

Looking to the Margins: Creating Belonging

PHILLIP D. RASH

Those of you who know me understand that I would prefer a much more intimate setting for a conversation. In fact, one of the reasons I became a clinician was because I prefer one-on-one and small-group interactions. You came to the devotional today likely preferring to hear from a charismatic and dynamic speaker. I guess my mom was right when she said that we don't always get what we prefer. As my initial nerves begin to subside, I sincerely feel that it is good to be with you today.

The Brigham Young University mission statement states, "All instruction, programs, and services at BYU . . . should make their own contribution toward the balanced development of the total person."¹ The mission statement also contains the idea that at BYU "the full realization of human potential is pursued."² Please keep these two important concepts from the mission statement in mind as we continue: We are striving to achieve (1) "the balanced development of the total person" and (2) "the full realization of human potential."

Not long ago, BYU hosted a noted scholar on the topic of student success. Dr. Laurie A. Schreiner and other scholars from across higher

education have come to conceptualize the idea of college success in a way that reflects the broader, more comprehensive language found in our own mission statement. Dr. Schreiner defines success as "students getting the most out of their college experience—being intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged."³ In her definition we find that idea of the balanced development of the total person.

In a conversation with BYU administrators, Dr. Schreiner quoted a scripture several times in order to add a spiritual context to her definition of student success. In John 10:10, Christ proclaimed, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." An abundant life is certainly characterized by the development of the total person and the full realization of human potential—our potential to become like our heavenly parents.

Phillip D. Rash, assistant dean of undergraduate education and director of the BYU Office of First-Year Experience, delivered this devotional address on June 4, 2019.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

I truly believe that our Heavenly Father desires that we live an abundant life. I am equally convinced that the One who notes even the sparrow's fall⁴ desires that our time at BYU is a successful one. Furthermore, I believe that Heavenly Father endorses the broad view of student success as previously described. We are so much more than a GPA, and we are so much more than a grade on a term paper or final exam. As found in the BYU Aims, an education at BYU is intended to help "students integrate all parts of their university experience into a fundamentally sacred way of life."⁵ Heavenly Father wants us to live, work, and study—and to do so abundantly.

Nevertheless, living an abundant life as a student at the university is not a given, and there are several elements that must be present in order for an individual to succeed and to live abundantly. One key factor, now widely recognized in the field of education, is whether or not an individual feels a sense of social belonging. Belonging is not simply having a place or even fitting in somewhere. Instead, belonging says that this place is my home, that I am needed and have a purpose here, and that these people around me understand and accept me. It is a feeling that my community "has my back" and wants the best for me.

Belonging has been described as a basic human need, and its absence has been shown to affect our mood, our ability to cope with stress, our academic achievement, and even our immune system.⁶

Belonging is more than mere affiliation. Admission to BYU means that a student will be allowed to affiliate with the university for four or more years. For employees, being hired at BYU guarantees that we get to come to work and receive compensation. As long as we show up and do a good job, we will be all right. However, the guarantees end there.

To help someone truly belong requires an intentional institutional effort as well as the cooperation of individuals of goodwill. Belonging summons the courage to confront our own prejudices and to challenge the assumptions we make about others. Belonging enlists those who are wise enough to just listen and humble enough to admit what they

don't fully understand. The desire and ability to help another person belong at BYU, at church, in our apartments, or in our neighborhoods is a characteristic of advanced discipleship.

Perhaps the apostle Paul was speaking of this idea when he wrote:

There should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.⁷

I think you will agree that BYU is a fairly homogenous place, as are the communities of Provo, Orem, and even faraway Springville. On campus I am consistently surrounded by a majority of people who look, dress, and generally act as I do. I don't have to look far to find someone who has shared similar life experiences, has grown up in similar neighborhoods, has been raised in similar families, or has had similar educational opportunities. When I arrived as a student on campus in the early 1990s, these commonalities—shared with peers and professors alike—allowed me to feel comfortable very quickly, to make good friends and establish long-term relationships, to communicate my needs, and to find the resources I needed to do my best. My path from affiliation to belonging was fairly quick, and although there were—and continue to be—hiccups along the way, the process has been relatively smooth.

I would venture to guess that there are many here today who would say that their experience has been similar to mine. Of course no one is identical to another human being in terms of experiences, beliefs, or behavior; however, for many of us, our commonalities facilitate a feeling of community and a sense of belonging.

I would also venture to guess that there are individuals in this auditorium who would say that they have not experienced Brigham Young University in the same way. They may look like me or they might not. They might affiliate with the same communities that I affiliate with or they

might not. Unfortunately, I believe that there are individuals who, for a variety of reasons, have never felt like they truly belong here. In fact, in my conversations with students, faculty, and staff, a number of our brothers and sisters feel like they live on the periphery or on the margins of the BYU experience.

I recognize that this might be difficult for some of us to believe when compared to our own experience at the university and elsewhere. After all, some might say that BYU is a very welcoming place. The students and staff are generally friendly and even kind. The grounds are gorgeous, and we have clubs and sports and resources. Maybe those who feel like they don't belong simply are not trying hard enough.

However, I am afraid that this attitude ignores the complexity of what we refer to as marginality—or the idea that there are those who, for many different reasons and life circumstances, find themselves on the margins of a given group or community. We are not speaking about mere reticence or simple reluctance on the part of individuals. Often the factors that place and keep individuals on the margins or on the periphery of a given community are extremely complex and usually have very deep sociological and historical roots.

Therefore, when we are tempted to respond to the idea that some of our brothers and sisters remain on the sidelines by saying that “they just need to try harder,” we necessarily encounter the warning given by King Benjamin:

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, . . . for his punishments are just—

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.⁸

Now we know that King Benjamin was talking about refusing those who are severely economically disadvantaged—about beggars, to be precise. Nevertheless, there is an important parallel in terms of our response when we are made aware

that someone in our community does not feel fully accepted. After all, as King Benjamin reminded us, “Are we not all beggars?”⁹

Have we not all, at some point in our lives, felt like we did not belong? I am confident that it would not take long for the majority of us to remember a time in our lives when we felt like a stranger or an outsider looking in. We probably do not feel this to the same extent as some of our brothers and sisters but may perhaps still feel it in personally significant ways.

Remembering Our Egypt

Throughout the Old Testament, the children of Israel were repeatedly commanded that certain groups of people were to be extended special care. These groups included the poor and oppressed, widows and orphans, and strangers. When the Lord revealed His law to the prophet Moses, He commanded, “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹⁰

I think it would be unfair and inaccurate for me to compare my experiences of not belonging to those whose cultural or racial identity, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation have placed them on the margins of society for hundreds or even thousands of years. Nevertheless, the Lord's reminder that “ye know the heart of a stranger” was designed to activate a holy empathy within all of us. It is like He is speaking to me, saying, “Phil, you know what it feels like to not belong. Remember seventh grade at East Minico Junior High School.” That was my Egypt. I am fifty years old, and I still remember the sting of that awkward and painful episode of my life.

How we respond as a university community and how I personally respond to those on the margins has weighed heavily upon my mind for quite a while. I believe we can and should do better. More important, I believe that I can and should do better. My relationship with God—who asks me to show my love for Him by loving my neighbor—depends upon it. Likewise, I believe that my discipleship and personal ministry should largely be defined by it.

The Savior’s Ministry to the Margins

Fortunately, our loving Heavenly Father provided a perfect model for us to follow in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Even though none of us will be able to walk His path perfectly, we are nevertheless called to emulate Him and His works.

When the Savior visited the inhabitants of this continent, He taught many sacred and important things. In 3 Nephi we read, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and ye know the things that ye must do in my church; for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do.”¹¹

The Savior’s interactions with the people in the land of Bountiful provide us with a very robust blueprint for discipleship. The Lord blessed, healed, taught, and instituted the sacrament. He prayed with and for others. Additionally, the New Testament allows us to witness other acts performed by the Savior that we are likewise commanded to emulate.

So who were the marginalized that Jesus encountered and how did He respond and relate to them?

For one, there was the woman at Jacob’s well. There were many reasons why Jesus, being a Jewish man, should never have engaged her in conversation. First, she was a Samaritan, an ethnic group considered to be heretical and unclean by the Jews of the day. Second, she was also a woman whose social status was not on equal footing with men. Additionally, she had been divorced multiple times, and, at the time of her encounter with the Savior, she was living with a man who was not her husband.

How did Jesus act toward her, and what do we see Jesus do in this story? I urge you to read the entire account found in John 4. But to briefly summarize, what started with a strategic request for water ended with the Messiah revealing His true identity and the essence of His mission to this woman of Samaria who, in turn, proclaimed her witness of Jesus’s divinity to her entire community.

We often recall, almost offhandedly, that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners. Who were the publicans and what makes time spent with them

so remarkable? From my limited understanding of the subject, publicans were contract employees of Rome. They collected revenue, including taxes, from the people on behalf of the government of the day. Because they worked for Rome, they were considered to be traitors to the Jewish people. Apparently some publicans inflated taxes for their own benefit, used extortion and fraud to get more money than they were owed, and may have used force and brutality in their work. For these reasons they were hated, especially by the Jewish leaders in Jesus’s day.

How did Jesus respond to the pharisaical criticism that ensued after He shared a meal with publicans and others of ill repute? Consider for a moment that it was during one of these meals—and we can read about that dinner in Luke 15—that the Lord taught three beautiful and inspiring parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the immensely powerful parable of the prodigal son.

Perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of Christ’s ministry to the marginalized is found in Matthew 9, when Jesus sees a publican named Matthew sitting at work one day and bids him, “Follow me.”¹² Matthew the publican, from a class of men despised by the Jews, left his post to follow Jesus and was later numbered with the original twelve apostles.

Jesus ministered to all types of marginalized individuals, including lepers, prostitutes, adulterers, the demon-possessed, and Roman soldiers. Even while upon Golgotha’s agonizing cross, the One—innocently and heroically bearing all sin and human frailty—mercifully ministered to a contrite thief being crucified next to Him for his crimes.¹³

So then what do we see Christ do with the marginalized? As previously mentioned, He ate with them, He walked with them, He cried with them, He healed them, He validated them, and He listened to them. Most important, Christ taught *everyone* the doctrine of His Father—the doctrine of ultimate liberation: that in Him and through Him alone we are made free from the bondage of sin and death and that in Him we overcome all things.

A Marginalized Savior

I believe it is also critical for us to remember that Christ Himself lived on the margins and that Christ's own marginalized status was intentional and foretold by the ancient prophets.

Isaiah prophesied:

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.¹⁴

Perhaps Christ had to live a life of marginalization and rejection because the Father knew that those two things would be both pervasive and painful to many of His children during mortality. Christ's mission, according to Alma, embodied this universal pain:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.¹⁵

Following His Footsteps to the Margins

If we are to do what the Savior did, we probably want to ask ourselves, "Who are the marginalized today and what should be my response to them?" Time will not permit me to list every group that currently experiences or has historically experienced marginalization. Unfortunately, those ministered to by the Savior might still encounter many of the same attitudes and prejudices in our day. Although society in Christ's time deemed marginalized people to be broken or defective, the terms *broken* or *defective* should not be applied to those standing on the periphery of belonging and inclusion today. Marginality does not mean to be less than others, even if people existing on

the margins have been wrongly treated as such throughout history.

It is also important to understand that membership in a community that has historically endured pervasive marginalization and even oppression does not mean that all members of that community consider themselves marginalized. I mention this because it would be unwise, following this devotional, for us to approach someone and say, "Hey, Brother Rash said that you must feel marginalized." That is probably not the best approach.

So what do we do? Perhaps we begin by opening ourselves up to the idea that there are, in reality, people who feel as though they do not fully belong at the university, in our wards, in our residence halls, and in our neighborhoods. They may not act downtrodden or sad or angry. However, it is important for us to remember that not everyone experiences BYU, Provo, the United States, or even the Church in the same way. It is also important to acknowledge that history often leaves deep and enduring scars.

Age-old prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, against the poor, against women, and against our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters has left long-lasting scars. Similarly, religious differences continue to engender deep division and hatred, even within families.

During the "Be One" celebration, President Dallin H. Oaks reminded Latter-day Saints that we need to rid ourselves of prejudice. He said:

As we look to the future, one of the most important effects of the revelation on the priesthood is its divine call to abandon attitudes of prejudice against any group of God's children. Racism is probably the most familiar source of prejudice today, and we are all called to repent of that. But throughout history, many groups of God's children are or have been persecuted or disadvantaged by prejudices, such as those based on ethnicity or culture or nationality or education or economic circumstances.

As servants of God who have the knowledge and responsibilities of His great plan of salvation, we should hasten to prepare our attitudes and our actions—institutionally and personally—to abandon all personal prejudices.¹⁶

At BYU the vast majority of us share a common church membership as well as common religious beliefs and practices. However, we must always remember that some among us do not. And even though many of us share a common church membership, there are different ways to be a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When my sense of orthodoxy confronts your sense of orthodoxy, there is a potential for misunderstanding and judgment. Consider a simple example. When my sense of orthodoxy allows for watching TV on Sunday and the orthodoxy of my roommates does not, there is a risk that I may be placed on the periphery of that small community of roommates.

Now let us consider a more significant example. There are men and women who, for a number of reasons, have not served and may never serve a full-time mission. They exist day-to-day in a virtual sea of those who have. The accounts of their pain at the attitudes, conversations, and judgments of others—even by the well-intentioned—have repeatedly broken my heart. Let us not add to their potential burden through thoughtlessness, judgment, or abandonment.

Let us also not forget that there are brothers and sisters all around us whose faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is failing or has perhaps already failed. A crisis of faith or a loss of spiritual identity is a tremendously disorienting and frightening experience. Perhaps our response to those in crisis might be crafted through the lens of what we now refer to as ministering—“a newer, holier approach to caring”¹⁷ discipleship. Instead of working to bring about an immediate change in behavior, belief, or attitude, we can listen with love and seek to understand—always ready, as Peter counseled, “to give an answer to every man that asketh . . . a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”¹⁸

In Luke 14, Jesus sat down to dinner with a chief Pharisee. Christ used that opportunity to teach the following lesson.

When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours. . . .

*But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind:
And thou shalt be blessed.*¹⁹

In other words, as disciples, we don’t just spend our time with those who are just like us or those with whom we are already comfortable. We spend our time with those whose life experiences, beliefs, or customs are different from our own.

When I read this scripture, I immediately thought of the recent forum address given by Bryan A. Stevenson, who taught us about the “power in proximity”²⁰ and about being with those who are different from us and those who might even challenge us.

As we strive to be disciples who venture to the margins and who invite others in from the periphery to a place of belonging and abundance, we will surely stumble and trip over ourselves. We have to be all right with a little stumbling. We ask for patience and understanding because this is only the beginning of important conversations. The important thing is that we try. We acknowledge that there really is a margin and that some people have lived on that margin for a very long time. We acknowledge that history leaves scars. We rid ourselves of prejudice and withhold judgment. We listen with love and understanding, and we activate holy empathy by recalling how we too were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

If it all seems unattainable or overwhelming, remember the words of our Redeemer, spoken to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

*Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me;
And none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost.*²¹

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).
2. The Mission of BYU.

3. Laurie A. Schreiner, "Different Pathways to Thriving Among Students of Color: An Untapped Opportunity for Success," *About Campus* 19, no. 5 (November–December 2014), 10.
4. See Matthew 10:29, 31.
5. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
6. See Gregory M. Walton and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students," *Science* 331, no. 6023 (18 March 2011), 1447–51.
7. 1 Corinthians 12:25–27.
8. Mosiah 4:17–18.
9. Mosiah 4:19.
10. Exodus 23:9.
11. 3 Nephi 27:21.
12. Matthew 9:9.
13. See Luke 23:39–43.
14. Isaiah 53:2–3.
15. Alma 7:11–12.
16. Dallin H. Oaks, "President Oaks' Full Remarks from the LDS Church's 'Be One' Celebration," *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, 1 June 2018, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2018-06-01/president-oaks-full-remarks-from-the-lds-churchs-be-one-celebration-47280.
17. Russell M. Nelson, "Ministering," *Ensign*, May 2018.
18. 1 Peter 3:15.
19. Luke 14:12–14.
20. Bryan A. Stevenson, BYU forum address, 30 October 2018; quoted in Erica Ostergar, "BYU Forum: Creating Justice," *Intellect, BYU News*, 30 October 2018, news.byu.edu/news/byu-forum-creating-justice.
21. D&C 50:41–42.