

THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

May God bless us to realize that an important measure of our progress in coming unto Christ is to be found in how well we treat others, especially those who are different.



By Elder Marlin K. Jensen

Of the Seventy

Two years before I was born in 1942, my mother gave birth to my older brother, Gary. Gary is a very special person. When he was born, his brain was damaged by a lack of oxygen. His mind never grew above the level of a six- or seven-year-old.

For more than 60 years, I watched my parents take care of Gary. They helped brush his teeth, comb his hair, and tie his tie on Sunday. Because he loved horses and cowboys, they took him to rodeos and Western movies. They performed countless acts of love and kindness for him.

Unfortunately, people aren't always so kind to those who are different. I'm sorry to say that some children—even children from active Latter-day Saint families—were unkind to my brother. They shut him out of games, called him ugly names, and teased him unmercifully.

Gary was a childlike person who was always quick to forgive. He loved and accepted everybody. I think that aside from my parents, this special brother did more during my childhood to shape my outlook on life than anyone else. I sometimes think how it will be after the Resurrection, when as Alma describes, “all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:23). Then

we'll know the real Gary, and I think we'll be very grateful for all the good things we've done for him and very sad about those times when we might have been more loving and understanding of his special circumstances.

The Need for Love and Understanding

There are many other people like Gary in our world. Even within the Church are certain brothers and sisters who might be considered “different” and who especially need our love and understanding. Their need for love and understanding stems in part from a culture that has developed as we have strived to live according to God's plan for us. Like all cultures, the culture arising from our efforts to live according to the gospel of Jesus Christ includes certain expectations and morally binding customs. Marriage and family are highly valued, for instance, and fathers and mothers have divinely appointed roles to fulfill. Children and youth are encouraged to live by certain standards and walk prescribed paths to achieve certain educational and spiritual goals.

The desired outcomes of a gospel-centered life are held up as ideals for which we are all encouraged to strive. Although such ideals

are doctrinally based and represent desirable objectives in our quest for eternal life, they can sometimes become sources of disappointment and pain for those whose lives may vary from the ideal.

Discomfort and unfulfilled expectations may exist, for example, for a divorced Church member, for a person still single though of marriageable age, for a person struggling with bouts of depression or an eating disorder, or for the parents of a wayward child. Other Church members who may feel culturally conspicuous are those in a racial minority, those struggling with feelings of same-gender attraction, or young men who, for whatever reason, choose not to serve a mission at the usual age. Members who repent and whose transgressions require formal and thus more public Church discipline also often find their social interaction in the Church to be quite awkward.

Even when they are worthy, members whose lives don't fit the ideal and thus are considered different often feel inferior and guilty. These feelings are heightened when we as their brothers and sisters fail to be as thoughtful and sensitive toward them as we ought to be. Consider, for instance, the unintended impact on a childless married couple when a member of the ward asks them when they are going to have children, not realizing that they have wanted to have children for a long time but have been unable to do so.

As we work to resolve these challenging situations, it is important to recognize that the solution isn't to eliminate or even lower the level of the ideal. Prophets and apostles have always had the duty to teach and encourage us to strive for the ideal. It was what the Savior did. His injunction was "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48), not just "Have a good day."



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We Are All Different

A helpful insight came to me several years ago when I was reading the Savior's teachings about the man who had one sheep go astray. The Savior asks, "Doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?" (Matthew 18:12).

As a priesthood leader, I had always thought of myself for many years as the shepherd—the one out searching for the lost sheep. But in a moment of reflection, it came to me that in some way or another we are all that one lost sheep. We all have our failings, and our lives vary in some ways from the ideal. We are all different! This is a humbling but helpful recognition.

It is also helpful to remember that in teaching the ideal, the Savior recognized that the ideal isn't always immediately attainable. In speaking of spiritual gifts—those wonderful endowments of the Holy Ghost—the Savior said, "They are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments." Having to keep all the commandments in order to enjoy spiritual gifts seems an impossibly high standard, but thankfully the



Savior adds that spiritual gifts are also given for the benefit of “him that *seeketh* so to do” (D&C 46:9; emphasis added). Seeking to keep all the commandments—even if we sometimes fall short of the ideal—is something within the power of each of us and is acceptable to our Heavenly Father.

Since at baptism we all covenanted “to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9), being compassionate and sensitive to those in special circumstances—those who are different—is an important aspect of our efforts to be Christ’s disciples. Of Jesus, Nephi wrote, “He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (2 Nephi 26:24). It is inconceivable that the Savior would do or say anything that would intensify the pains of or injure any of God’s children. In fact, Alma taught that as a part of the Atonement, Christ voluntarily experienced our pains, sicknesses, and infirmities so “that he [might] know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12).

We can take great comfort in Christ’s ability to relate to our own experiences—a trait known as empathy. The record of Christ’s

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ministry is replete with displays of His empathy and kindness to those who were different.

When the current *Primary Children’s Songbook* was compiled in 1989, a song was needed to speak to children—and thus to all of us—about those who, because they are different, have special need of our love and understanding. That simple song, “I’ll Walk with You,” beautifully summarizes how we can show our love and understanding:

*If you don’t walk as most people do,
Some people walk away from you,
But I won’t! I won’t!*

*If you don’t talk as most people do,
Some people talk and laugh at you,
But I won’t! I won’t!*

*I’ll walk with you. I’ll talk with you.
That’s how I’ll show my love for you.*

*Jesus walked away from none.
He gave his love to ev’ryone.
So I will! I will!*

*Jesus blessed all he could see,
Then turned and said, “Come, follow me.”
And I will! I will!
I will! I will!*

*I’ll walk with you. I’ll talk with you.
That’s how I’ll show my love for you.¹*

May God bless us to realize that an important measure of our progress in coming unto Christ is to be found in how well we treat others, especially those who are different. And may we remember that we are all different in some way. ■

From an address delivered during a stake conference broadcast in Utah County, Utah, on September 7, 2008.

NOTE

1. “I’ll Walk with You,” *Children’s Songbook*, 141.