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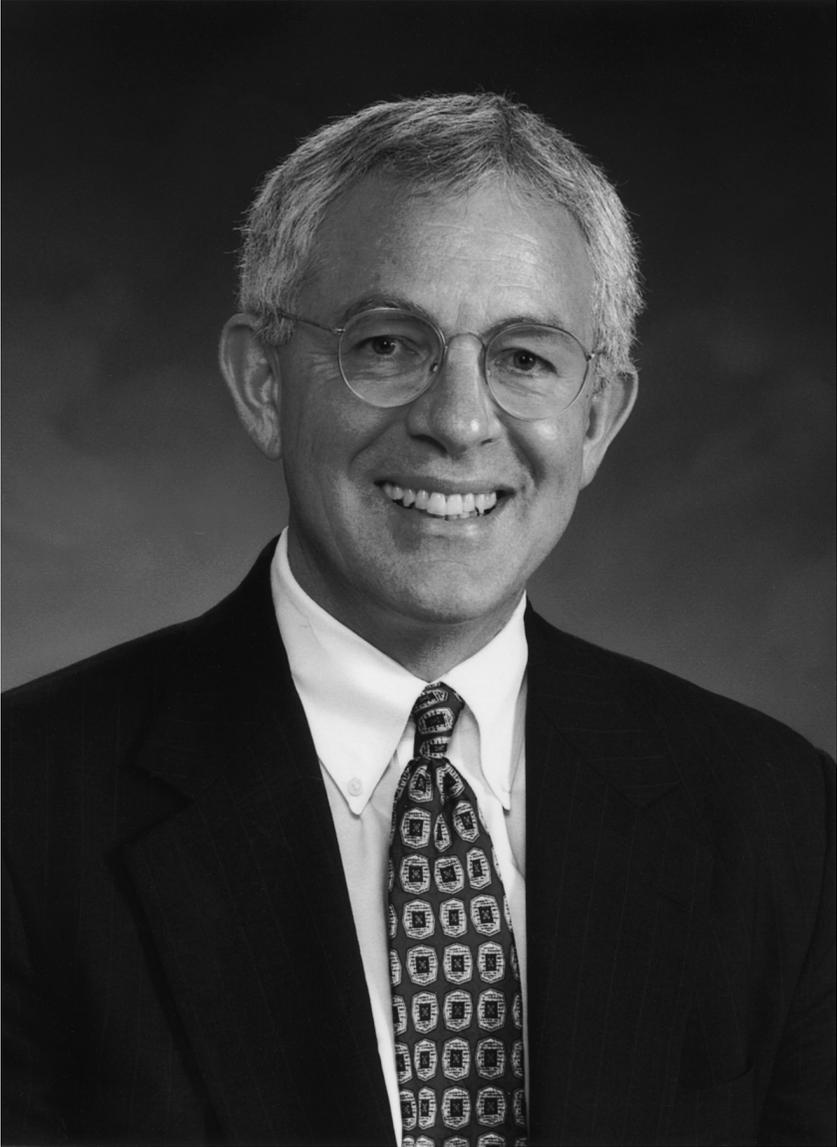
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Elder Marlin K. Jensen

Those Who Are Different

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This address was given at a Utah County Stake Conference Broadcast on September 7, 2008.

Two years before I was born in 1942, my mother gave birth to my older brother, Gary. My brother 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 over sixty 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 and 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, Gary. They shut him out of games, called him ugly names, and teased him unmercifully. Once when he was eating an ice-cream cone, a boy guided him over to a dog and let the dog lick the ice cream. Everyone laughed when Gary went back to licking the cone himself!

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 for the first time, 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.

There are many other people like Gary in our world. Even within the Church there are certain of our brothers and sisters who might be considered "different," and who especially need our love and understanding. Their need for this love and understanding stems in part from the culture that has developed as we strive to live life 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 mores, or 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 chose 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 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, even the unintended impact on a couple married for some years who remain childless when a mother of three who has just had a new baby, arises in fast and testimony meeting and innocently thanks God for trusting her with one more of His precious children.

In resolving the challenging situations I have described, 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.”

A helpful insight on this question came to me several years ago when I was reading the Savior’s teachings about the man who had one hundred sheep and one went 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 one who has been a priesthood leader for many years, I had always thought of myself 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 the 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 it 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.” Requiring us to keep all the commandments 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 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 injure or intensify the pains of 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 may 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 in life, a trait known as empathy. An old Jewish saying describes empathy as “feeling your pain in my heart.” The record of

Christ's 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 1987, 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. Carol Lynn Pearson wrote the words and Reid Nibley the music for "I'll Walk with You," 140–41, a simple song that beautifully summarizes how our love and understanding can be shown. I conclude with its inspiring message:

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.

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 ways is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**