

And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

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Husbands and wives should understand that their first calling—from which they will never be released—is to one another and then to their children.

Years ago on a cold night in a train station in Japan, I heard a tap on the window of my sleeper car. There stood a freezing boy wearing a ragged shirt with a dirty rag tied about a swollen jaw. His head was covered with scabies. He held a rusty tin can and a spoon, the symbol of an orphan beggar. As I struggled to open the door to give him money, the train pulled out.

I will never forget that starving little boy left standing in the cold, holding up an empty tin can. Nor can I forget how helpless I felt as the train slowly pulled away and left him standing on the platform.

Some years later in Cusco, a city high in the Andes of Peru, Elder A. Theodore Tuttle and I held a sacrament meeting in a long, narrow room that opened onto the street. It was night, and while Elder Tuttle spoke, a little boy, perhaps six years old, appeared in the doorway. He wore only a ragged shirt that went about to his knees.

On our left was a small table with a plate of bread for the sacrament. This starving street orphan saw the bread and inched slowly along the wall toward it. He was almost to the table when a woman on the aisle saw him. With a stern toss of her head, she banished him out into the night. I groaned within myself.

Later the little boy returned. He slid along the wall, glancing from the bread to me. When he was near the point where the woman would see him again, I held out my arms, and he came running to me. I held him on my lap.

Then, as something symbolic, I set him on Elder Tuttle's chair. After the closing prayer the hungry little boy darted out into the night.

When I returned home, I told President Spencer W. Kimball about my experience. He was deeply moved and told me, "You were holding a nation on your lap." He said to me more than once, "That experience has far greater meaning than you have yet come to know."

As I have visited Latin American countries nearly 100 times, I have looked for that little boy in the faces of the people. Now I do know what President Kimball meant.

I met another shivering boy on the streets of Salt Lake City. It was late on another cold winter night. We were leaving a Christmas dinner at a hotel. Down the street came six or eight noisy boys. All of them should have been at home out of the cold.

One boy had no coat. He bounced about very rapidly to stave off the chill. He disappeared down a side street, no

doubt to a small, shabby apartment and a bed that did not have enough covers to keep him warm.

At night, when I pull the covers over me, I offer a prayer for those who have no warm bed to go to.

I was stationed in Osaka, Japan, when World War II closed. The city was rubble, and the streets were littered with blocks, debris, and bomb craters. Although most of the trees had been blasted away, some few of them still stood with shattered limbs and trunks and had the courage to send forth a few twigs with leaves.

A tiny girl dressed in a ragged, colored kimono was busily gathering yellow sycamore leaves into a bouquet. The little child seemed unaware of the devastation that surrounded her as she scrambled over the rubble to add new leaves to her collection. She had found the one beauty left in her world. Perhaps I should say *she* was the beautiful part of her world. Somehow, to think of her increases my faith. Embodied in the child was hope.

Mormon taught that “little children are alive in Christ”¹ and need not repent.

Around the turn of the previous century, two missionaries were laboring in the mountains of the southern United States. One day, from a hilltop, they saw people gathering in a clearing far below. The missionaries did not often have many people to whom they might preach, so they made their way down to the clearing.

A little boy had drowned, and there was to be a funeral. His parents had sent for the minister to “say words” over their son. The missionaries stood back as the itinerant minister faced the grieving father and mother and began his sermon. If the parents expected to receive comfort from this man of the cloth, they would be disappointed.

He scolded them severely for not having had the little boy baptized. They had put it off because of one thing or another, and now it was too late. He told them very bluntly that their little boy had gone to hell. It was their fault. They were to blame for his endless torment.

After the sermon was over and the grave was covered, the elders approached the grieving parents. “We are servants of the Lord,” they told the mother, “and we have come with a message for you.” As the sobbing parents listened, the two elders read from the revelations and bore their testimony of the restoration of the keys for the redemption of both the living and the dead.

I have some sympathy for that preacher. He was doing the best he could with such light and knowledge as he had. But there is more that he should have been able to offer. There is the fulness of the gospel.

The elders came as comforters, as teachers, as servants of the Lord, as authorized ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These children of whom I spoke represent all of our Heavenly Father’s children. “Children are an heritage of the Lord: and ... happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.”²

The creation of life is a great responsibility for a married couple. It is the challenge of mortality to be a worthy and responsible parent. Neither man nor woman can bear children alone. It was meant that children have two parents—both a father and a mother. No other pattern or process can replace this one.

Long ago a woman tearfully told me that as a college student she had made a serious mistake with her boyfriend. He had arranged for an abortion. In due time they graduated and were married and had several other children. She told me how tormented she now was to look at her family, her beautiful children, and see in her mind the

place, empty now, where that one child was missing.

If this couple understands and applies the Atonement, they will know that those experiences and the pain connected with them can be erased. No pain will last forever. It is not easy, but life was never meant to be either easy or fair. Repentance and the lasting hope that forgiveness brings will always be worth the effort.

Another young couple tearfully told me they had just come from a doctor where they were told they would be unable to have children of their own. They were brokenhearted with the news. They were surprised when I told them that they were actually quite fortunate. They wondered why I would say such a thing. I told them their state was infinitely better than that of other couples who were capable of being parents but who rejected and selfishly avoided that responsibility.

I told them, “At least you want children, and that desire will weigh heavily in your favor in your earthly lives and beyond because it will provide spiritual and emotional stability. Ultimately, you will be much better off because you wanted children and could not have them, as compared to those who could but would not have children.”

Still others remain unmarried and therefore childless. Some, due to circumstances beyond their control, are raising children as single mothers or single fathers. These are temporary states. In the eternal scheme of things—not always in mortality—righteous yearning and longing will be fulfilled.

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”³

The ultimate end of all activity in the Church is to see a husband and his wife and their children happy at home, protected by the principles and laws of the gospel, sealed safely in the covenants of the everlasting priesthood. Husbands and wives should understand that their first calling—from which they will never be released—is to one another and then to their children.

One of the great discoveries of parenthood is that we learn far more about what really matters from our children than we ever did from our parents. We come to recognize the truth in Isaiah’s prophecy that “a little child shall lead them.”⁴

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

“And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

“Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”⁵

“Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

“And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.”⁶

We read in the Book of Mormon of the visit of Jesus Christ to the New World. He healed and blessed the people and commanded that the little children should be brought to Him.

Mormon records, “They brought their little children and set them down upon the ground round about him, and Jesus stood in the midst; and the multitude gave way till they had all been brought unto him.”⁷

He then commanded the people to kneel. With the children around Him, the Savior knelt and offered a prayer to our Father in Heaven. After the prayer the Savior wept, “and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.

“And when he had done this he wept again.”⁸

I can understand the feelings expressed by the Savior toward children. There is much to be learned from following His example in seeking to pray for, bless, and teach “those little ones.”⁹

I was number 10 in a family of 11 children. So far as I know, neither my father nor my mother served in a prominent calling in the Church.

Our parents served faithfully in their most important calling—as parents. Our father led our home in righteousness, never with anger or fear. And the powerful example of our father was magnified by the tender counsel of our mother. The gospel is a powerful influence in the life of every one of us in the Packer family and to the next generation and the next generation and the next, as far as we have seen.

I hope to be judged as good a man as my father. Before I hear those words “well done” from my Heavenly Father, I hope to first hear them from my mortal father.

Many times I have puzzled over why I should be called as an Apostle and then as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve in spite of having come from a home where the father could be termed as less active. I am not the only member of the Twelve who fits that description.

Finally I could see and understand that it may have been because of that circumstance that I was called. And I could understand why in all that we do in the Church, we need to provide the way, as leaders, for parents and children to have time together as families. Priesthood leaders must be careful to make the Church family-friendly.

There are many things about living the gospel of Jesus Christ that cannot be measured by that which is counted or charted in records of attendance. We busy ourselves with buildings and budgets and programs and procedures. In so doing, it is possible to overlook the very spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Too often someone comes to me and says, “President Packer, wouldn’t it be nice if ... ?”

I usually stop them and say no, because I suspect that what follows will be a new activity or program that is going to add a burden of time and financial means on the family.

Family time is sacred time and should be protected and respected. We urge our members to show devotion to their families.

When we were first married, my wife and I decided that we would accept the children that would be born to us with the responsibility attending their birth and growth. In due time they have formed families of their own.

Twice in our marriage, at the time of the births of two of our little boys, we have had a doctor say, “I do not think you are going to keep this one.”

Both times this brought the response from us that we would give our lives if our tiny son could keep his. In the

course of that offer, it dawned on us that this same devotion is akin to what Heavenly Father feels about each of us. What a supernal thought.

Now in the sunset of our lives, Sister Packer and I understand and witness that our families can be forever. As we obey the commandments and live the gospel fully, we will be protected and blessed. With our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, our prayer is that each one of our growing family will have that same devotion toward those precious little ones.

Fathers and mothers, next time you cradle a newborn child in your arms, you can have an inner vision of the mysteries and purposes of life. You will better understand why the Church is as it is and why the family is the basic organization in time and in eternity. I bear witness that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that the plan of redemption, which has been called the plan of happiness, is a plan for families. I pray the Lord that the families of the Church will be blessed, parents and children, that this work will roll forth as the Father intends. I bear this witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moroni 8:12.

2. Psalm 127:3, 5.

3. 1 Corinthians 15:19.

4. Isaiah 11:6.

5. Matthew 18:2-4.

6. Matthew 19:14-15.

7. 3 Nephi 17:12.

8. 3 Nephi 17:21-22.

9. 3 Nephi 17:24.

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