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A Letter to a Single Sister

(and anyone else who is longing to belong)

I receive hundreds of letters in my office, and many of them describe the heartache that results from the categories we sometimes create for each other. Below is a letter describing the pain of being single in a Church focused on family:

“I’m 48 years old and have never been married; I’ve really struggled with this reality. I’ve had a difficult time knowing what my purpose in this life is as a single person with no family or posterity. Family is such a big focus in the Church (as it should be), but when that blessing isn’t given to you, it can be challenging to know where you fit in. How do I get past feelings of emptiness and feel more purpose in life?”

Other letters describe different issues, but the authors all share a feeling of being on the “outside” of the “regular” Church.

I have found that the things we have in common as disciples of Christ are much more compelling and important than the labels that keep us segregated. The Church of Jesus Christ, focused as it is on creating the conditions for Zion, can be a church without categories—a place without -ites, as the Book of Mormon says (see 4 Nephi 1:17).

The following seven ideas are my response to this sister’s letter. Your situation may be different, but if you have felt pigeonholed, I hope there is something here for you.



1. Our Blessings Come in Different Order, but They Still Come

During mortality, people label us and divide us into categories—single, Nigerian, returned missionary, Hyundai driver. The variety is almost funny—but these categories mean very little from the eternal viewpoint. President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, recently taught us that only one label matters: “Each of us is a child of God with a potential destiny of eternal life. Every other label, even including occupation, race, physical characteristics, or honors, is temporary or trivial in eternal terms.”¹ God is truly “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34; see also Alma 1:30).

Knowing this truth helps me understand my eternal purpose. I came to the earth with eons of experience and talent. I also came with certain responsibilities personal to me. My macro-mission is the same as anyone else’s: have experiences, repent and forgive, gain ordinances, serve others. My micro-mission, however, is specific and part of a divine plan for me. If I’m doing my best to keep my covenants, the life I’m living now is part of that plan. I want to respect the life the Lord has given me; it isn’t a punishment I’ve been given because somehow I wasn’t good enough.

Blessings come in different order, but to those who strive to be faithful, the blessings all come. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said it best: “Some blessings come soon, some come late, and some don’t come until heaven; but for those who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, *they come*.”²

2. Eternal Now

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that “God lives in an eternal now where the past, present, and future are constantly before Him.”³ I believe that my Heavenly Parents don’t view me for who I am now but instead see the person I will be in eternity. Knowing this helps me focus on my holistic being rather than who I am at this exact moment.



3. Wards Can Be Family Too

Since many of us don't live in an ideal two-parent family, wards or branches can function as an extended family. For children who don't have an ideal home life, there are caring adults who can be an example and teach them. For adults who don't have the children they desire, there are other children who need nurturing. Wards can be socially safe places with people disposed to care for us and forgive us, just as we do for them. A ward family gives us a chance to interact and bond with people we otherwise may not understand.

"Ah," you say, "but my ward isn't like this."

Maybe. But consider this: You have no idea the power you yourself have over the tone and example of your own ward. This may be part of your mission.

4. Fitting into Family and a Family-Oriented Church

Being single myself, I get how this feels. You have no wingman; sitting at church is awkward; parties can be torture; relatives feel they can comment when no one should be saying a word.

For me, Christmas morning emphasizes my singleness like no other time. The temptation is to allow my "category" to be an excuse to be sad or to never take initiative. Once I started hosting Christmas and planning family events, it made a difference in how I felt and how I was viewed in my family. The change reminded me that family isn't only being a spouse and a parent. There are things I can do as an aunt that a parent cannot do, and I try to be aware and perform those well. Being a good sibling, daughter, granddaughter, and aunt are not throwaway roles. They are sacred. You and I have much to contribute; and we will be held accountable.

Fitting into a Church focused on family can also be challenging.

But the reality is that a majority of Church members do not live in perfect family situations. I'm not sure *anyone* lives in that perfect, ideal family. So why keep the emphasis? Because family is our destiny, and we are on this earth to learn the skills of strong family relationships, no matter what our own situation is.



5. Feeling Lonely, Dealing with Pain

My own experiences have sometimes brought me bright pain and concentrated loneliness. It's easy to blame that pain on the category of my life circumstances, but I've come to see that everyone is dealing with pain. My sister is divorced; my other sister can't conceive; a 38-year-old is lost to cancer; kids cause heartache; terrible accidents

happen; spouses leave the Church; health breaks down. It's the state of mortality. The best we can do is try to help bear each other's pain. I can be vulnerable and share my reality; I can find empathy when other people share theirs. Somehow knowing that we're all carrying various loads of pain makes me "less special" and it's easier to bear up. Of course, when the pain is unbearable—as it sometimes gets—we can turn to Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They know this burden. They have promised to give us respite and rest. And I testify that They do.

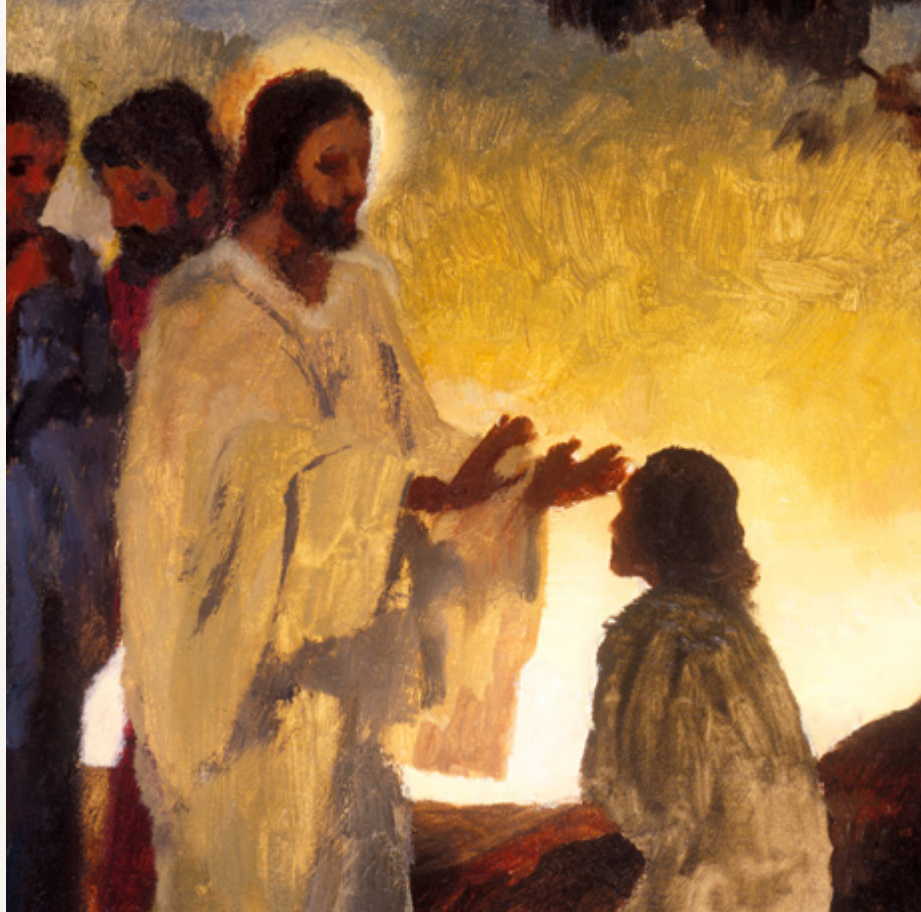
6. Opportunities in New Directions

I often meet people who aren't Latter-day Saints who are tremendous examples of integrity and devotion; they sacrifice for others and try their best to love God by loving His children. The Lord is obviously with them. Many are searching for friendship and bridges to a caring, moral community. We can do the same. In addition to sharing our faith and learning about theirs, there are many things we can do together to build friendships and improve our communities. Our neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, and slightly dysfunctional families are all part of God's plan for us. You and I have much to do to build up the places where we live, and the Lord is surely guiding us.

7. Emotional Support

If I'm honest, my single life only works because I've stumbled into a deep network of emotional support. It removes some sting and gives me people who tell me the truth. I believe in praying to receive friends. Heavenly Father knows we need close friends, and those He sends are gifts. Being a good friend attracts other friends.

But sometimes even our good friends cannot fully understand our pain and desires. In those



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instances, attending the temple can strengthen us like nothing else. If we feel weak and powerless, participating in ordinances brings "the power of godliness" into our lives (Doctrine and Covenants 84:20), including emotional health and stamina.

Sister Chieko Okazaki, former First Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, expressed it this way: "Strengthen yourselves by seeking the source of true strength—the Savior. Come unto him. He loves you. He desires your happiness and exults in your desires for righteousness. Make him your strength, your daily companion, your rod and your staff. Let him comfort you. There is no burden we need bear alone."⁴

Perhaps there's nothing here you didn't already know, but I hope it gives the Spirit a chance to buzz inside you that these are truths. There's nobody exactly like you, and if you're bold enough to inquire, I believe you'll be swamped with impressions about your purpose—more than you ever thought possible.

Most of all, I hope you know there is no category that can hold you except that of being a child of the eternal God. The Lord sees you. You're not invisible to Him. He loves your efforts that no one else may see. You're valuable, and He treasures you in all your quirks and individuality. If you trust your life to Him, His hand will guide you every step of the way until you are happy and at peace with all the desires of your heart. ■

NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "Where Will This Lead?" *Ensign*, May 2019, 62.
2. Jeffrey R. Holland, "An High Priest of Good Things to Come," *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 38.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, "Care for the Life of the Soul," *Ensign*, May 2003, 70.
4. Chieko N. Okazaki, "Strength in the Savior," *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 96.