

The Tie That Binds

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I appreciate my mother, who represents today the epitome of this topic.

In listening to the devotional speakers over the past few weeks, I have been struck by the counsel given us and the noticeable theme that threads its way through the messages—the importance of bringing together two concepts that at other times and places have received individual attention: faith and reason, head and heart, parents and children, savings and service, knowledge and righteousness. We have been taken on a spiritual journey of integration, of coming to understand how one concept or principle relates to another; how each is enhanced by the presence and, as it were, companionship of the other; how each exceeds its individual potential through a relationship with the other; and, ultimately, how you and I are enriched, not just by one principle or the other but by their “relatedness.” I appreciate the lessons taught, the personal revelation evidenced; they stand as additional witnesses to the strength and value of relatedness or relationship, a very significant subject indeed.

Over the past few months, this topic—relationship—has caused me much pause and reflection. I wish to share some of my reflective journey with you today and hope that, in at

least some small way, it adds clarity, as it has for me, to our identity, our purpose, and the role of relatedness in our destiny. I hope I neither ascribe more importance to “relationship” than it warrants nor less than it merits. The scriptures guiding us this morning are nested within Matthew, 3 Nephi, and Alma. I pray that the Lord’s Spirit will grace us today.

So God created the earth and all therein and *pronounced* that it was good. But then the *question* of goodness was posed. And his answer, or judgment, was that it is not good to be alone (see Genesis 2: 18). Why isn’t it good to be alone? What goodness does “together” bring? What role does relationship play in the heavens above and on the earth below? Just how essential, expansive, and vital is the role of relatedness?

His creations, his words, and the very fiber of our covenants with him are convincing testimony to me as to the significance and prominence of relationship that culminate in one

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whole: be ye one, even as “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). Three compelling examples illustrate the centrality of relatedness. First, *life* is grounded in relationship. The fact that life exists and continues is dependent on relationship, on connectedness. Second, the *plan of salvation* that unites our premortal existence, mortality, and eternity has at its core relationship. In that plan we are assured of the continuity of at least three things: intelligence, agency, and relationships. Of these, relationship is the tie that binds: “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). And third, *gospel principles and truths* given to help us comprehend “how we shall live” and “how we shall be saved” are also threaded and saturated with relationship. It is of note that being together is also an ingredient in the Lord’s judgment and mercy; it is a designated blessing. We make commitments and covenants that charter the direction and craft the architecture of worthy lives. And if so lived, what is the promised blessing? A perpetuity of relationship: we will be “gathered in,” will be “brought in,” “will come into the fold,” will “no longer be strangers, but fellow citizens,” will “live with him.” And what happens if we do not keep commandments or do not bring worthy lives? A dissolution of relationship: we become “separated” as in the Tower of Babel incident; “cast out” as in the Garden of Eden; not “permitted in” as with the third of the host of heaven; or we are “unknown” as in his fateful, prophetic pronouncement “I knew you not” and he will “depart” from us. The relationship is severed, and we are left without even its possibility.

The role of relatedness in life, in the plan of salvation, and in the truths of the gospel is pivotal and significant. And, so, with whom are we to relate? The scriptures designate and detail three: our fellow human beings, other creations of the Lord, and the Lord himself. How then are these relationships to be characterized?

Let us begin with our fellow human beings. God’s word to humankind is instructive as to the characteristics that define how we are to be in relationship with one another. Indeed, the old law, or the Ten Commandments, appears to exist in order to ground, at the very least, the foundation of a relationship (see Exodus 20:2–17). Breaking or not adhering to anyone of the commandments does, in fact, violate or injure a relationship. Encoded within each commandment is a sin against relationship.

The first four—thou shalt not have other gods before me, make no graven image, do not take the name of the Lord in vain, and keep the Sabbath day holy—all reflect upon and affect our relationship to the Lord. Breaking anyone of these sends a message of how we think about and how we feel toward the Lord—maybe even more important, it shows how we value who he is and our relationship with him. By keeping these four commandments, we are saying that who he is is important and our relationship with him is primary and will not be subservient to falsity or imitation; we will honor and uphold the sanctity of his name, his identity; and we will acknowledge and revere his role and relationship to us through a dedicated seventh of our time.

The remaining commandments concern our relationships with others. The commandment dealing with mothers and fathers is set apart from all others—due, in large measure, to their unique role and responsibility. We are to *honor* them, further underscoring the uniqueness of our relationship to them. Coveting, bearing false witness, stealing, committing adultery, killing, and dishonoring are all behaviors that, with their companion attitudes, thwart the establishment of a relationship, contaminate an already existing one, destroy a previously valued one, and, ultimately, negate the concept and value of our connectedness.

Notwithstanding this reality, Christ came to fulfill the old law and establish a new and

complete way of relating to others. His life and way of being in the world set forth new expectations. While the “old” commandments remained necessary, they were not sufficient to fulfill a higher law that could bless our relationships with one another.

- The shift from the old law to the new one was dramatic. It went from violation to enhancement: “turning the other cheek,” “going twice the distance,” “praying for,” “doing good to them that hate.”
- The shift from old to new was subtle. It went from behavior to attitude: “not opposing the hireling, widow, fatherless, stranger;” giving to “whosoever” asketh; not swearing by *any* of God’s creations; loving and blessing enemies; not even thinking or considering adultery; not turning away from the borrower.
- The shift from old to new was compelling. It was to make resolution *before* worship: to “go and take care” *and then* bring our gift to God; to *first* be reconciled to our brother, and then come; to become *as one*, even as the Father and he are one.

These imperatives, coming by way of counsel and example, extend a “hand” to us. They help us connect to one another. They help us be like him in our relationships with others: congruent in thought and action, in mind and heart, in intent and effort. These all point toward the fulfillment of a higher law and the blessing of a *new* commandment that he gave unto us, to all humankind: “Love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). This commandment makes crystal clear the value of our relatedness to one another and its important role—its fundamental and intrinsic role—in the plan of salvation. This new commandment then answers our question “How shall we live?” We shall live as he lived; and the reality of his plan is that we live in relationship to others.

Christ’s words and example are instructive as to how we can be like him in our relationships. His interaction with us—with all

creation—is a literal demonstration of the qualities that lace together enduring relationships. The scriptures are replete with descriptions of these behaviors and attitudes and reveal the way of being with others that he set for us: patient, virtuous, humble, kind, temperate, contrite, meek, compassionate, merciful, charitable, and with attitudes instrumental to sacrifice and consecration. The scriptures also deal with exclusive behavior: do not judge or contend with others, do not exalt self over another or be prideful or selfish. These are qualities that contribute to being “godlike.” In one sense, these qualities form the laws or principles that govern how we live with one another. If we were to follow his example and admonition, we would have less dependence on our social norms or “civil” laws to define how we are to “live together.”

These expected qualities or ways of being have a creative power: they form the seedbed that gives birth to and nourishes a relationship. They have a cohesive power: they link and strengthen our bonds across varied conditions and predicaments. They have a predictive power: they determine the quality of the relationship we create and they become the “way we are,” a profound portion of our identity.

In truth, these qualities and attitudes voiced repeatedly throughout the scriptures have little meaning outside the context of a relationship—further testament as to its important role in the gospel plan, a role intricately woven into the gospel fabric. In truth, they are the substance that forms the *bond* of charity, or love. In truth, they are the artist’s tools that will sculpt us such that we will be *like* him. These relational qualities that the Lord consistently displayed, that he encouraged us to live by, that are embedded in “love one another”—these behaviors carry a recognizable signature that gives a name to *how we think about* ourselves and others. Close scrutiny reveals the presence of an attitude innate to their definition, value, and success. It is an attitude favorable to

equality, of being equal with one another, of valuing the welfare of another as much as one's own.

From the reservoir of scriptures describing this attitude of equality, let's dip into but a few:

"Should impart of their substance. . . . Should impart of their substance of their own free will and good desires towards God. . . . Walk uprightly before God, imparting to one another both temporally and spiritually according to their needs and their wants" (Mosiah 18:27–29). "Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you" (Jacob 2:17–18). "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21). Have "all things common" (3 Nephi 26:19).

Certainly these create an equalizing of health, knowledge, riches, and talents.

"Love one another, and . . . serve one another. . . . Succor those that stand in need of . . . succor; . . . administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; [do] not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain" (Mosiah 4:15–16). "Willing to bear one another's burdens" (Mosiah 18:8).

Certainly these are an equalizing of hardship and handicap, of strength and light.

"Exalt not yourselves" (D&C 112:15). "Judge not" (Matthew 7:1). "Acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done" (Alma 39:13). "A soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming" (Alma 39:17). "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12).

Certainly these are an equalizing of influence and humility.

What does considering others in equal terms do? Can it steer our behavior, guide

our interactions with others? Does it affect our pride, our generosity, our humility? Our bearing of others' burdens, our sharing of others' joy? Our loving? Does it help us be as he is regardless of "whosoever" asketh or "whatsoever" is done? Yes, our feeling about equality moves as a lubricant throughout the way the Lord would have us be with one another. And no wonder, for inherently, equality

acknowledges rather than ignores,
accepts rather than rejects,
grants rather than denies,
respects rather than disdains,
compensates rather than collects,
harmonizes rather than clashes,
joins rather than separates.

All are features that enhance relationship. It is not surprising then that the way we are in relationship to others occupies such a prominent and pivotal position in the eternal plan. Nor is it difficult to understand why it is that relationship has such a binding quality and why it is a central feature in our becoming one with him.

Regarding specific fellow human beings, are we to be like him in our interactions with "whomever"? How about those who oppose us, put us "down," or criticize us? Or those who have a different perspective, don't see things the way we do, or are of a different political persuasion? Or those who wrong us—take my irrigation turn, run me off the road, overcharge me, misrepresent me, bring suit against me? How about those who don't realize that I am always right or who really don't understand me? Or those I live with, or next to, or far from? To just what extent does being like him "with one another" go? And what is the level of our sacrifice to be? Just how much sacrifice is involved in not taking offense? Perhaps a sacrifice of pride for humility. How much sacrifice is involved in doing as we would have done to us? Perhaps a sacrifice of guile and

effort for virtue or purity of intent. How much of all that we have is needed for our good? Perhaps less than half. How does our own need and want relate to the bearing of another's burden? Perhaps more than we think. One illustration:

The sun blazes down; heat rises; moisture is drawn from the earth; temperatures soar. Resources are limited: food is scant; water is scarce, health is minimal. Sunbaked earth frames huts; hardened earth forms beds; twigs become toothbrushes. Children are born, get sick, die. Women work, bear children, become weary and worn. Men try, fight futility, grow old, and despair. Land once flourished, now it is austere and yields less than needed. Wind blows, sand travels, then settles—a death knell to nutrient-rich earth. Porous rocks, once reservoirs of moisture, become conveyers of air and silt. This setting: a poverty of life, of hope—for children, for men, for women, for the earth.

What is equality in this setting? What is required if we are to live as equals—equals in what?

And now, the same setting:

These weary bodies exude an abundance of soul. These worn bodies are vessels of nobility and strength of soul. And these little malnourished bodies, fountains of eagerness and warmth. A sense of community flourishes among young and old; outsiders are drawn in. Generosity marks their gratitude. Strangers, coming to give, leave—full and friends. Wisdom, a harvest gathered from experience, is shared through rich metaphors of creatures and earth. And the result? Poverty's influence is halted, stopped at the border between body and soul; hope is rekindled.

In this vignette, who then has extended equality, long-suffering, charity, love? Who then has lived as he lived?

The interrelatedness of all things is even more deeply and intricately evident in our relationships with others and our relationship with the Lord. Abundant counsel exists describing the basis on which the Lord relates to us *as* we relate to others. As we forgive, so will we be forgiven; as we judge, so will we be judged; as we give, so will we be given to; as we love, so shall we be loved. As we extend mercy, deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually, then we shall have mercy, justice, and righteous judgment restored unto us. “For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored” (Alma 41:15).

These then are the lines drawn in the sand that clarify our effort and set the expectation and touchstone for our investment and involvement with others. The Lord is defining how we are to be with one another and intimating that it is to be qualitatively similar to how we are with him. These then are the ways of being with one another that will help us be one and bring each other home.

[A video clip of *For Their Future* (Ouelesse-bougou-Utah Alliance) was shown]

Let us consider now how we are to be in relationship to God's other creations apart from humanity. How are we to relate to the wilderness that served as a sanctuary for the Lord and the prophets; the desert that provided a haven for his people; the rock that stood as an altar to the Most High; the lamb that served as a sacrifice to him; the soil that nourishes and the water that quenches; the tree that shelters his children; and the flower that lifts their souls? What is our relationship to them? One illustration:

The setting is a rocky valley. The young anthropologist, Loren Eiseley, considers his two duties: one, “to capture the past,” and, two, “to lay hands on the present”—in this case, to trap animals to be sent to zoos. In the dark of the night, previously having discovered the nesting

place of some birds in an old abandoned cabin, he quietly and quickly opened the door, shone a spotlight into the dark, and grabbed with his two hands whatever was blinded by his cohort, the light. Two sparrow hawks, a male and a female, were there. What he hadn't planned on was that the male would protect the female. When the light went on, the male gave a cry and began to peck and claw the young man's hand. The light was knocked over, and the female regained her sight and flew out through a hole in the roof. But he had the male in his possession. A fine sparrow hawk in the prime of life who had saved his mate by diverting the young "assassin's" attention. The hawk was placed in a box to await the morning, the trip to civilization, and a cage where he would spend the rest of his life. The next morning the young man brought the box in which the little hawk was imprisoned out onto the grass where he was building a cage. But then he paused; he could see no sign of the female. He opened the box, paused again, and then took the bird in his hands. It lay limp in his grasp, but he could feel the heart pound under the feathers. He then laid the bird on the ground. The hawk looked beyond the man and into the sky. "He lay there a long minute without hope, unmoving," his little breast against the grass, his eyes still fixed on the sky above. Then he was gone, soaring into the sky. The young man watched and listened—silence, then a cry ringing from somewhere high overhead. His heart turned over, for it was not the cry of the hawk he had captured but the cry of its mate from where she had been soaring restlessly above for hours. He saw them both whirling together—then, once more, there was another cry of such "unutterable and ecstatic joy" that for the young man it sounded in his heart throughout his years (See Loren Eiseley, "The Bird and the Machine," *The Star Thrower* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978], pp. 83–91).

Embedded within this narrative is Loren Eiseley's response to his responsibility, his

relationship to the others of God's creations, and the agency that would direct his response. And what of our response? How will we relate to them?

The earth and all therein preceded us in their physical creation; they were already there when Adam and Eve were placed in Eden. Connectedness or relationship as an integral notion in their realm is strikingly apparent. We are well aware of the interactive nature of all living things: pollination, habitation, conception. We are also aware of the interactive nature of the earth—the winds, the tides, the elements: erosion, germination, translocation. The vitality of these living things is nourished in the rich humus of an interactive, connected relationship—as is even our own. We are dependent on these other living things for our temporal welfare, perhaps our spiritual as well. The nature or essence of our world was *not* designed to be an isolated, linear experience; by design it was to be responsive, interactive, and interrelated.

So what guides us in our relationship with the Lord's other creations? The Lord was clear about our part and our responsibility: to have dominion over and to assure the attainment of the *full* measure of their creation that they might have joy therein. The importance that God placed on these creations is equally apparent, particularly in relationship to him. For example, we are not to swear by them as they are his "throne" and his "footstool." Our role with other creations is more reflective of a parental role; that is to say, we have responsibility *for* them. "Replenishing," "multiplying," and "filling" irrefutably have a more enriching ring to them than does "not killing or stealing." In light of where "much is given much is required" (D&C 82:3), and being aware that, as sons and daughters of God, we are inherently blessed with gifts of intelligence, conscience, and agency, I would guess that the expectations for how we relate to his other creations are very high indeed! And, perchance, this

opportunity to be involved in the fulfillment of their creation may well be an excellent exercise in the management of the worlds to come.

At the time of the Fall and Adam and Eve's departure from Eden, the nature of our relationship to God's creations alterably changed; but our responsibility for and to them did not! Nevertheless, the new conditions and circumstances made it more difficult for us to fulfill our responsibility. Adversity entered the scene and changed the conditions, thus hindering our progress in the fulfillment of our responsibility. We now had to work hard by the sweat of our brow to overcome obstacles, both physical and attitudinal, in order to guarantee success in the fulfillment of our duty and calling to God's creations. Subduing *and* replenishing became a more difficult balancing endeavor. Just how much would be "needed" for our good? How much then would need to be removed? How does *our* need relate to *their* fulfillment?

Visualize, if you will, our friends Babe, the pig, and Mr. Hoggett from the film *Babe*. Babe is sick and dehydrated almost to the point of death—despondent to the point of hopelessness. And Mr. Hoggett, at the point of helplessness, knows that unless he can get Babe to drink and eat, he will lose him. And what turns the tide in that hopeless and helpless moment? A change of heart and purpose. Mr. Hoggett holds Babe and begins to sing:

*If I had words to make a day for you
I'd sing you a morning golden and true.
I would make this day last for all time, then
Fill the night deep in moon shine.
If I had words to make a day for you,
I'd give you a morning golden and true. ["If I Had
Words," lyrics by Johnathan Hodge, *Babe: A
Little Pig Goes a Long Way*, Universal City
Studios, Inc., 1995]*

"I'd give you; I'd make this day last." In what ways do our decisions regarding the

other creations change our relationship to and with them? And, finally, what role does our relationship with the earth and the other species play in the realization of paradisiacal glory for the earth? Hopefully, our relationship with them, with its accompanying role of responsibility, is a significant element, or at least a moving force, in bringing to pass the full measure of their creation and, along with others, bringing them home.

Finally, is our first and foremost relationship—our relationship with the Lord. He underscored this relationship's importance; he said that we are to be called by his name—a distinct definition of who we are and to whom we belong by lineage, association, and affinity. It is this relationship that captivates our attention, affection, and attachment. And if the relationship corresponds to our familial brother and sister relationship, then our relationship with him is, indeed, the closest in life. The importance of a relationship with the Lord is registered in his blessing: great will be our joy if we bring one soul unto him. Priceless is a relationship to him. It is from our relationship with the Lord that all others should flow.

He is our link with God, making an additional connectedness with our Father. If we learn of him, we learn of the Father. If we know one, we know the other. How much stronger, unified, or more trustful can a relationship be than if when you know one you know the other? Through our relationship with Christ we become a party to their relationship and are brought into the features and investment that mark that holy bond.

Three gifts offered to us by the Lord in our relationship with him almost eclipse understanding. First, an *atonement* for our sins—sins whose weight and entanglement could have kept us forever strangers to him. What a merciful and equalizing act. What an invitation to and sacrifice for an enduring relationship. This act is the only one that ensures the continuation of our relationships with the Lord and

those with one another—then, now, and forever. Second, the gift of *agency*, the freedom that puts within our control the way we are with others. Unconstrained by trait or talent, we are free to choose how we will be and how we will live. And third, his own *example*, the way he lived, day by day, among all people.

And what is our part? What is our offering or gift to the relationship? It is a receptive heart, hope in who he is, time spent with him, a living endorsement of his gospel, a sacrifice and consecration of self, and living lives with others wherein we have been *like* him.

The path we take in relationship to other human beings and others of God's creations does portray who we are and what we believe. The defining features we etch upon that trail may well trace and define the boundaries we place on our relationship with him. His parameter is expansive: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto them, ye have done it unto me. No wonder he *knows* his sheep. There is something recognizable about the way they are with one another: they are with others as he would have

them be, and they would do with others as he would have them do.

[A video clip of *To This End Was I Born* (LDS Church Educational System) was shown]

We are to be with others as he would have us be; we are to do with others as he would have us do; in fact, as we would do and be with him. The link with him through our relationships carries an identifiable inscription once again: Whatsoever ye do unto the least, ye do it unto him (see Matthew 25:40).

*Love one another, love one another,
As I have loved you.
And bear one another's burdens,
And share one another's joys.
And bring each other home.*

May "as I have loved you" be emblazoned on our hearts—no, emblazoned on our relationships—is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.