him and help him if he forgot what to say. Leif was terrified. Rather than embarrass himself, he just stayed away from church for several months.

“Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them ...

“And [said] whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.”⁹

These children and youth are blessed with believing hearts and spiritual gifts. Leif told me, “I knew deep in the recesses of my mind that God was my Father and that He knew me and loved me.”

Our friend Veronique said, “As I learned the principles of the gospel and studied the Book of Mormon, it was as though I was remembering things that I had already known but had forgotten.”

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Our friend Zuleika comes from Alegrete, Brazil. Although her family was not religious, at age 12, Zuleika began to read the Bible and visit local churches, searching to know more about God. With her parents' reluctant permission, she studied with the missionaries, gained a testimony, and was baptized. Zuleika told me: "During the discussions, I was shown a picture of the Salt Lake Temple and told about the sealing ordinances. From that moment, I had the desire of one day entering into the house of the Lord and having an eternal family."

While a child's earthly situation may not be ideal, a child's spiritual DNA is perfect because one's true identity is as a son or daughter of God.

President Thomas S. Monson has said: "Help God's children understand what is genuine and important in this life. Help them develop the strength to choose paths that will keep them safely on the way to eternal life."¹⁰ Let's open our arms and our hearts a little wider. These youth need our time and our testimonies.

Brandon, who joined the Church in Colorado in high school, spoke to me of those who reached out to him both before and after his baptism. He said: "I was in the homes of families that lived the gospel. It showed me a standard that I felt I could have in my own family."

Veronique, born in the Netherlands, attended school with our daughter Kristen when we lived in Germany. Veronique noted: "Students who were Church members had a light about them. I came to realize that that light came from their faith in Jesus Christ and living His teachings."

My friend Max was baptized when he was eight years old. His father was not a member of any church, and Max could go to church or not go.

As a teenager, after not attending for several months, Max had the feeling that he needed to go back to church and determined one Sunday morning that he would return. But his resolve weakened as he approached the front door of the church; his stomach tightened.

There, standing at the door, was the new bishop. Max didn't know him, and he felt sure the bishop didn't know Max. As Max approached, the bishop's face lit up, and he put his hand out and said, "Max, it's so good to see you!"

"As he spoke those words," Max said, "a warm feeling came over me and I knew I had done the right thing."¹¹

Knowing someone's name can make a difference.

"And [Jesus] commanded that their little children should be brought [to him]"

AND [JESUS] COMMANDED THAT THEIR LITTLE CHILDREN SHOULD BE BROUGHT [TO HIM]. ...

“And ... he took [them], one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.

“And when he had done this he wept.”¹²

At the request of parents, many youth who love the gospel wait years to be baptized.

Emily's parents divorced while she was a child, and she did not receive permission to be baptized until she was 15. Our friend Emily speaks glowingly of a Young Women leader who “always reached out and helped strengthen [her] testimony.”¹³

Colten and Preston are teenagers who live in Utah. Their parents are divorced, and they have not received permission to be baptized. Even though they can't pass the sacrament, they bring the bread each week. And even though they can't enter the temple to do baptisms with the youth when their ward goes to the temple, the two brothers find family names next door at the family history center. The greatest influence on helping our youth feel included is other righteous youth.

I close with the example of a new friend, someone we met a few weeks ago while visiting the Zambia Lusaka Mission.

Elder Joseph Sengooba is from Uganda. His father died when he was seven. At age nine, with his mother and relatives unable to care for him, he was on his own. At age 12, he met the missionaries and was baptized.

Joseph told me of his first day at church: “After sacrament meeting, I thought it was time to go home, but the missionaries introduced me to Joshua Walusimbi. Joshua told me that he was going to be my friend, and he handed me a *Children's Songbook* so I wouldn't have to go into Primary empty-handed. In Primary, Joshua put an extra chair right next to his. The Primary president invited me to the front and asked the whole Primary to sing for me 'I Am a Child of God.' I felt very special.”

The branch president took Joseph to the Pierre Mungoza family, and that became his home for the next four years.

Eight years later when Elder Joseph Sengooba began his mission, to his great surprise his trainer was Elder Joshua Walusimbi, the boy who had made him feel so welcome on his first day in Primary. And his mission president? He is President Leif Erickson, the little boy who stayed away from Primary because he

was terrified about giving a talk. God loves His children.

When my wife, Kathy, and I were in Africa a few weeks ago, we visited Mbuji-Mayi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Because the chapel was not large enough for the 2,000 members, we met out of doors under large plastic coverings supported by bamboo poles. As the meeting began, we could see dozens of children watching us, clinging to the bars on the outside of the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the property. Kathy quietly whispered, "Neil, do you think that you might want to invite the children to come in?" I approached District President Kalonji at the podium and asked him if he would welcome the children outside the fence to come join us inside.

To my surprise, with President Kalonji's invitation, the children not only came but came running—more than 50, perhaps 100—some with tattered clothes and bare feet but all with beautiful smiles and excited faces.

I was deeply moved by this experience and saw it as symbolic of our need to reach out to the youth who feel alone, left behind, or outside the fence. Let us think about them, welcome them, embrace them, and do everything we can to strengthen their love for the Savior. Jesus said, "Whoso shall receive one such ... child in my name receiveth me."¹⁴ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.