

The Mission of Motherhood

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I wanted to speak today on the Mission of Motherhood. But first, a little backstory.

I studied Japanese in college, for 2 years. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father, who had served an honorable and life-changing mission there, and was naeively dead-set on going. As so often happens, the Lord had other plans for me, and I was called to serve in Detroit Michigan.

I was determined to serve the Lord wherever he had called me, so I went gladly, and tried to do my best to learn to live the rigorous missionary lifestyle. I made it for about 3 months before – because of the stress, the emotional and spiritual and physical difficulty of the work, I began to doubt.

Exhausted and despairing, I knelt down by my bed one night, sobbing into my covers, and pled with the Lord for understanding. I'm afraid that the prayer was a little bit "Why me?" and a little bit "Why here?" but I knew, even then, that I could rely on the Lord for answers, help and guidance. After all, hadn't He called me here? Didn't He have as much invested in this as I did?

I prayed for a long time. And suddenly, a voice came into my head as clearly as anything I've ever heard: "These are my people, too." Like the sun breaking through a dark storm, everything became clear and light. These are my people too. Michigan or Japan or Brazil or North Carolina. When we have gone where the Lord would have us go, we are doing His work.

So why do I mention this story on Mother's day?

Well, the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that motherhood and missionary work have a lot in common, as I've come to realize after thinking about this for a couple of weeks. You are called into full-time service. You are sent into strange lands, set to doing unfamiliar things. You are given responsibility over souls to teach and to show the way to live. And it can be the great spiritual experience of your life, if you let it.

Before I was called on a mission, I was excited about the glamor of missionary work. I get the black tag, I get to wear a dress every day, see thousands of people baptized and teach discussions to dozens of eager listeners. Then I WENT on a mission, and I realized that missionary work is mostly just plain WORK. Hot, dusty, snowy, freezing cold, hard work.

Before I became a mama, I was excited about the glamor of motherhood. I get the cute stroller, the baby bjornn, the diaper bag, the walks in the park and at the mall. And let's talk about shopping for the teeny clothes! Ah, be still my heart. Then Rowen was born. And she cried. For 5 months. Elliott came 16 months later and I knew I was in for it bigtime. I began to realize that motherhood is mostly just plain HARD WORK.

And for motherhood, just as in missionary work the development of virtues that may not come naturally, like patience – oh, so much patience, longsuffering, the ability to keep long hours, the ability to see deeply and with perspective, the ability to see that “These are my people, too.” Is a gift that only comes because of the sacrifices involved.

In 1942 the First Presidency declared, "Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind." But it often doesn't feel that high or that holy. Especially on your knees scrubbing, or folding endless laundry, or the rounds of cooking and cleaning and cooking again, washing sand out of hair and clothing and, well, pretty much everywhere – learning to tolerate a much higher level of noise and chaos, and that “barely keeping it together” feeling.

I do, sometimes, feel like the young mother who wrote to Elder Holland, saying that her anxiety came in three ways:

“One was that whenever she heard talks on LDS motherhood, she worried because she felt she didn't measure up or somehow wasn't going to be equal to the task. Secondly, she felt like the world expected her to teach her children reading, writing, interior design, Latin, calculus, and the Internet—all before the baby said something terribly ordinary, like “goo goo.” Thirdly, she often felt people were sometimes patronizing, almost always without meaning to be, because the advice she got or even the compliments she received seemed to reflect nothing of the mental investment, the spiritual and emotional exertion, the long-night, long-day, stretched-to-the-limit demands that sometimes are required in trying to be and wanting to be the mother God hopes she will be. (Jeffrey R. Holland, April 1996 General Conference)

And for me, it was easy to get overwhelmed in the details and ideals I don't measure up to. And now that I'm on the other side, it is totally *not* glamorous. But even small tasks have a spiritual side.

In John 13: 3-5, we are nearing the end of the Last Supper, and the last hours of Jesus' life on earth. It says in this beautifully moving passage:

“Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God;

He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded."

He goes on to say that if he who was greatest could wash feet – if the Master could serve in such a menial task, could not we all serve? Suddenly, wiping peanut butter off a small face doesn't seem so menial. In fact, it seems that such small service, rendered with love, is the foundation upon which the kingdom of God is built. And knowing – if we could only remember it in the toughest times - that we are about our Father's business in this calling is a wonderful thing.

So why do they call a mission a "mission", anyway, and not "18-months to 2 years of self-imposed poverty, too little sleep, incredible emotional and spiritual exertion, and too-hot, too-cold hard physical labor, that you will still end up somehow coming home and telling everyone it was the best two years of your life?" Well, not to mention the fact that "mission" is just easier, it also implies a focus. A targeted series of activities, An inner calling to pursue an activity, an operation intended to carry out specific objectives.

And this is probably the clearest reason why motherhood is a mission, too. Rather than "18 years of self-imposed poverty, too little sleep, incredible emotional and spiritual exertion, and too-hot, too-cold hard physical labor, that you will still end up somehow telling everyone it was the best time of your life." But it is targeted. Its objectives are specific, and it is a calling, more important, say the prophets, than almost any other that the Lord gives to *anyone*.

So it is not that the road is not difficult – indeed that it will not be the most difficult thing we ever do, because, for me at least, it definitely is. No thing worth doing is easy to do, and this has never been truer here. And for me, at least, just like my first months of missionary service, the difficulty lies partly in losing the eternal perspective – in seeing the endless work of being a mom as only MY work, and not the work of the Lord, who has given me the calling to watch over, care for, teach, lead, and love with all my guts these small people who are very literally his people, too. He has at LEAST as much tied up in this as I do, and anxiously awaits to help, if we'll only ask.

In chapter 8 of 1 Nephi, Lehi tells of his dream of the tree of life. He follows a white-robed man into the darkness, and then travels for the space of many hours in the dark and dreary waste. After praying that the Lord would have mercy upon him, he sees a beautiful tree, whose fruit, he said, was desirable to make one happy.

He says, :

11 And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the ^a[fruit](#) thereof; and I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the ^b[whiteness](#) that I had ever seen.

12 And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great ^a[joy](#); wherefore, I began to be ^b[desirous](#) that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was ^c[desirable](#) above all other fruit.

His first instinct after finding something so incredible was to share this wonderful fruit with his family. He sees Sariah and Nephi and Sam standing at the head of the river a way off,

15 And it came to pass that I beckoned unto them; and I also did say unto them with a loud voice that they should come unto me, and partake of the fruit, which was desirable above all other fruit.

I think Lehi's experience encompasses our main responsibility as parents – to go to the tree that Nephi later calls “precious above all” that represents “The love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men.” And then to experience the joy of the Atonement and the plan of salvation working in our lives, and then to share that joy with our families. I can imagine Lehi standing by the tree, shouting and waving his arms so that his children could know where they could come for peace, joy, happiness, and salvation.

So what does the beckoning and shouting entail specifically? How exactly can we be sure that we measure up according to the standard of the Lord?

I love this quote from Sister Sheri L. Dew:

As daughters of our Heavenly Father . . . we each have the responsibility to love and help lead the rising generation. How will our young women learn to live as women of God unless they see what women of God look like, meaning what we wear, watch, and read; how we fill our time and our minds; how we face temptation and uncertainty; where we find true joy; and why modesty and femininity are hallmarks of righteous women? How will our young men learn to value women of God if we don't show them the virtue of our virtues? – Sheri L. Dew: Ensign Nov 2001

This sounds to me like basic Gospel living, not some deep and esoteric secret found in a manual I don't own. It was said of Christ, simply, that “He went about doing good.” What higher thing can be said of any woman, of any mother? Going about doing good, showing our children what it means to do good.

So how can we stay more connected to this desire, simply to do good?

Elder Holland continues in the letter he received from the young mother I quoted earlier:

“But one thing, she said, keeps her going: “Through the thick and the thin of this, and through the occasional tears of it all, *I know deep down inside I am doing God’s work.* . . . I am deeply moved that God finds His ultimate purpose and meaning in being a parent, even if some of His children make Him weep.

Maybe it is precisely our inability and anxiousness that urge us to reach out to Him and enhance His ability to reach back to us. Maybe He secretly hopes we *will* be anxious,” she said, “and *will* plead for His help. . . . If I can be right before my Father in Heaven, perhaps His guidance to our children can be unimpeded. Maybe then it can be *His* work and *His* glory in a very literal sense.”

Moved by that kind of devotion and determination, may I say to mothers collectively, in the name of the Lord, you are magnificent. You are doing terrifically well. The very fact that you have been given such a responsibility is everlasting evidence of the trust your Father in Heaven has in you. “

Mothers, we acknowledge and esteem your faith in every footstep. Please know that it is worth it then, now, and forever.”

Think back to the last time you stopped and said to yourself, yeah. This is worth it. My kids have a way of helping me learn things about myself, if I’ll only stop to listen. They love with such purity, so completely, so unhesitatingly.

The other day I was tucking Rowen in for her nap (yes. I know. She’s 4 and still takes a nap. Let’s knock on wood), and she was explaining this wondrous machine she had built out of a scarf and a toy bucket and a plastic hanger and a sippy cup, which would remove the splinters from the paws of all her stuffed toys. I said, “Wow! You are an amazing engineer!”

And she said, “When I grow up I want to be a train engineer, because I LOVE TRAINS!

But do you know what I love more than trains? DADDY! I love him all the way to the very last solar system’s very last planet. I love you and daddy and all good things all the way to the very last solar system’s very last planet.”

Now THAT is a lot of love for one small child to have. And suddenly I thought, yes. This is worth it. Imagine, Jessica, if you had never had this experience.

So many of the “worth it” moments are so quiet. And there aren’t any words that I know of to describe what it feels like, because my heart catches in my throat and I can’t utter it.

I have thought many times about that night on my knees in a town outside of Detroit Michigan - about that statement, "These are my people, too." I think that God would have us love and lead and serve our children following the pattern of the Master, and I think that he would have us never forget that in this most important of all callings, we are His partners – not only with the opportunity, but the right and responsibility to call on Him for help and guidance.

Sometimes we feel inadequate to the task. No question about that. But suddenly all the traditional missionary scriptures take on new meaning for us, the mamas on a mission. Like this one, which came as an answer through a kind district leader when I was struggling through those first missionary months and feeling desperately unprepared:

"And faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify him for the work.

"Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence."

I sang the famous missionary song, "I'll go where you want me to go" at the farewell before I departed for my mission. But its words are apt for us as well, as we struggle to keep our faith strong through the challenges of this calling:

"It may not be on a mountain height, or over the stormy sea. It may not be at the battle's front – my Lord will have need of me. But if by a still, small voice He calls to paths that I do not know, I'll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in Thine – I'll go where you want me to go.

There's surely somewhere a lowly place in Earth's harvest fields so wide, where I may labor through life's short day, for Jesus the Crucified. So trusting my all to thy tender care, and knowing thou lovest me, I'll do thy will with a heart sincere – I'll be what you want me to be."

So whether the lowly place is Michigan or Japan, or our houses down the street in Apex, we have been given the opportunity to labor through life's short day, not in our work, but in the Lord's work in the most literal sense.

Elder Holland said in the April 96 general conference:

When you have come to the Lord in meekness and lowliness of heart and, as one mother said, "pounded on the doors of heaven to ask for, to plead for, to demand guidance and wisdom and help for this wondrous task," that door is thrown open to provide you the influence and the help of all eternity. Claim the promises of the Savior of the world. Ask for the healing balm of the Atonement for whatever may be troubling

you or your children. Know that in faith things will be made right in spite of you, or more correctly, because of you.

You can't possibly do this alone, but you *do* have help. The Master of Heaven and Earth is there to bless you—He who resolutely goes after the lost sheep, sweeps thoroughly to find the lost coin, waits everlastingly for the return of the prodigal son. Yours is the work of salvation, and therefore you will be magnified, compensated, made more than you are and better than you have ever been as you try to make honest effort, however feeble you may sometimes feel that to be.

As with every other facet of life, but more so with the crucial nature of the callings we have, the Lord will strengthen us when we have no strength left.

Elder Holland concludes his majestic talk:

Rely on Him. Rely on Him heavily. Rely on Him forever. And “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope.” [11](#) You are doing God's work. You are doing it wonderfully well. He is blessing you and He will bless you, even—no, *especially*—when your days and your nights may be the most challenging. Like the woman who anonymously, meekly, perhaps even with hesitation and some embarrassment, fought her way through the crowd just to touch the hem of the Master's garment, so Christ will say to the women who worry and wonder and sometimes weep over their responsibility as mothers, “Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole.” And it will make your children whole as well.