

Personal Ministry: Sacred and Precious

BONNIE D. PARKIN

I guess you are wondering why I wore this red jacket. My hope is that it will remind you that tomorrow is Valentine's Day. So, on this day before Valentine's Day, I've been wondering: "How's your heart?" If your heart hasn't already been promised to someone, think about doing it. And remember, your mother doesn't count!

I'd like to begin with a story.

My daughter-in-law's mother, Susan, was a wonderful seamstress. President Kimball lived in their ward. One Sunday, Susan noticed that he had a new suit. Her father had recently returned from a trip to New York and had brought her some exquisite silk fabric. Susan thought that fabric would make a handsome tie to go with President Kimball's new suit. So on Monday she made the tie. She wrapped it in tissue paper and walked up the block to President Kimball's home.

On her way to the front door, she suddenly stopped and thought, "Who am I to make a tie for the prophet? He probably has plenty of them." Deciding she had made a mistake, she turned to leave.

Just then Sister Kimball opened the front door and said, "Oh, Susan!"

Stumbling all over herself, Susan said, "I saw President Kimball in his new suit on

Sunday. Dad just brought me some silk from New York . . . and so I made him a tie."

Before Susan could continue, Sister Kimball stopped her, took hold of her shoulders, and said: "Susan, never suppress a generous thought."

Susan didn't have an assignment to make that tie. She wasn't hired to do so. Despite feeling a bit hesitant, she did it because it *felt* right. Susan had a quiet sense of mission to serve others. I was also the beneficiary of such service. Her service went beyond any calling because it lasted throughout her life. Never suppressing a generous thought became a part of her *personal* ministry.

Some years ago, at the conclusion of a Utah Board of Higher Education meeting, Elder Neal Maxwell submitted his resignation. He said he needed to do so to make time for his personal ministry. Most of the board members assumed he was referring to his apostleship. However, he explained that his personal ministry was different than his apostleship. His personal ministry was to comfort fellow cancer patients.

Bonnie D. Parkin was Relief Society general president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 13 February 2007.

We often speak about the Savior’s ministry. But have you ever wondered if *you* have a personal ministry? I have.

What is personal ministry? Each of us has a personal ministry. I believe we received our personal ministry in the premortal world. It was divinely given and lasts a lifetime.

I hope all of you are excited to study the teachings of President Kimball in Relief Society and priesthood this year. I love what he taught when he said:

*Remember, in the world before we came here, faithful women were given certain assignments while faithful men were foreordained to certain priesthood tasks. While we do not now remember the particulars, this does not alter the glorious reality of what we once agreed to. You are accountable for those things which long ago were expected of you just as are those we sustain as prophets and apostles!*¹

How can we know what was entrusted to us at that time? As we accept callings and love and obey the Lord, our personal ministry unfolds. It is a sacred and precious thing. It embraces the people who come and go across the path of our life. It extends beyond our temporary callings as presidents, counselors, secretaries, teachers, and so on. It is illuminated by our patriarchal blessings. And while each of our ministries is unique, they allow us to become extensions of the Lord’s love.

The Holy Ghost is key to pursuing our personal ministry. I pray that the Spirit will attend us in these moments together and that we will each have a greater desire to minister personally to others.

It’s so important to realize that every interaction we have is an opportunity to minister, to nurture. You can minister to someone right now. Tell the person sitting next to you “Thank you for sitting by me.” And if no one’s sitting by you, pop over next to someone and tell them thanks.

“To minister” is defined as attending to the needs and wants of others. The Bible Dictionary adds, “The work of the ministry is to do the work of the Lord on the earth—to represent the Lord among the people.”²

Ministering involves extending charity—that pure love of Christ—to others, one person at a time. By doing so, we offer a kind, generous, peaceful, and pure heart. Opportunities to minister may come within the formal stewardship of a calling or assignment, or they may come as we spontaneously extend ourselves to someone in need. I believe these words of Elder Maxwell:

*Our impact is less likely to emanate from the pulpit—more often it will occur in one-to-one relationships, or in small groups where we can have an impact on an individual.*³

Such ministering follows the scriptural admonitions that should govern our every interaction with all of our brothers and sisters: “Be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient.”⁴ “See that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.”⁵ As we offer such Christlike service to those around us, we and they are blessed and feel His love.

Most ministering opportunities are spontaneous, not planned in advance. Much of the Savior’s ministering seemed almost incidental, happening while He was on His way to somewhere else—while He was doing something else. Chapter 9 of the Gospel of Matthew is an amazing illustration of that.

Early in the chapter, the Savior disembarked a ship. A man with palsy was brought to Him. Jesus stopped and healed him. Then Jesus had a discussion with the Pharisees and a man interrupted, saying his daughter had died. So Jesus left to assist the man. On His way, a woman touched His garment. Jesus healed her. He continued on His way and raised the girl from the dead. As He departed her home, two blind men followed Him, and He healed them.

As He continued on His way, He cast the devil from a man possessed. All of this took place in one chapter! He gave us the example of ministering *as He went*.

Just as a doctor comes to heal the sick, Jesus came to heal the sinner. When the Pharisees criticized Him for spending time with sinners, He responded, “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.” Then He said, “Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy.”⁶ Had they simply watched Him ministering as He went, they would have learned what He meant. They would have seen His mercy. When we are merciful to others, we can feel at one with the Savior in that moment.

President Hunter taught:

*We have the responsibility to learn of him, the things he taught and the things he did during his earthly ministry. Having learned these lessons we are under commandment to follow his example.*⁷

Like Him, we can go and do likewise if our hearts are open to those opportunities.

Just as ministering doesn’t always need to be planned, it doesn’t need to be spectacular. It is something we can do every day in natural, comfortable ways. Mother Teresa suggested that we “do small things with great love.”

My sister Joyce called our 98-year-old Aunt Leona and asked, “What can I do for you?”

Aunt Leona didn’t even hesitate but said, “Oh, I would just love a note in the mail when you have a minute.”

That’s pretty simple. Who do you know that needs a note?

While we were serving in London, we received a missionary from another mission. During his first interview he told my husband, Jim, that he did not like the Brits and did not want a British companion. Jim had prayed about the companionship and had felt impressed to put this missionary with one of the hardest-working missionaries—who also just happened to be British. Although that

British missionary never complained about his new companion, he later told us it was a difficult time. Nonetheless, he served his companion in small ways: he made him breakfast, ironed his shirts, even shined his shoes. At the conclusion of his mission, I asked the missionary who had not wanted to serve with a Brit who his favorite companion had been. It was no surprise—it was his British companion.

I’ve heard remarkable stories of how you BYU students, faculty, and staff minister to each other. Listen for the common threads as I share three experiences.

I was a little apprehensive and nervous when I moved into a new apartment. Of the girls in the apartment, two were sisters and the others were already good friends. I worried about fitting in. To complicate matters, their interests and strengths were my weaknesses: they could make bread from scratch, bake pies, and run a household. Their uniforms for these activities were their well-worn aprons, which hung prominently on the kitchen wall. Then, as I was moving in, I noticed a sewing machine on the kitchen table. I was shocked. They even did their own sewing!

*Well, they must have read me very easily because I was soon presented with my very own apron that they had sewn just for me. It didn’t seem like ministering, but that blue apron symbolized their extended friendship, and it made me feel welcome. They helped me gain confidence in the kitchen—but, more lasting, they helped me through their examples. They included me in their circle as they gave of themselves. I still have and use that blue apron in my kitchen as I try to open my home and heart to others around me.*⁸

The second experience is from a BYU graduate:

As a sophomore, I had a roommate named Krista. She ministered to me by just being a loyal and kind friend. She asked about my life and always listened. She noticed what my talents were and suggested a

*field of work I never would have considered—the next 15 years of my life were altered because she noticed my skills and abilities and I took her advice related to a career. She could have noticed my inabilities and weaknesses—maybe she did, but she never commented on them. She just helped me be the best person I could by believing in me.*⁹

The last experience tells of a professor's impact:

*I was a research assistant for a professor who taught me how to run statistics software, how to cull themes out of qualitative data, and how to patiently comb through survey responses. But he also shared with me faith-filled personal experiences and stories about his family. He lived his values and always remembered which things were most important in life. He inspired me to want to sing more and laugh more and appreciate life often, even in its extremities. When I came to his office to work, I always left edified. He ministered to me even though I wasn't doing a stellar job for him because I was so busy and stressed out with school. He looked at the situation and saw the most important thing in it. And that thing was not the work. It was a person who needed hope and faith in a challenging time of life.*¹⁰

One common thread I see in these stories is people who followed the Savior's admonition: "Feed my lambs. . . . Feed my sheep."¹¹ Isn't it wonderful that there is so much flexibility in *how* we minister to each other? I hope you can see that all our personal interactions provide us with opportunities to minister.

President Hinckley said:

*Believe in yourselves. Believe in your capacity to do some good in this world. God sent us here for a purpose, and that was to improve the world in which we live. The wonderful thing is that we can do it.*¹²

We can often learn more about our personal ministry *through* our callings. I hope all of you

are visiting teachers or home teachers. Look at these assignments with new eyes. They are great opportunities to minister to each other. Do you know the hearts of those you visit? Do you spend time with them? Do you listen and give them the great gift of knowing they have been heard and understood? It takes time and energy, but it is so important! I testify that as you seek for inspiration, you will not only know how best to serve others but will better understand your own personal ministry.

Let me give you an example. Elder Maxwell talked the talk, but he also walked the walk. Aileen Figuerres, who currently serves on the Relief Society General Board, shared this story:

Elder Maxwell oversaw the Asia North Area while my husband, Cyril, presided over the Japan Fukuoka Mission. Each time we saw the Maxwells, they would ask if there was anything they could do for us when they returned to Utah. However, we never wanted to burden such busy people with extra things to do.

While we were in Japan, our daughter Dawn was a new BYU student. One day she was called to the front desk of her dorm to find Elder and Sister Maxwell waiting. [Wouldn't that be a surprise!] They knew she was away from us and brought her a potted plant for her room and a book by Elder Maxwell. He humbly and humorously suggested that she could read it if she was ever having difficulty falling asleep. They chatted with her, told her about what we were doing, and offered her the name and phone number of their daughter who lived nearby in case Dawn ever needed assistance.

But this was not the end of their ministering to a young college student. During the Christmas holidays Dawn received a call to make sure she had somewhere to go. Sister Maxwell even invited her to the MTC to hear Elder Maxwell speak.

Their ministering was a blessing to Dawn and to us, her parents, who thought about her and worried about her as we lived half a world apart from each other.

Have you ever been the recipient of someone's ministering? Do you welcome or resist when others try to minister to you? Does it make you feel like a "project"? Sometime ago in our ward priesthood meeting, one of the brethren mentioned that the compassionate service leader in Relief Society had said there were ward members who did not want to be projects. This made it difficult for the sisters to serve them. My husband raised his hand and said if it would help, he did not mind being a project. So if the sisters wanted to bring him some meals when I was out of town, that would be okay. Unfortunately for Jim, they thought he was just kidding.

Jim, will you share your favorite story of learning to receive?

Jim Parkin: Once when Bonnie was the ward Relief Society president, an unusual thing happened. She was sick and could not go to church. She gave me careful instructions for preparing Sunday dinner. I put the roast in the pan with potatoes and carrots and celery around it, with the proper seasoning, and placed it in the oven. The boys and I were stoked, as it was our favorite Sunday dinner.

When we returned from church, the house smelled of that wonderful roast beef fragrance. I went to Bonnie's bedside for further instructions. She told me to put the roast and all the trimmings on serving dishes and take it to another family in the ward.

All I could say was: "What will we eat?"

She said, "Diana heard I was sick, and she's bringing us dinner."

Remembering the wonderful roast I had just soloed on, I said, "Well, how about we eat our dinner and give Diana's dinner to that other family?"

Bonnie responded, "No! We need to learn to receive as well as to give."

That lesson has served me well, and I have taught it on many occasions. But it still hasn't

gotten me any extra dinners from the Relief Society!

Bonnie Parkin: Thanks, honey. What I know is that personal ministry must begin in our homes—and apartments.

Don't deny others the blessings of service. Allowing them to minister to us is another form of ministering. Personal ministry helps us feel the love of the Lord and come unto Him. Alma taught us that we entered into a covenant with the Lord at the time of our baptism. We specifically committed "*to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; . . . and . . . mourn with those that mourn; . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.*" As we minister to each other, Alma promised that the Lord would "pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [us]."¹³ Thus, when we serve one another, we are individually blessed.

A young couple took Alma's words to heart. They learned that a woman in their BYU ward had been diagnosed with advanced leukemia. They opened their hearts to her, her husband, and their young daughter. Listen to what this couple did. They contributed the money they would have spent on Christmas to this family to help defray their mounting medical bills, and they visited the wife in the hospital, read to her, and brought small gifts to cheer her.

Six months after the diagnosis, this mother died. The young couple had planned to move east to pursue professional opportunities following graduation. They decided to delay their move so that they could help this newly widowed father while he completed law school. When the father went to class, the young couple cared for his two-year-old daughter. They planned a surprise birthday party for this dad, and, with help from the ward, they kept the meals coming. I can't imagine that such extended service was easy for either this young couple or the widowed father.

Love and relationships—simply and profoundly—are what personal ministry is all about. President Hinckley said:

Our mission in life, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be a mission of saving. . . .

If we are to build that Zion of which the prophets have spoken and of which the Lord has given mighty promise, we must set aside our consuming selfishness. We must rise above our love for comfort and ease, and in the very process of effort and struggle, even in our extremity, we shall become better acquainted with our God.¹⁴

We can become better acquainted with Heavenly Father through prayer. Personal ministry can answer prayers. We can offer a daily prayer that enlists the help of the Lord Jesus Christ as we ask: “Help me to be the answer to someone’s prayer today.” The Lord consistently answers this prayer as we tune our eyes and ears to discerning the needs of those around us.

The prayers of one missionary’s parents were answered by the personal ministry of another. A missionary arrived in a foreign mission and was struggling with discouragement. He said he couldn’t take it and wanted to come home. His parents and others tried to encourage him but to no avail. At a reception during a training session, this distraught father mentioned his son’s struggle to a priesthood leader.

The following week an envelope arrived at the parents’ home. Inside was a copy of a letter that had been sent to their son. The letter had been typed on a typewriter and very tenderly addressed to the discouraged elder. It was several pages long, full of encouragement and the writer’s own missionary experiences about faith and sticking to it. The letter was warm, loving, thoughtful, personal, and signed, “Sincerely, your brother, President Gordon B. Hinckley.” Shortly after this, the elder wrote his parents to say he was staying. He became a mighty power for good among the people of his mission.¹⁵

It is motivating to think that in spite of President Hinckley’s many responsibilities and his age, he is actively involved in personal ministry. As I attend the board meetings of the Church Educational System, I am moved and touched when it is President Hinckley’s turn to pray: He prays for each of you that you will be blessed with faith and testimony in Jesus Christ. As you increase your faith and testimony, you answer a prophet’s prayers.

We become the hands of our Savior as we do His work. In a missionary zone conference we discussed being the answer to someone’s prayers. One pair of missionaries went home and prayed that evening and the next morning that they would be the answer to someone’s prayers. The next morning they walked down the high street, and a man came running out of a hotel. He asked if they had a copy of the Book of Mormon—and they did! He explained he was a member attending a business conference. He was worried about some personal problems, and, as he prayed, he received the impression that his answer was in the Book of Mormon. But he did not have one with him. That morning he was sitting in the hotel restaurant. He suddenly had the impression to go immediately to the front of the hotel, where he saw the missionaries, who provided him with the answer to his prayer.

Asking to be an answer to someone’s prayer has a powerful impact. There are sacred, quiet experiences for those who participate with the Lord in answering prayers. As we go about listening, watching, and feeling for the answer to those prayers—even in the midst of our busy schedules—I testify that our earthly ministry unfolds by revelation and divine empowerment. Our testimonies, faith, and feelings of connectedness to the Lord expand in amazing, unexpected ways.

And we can increase that participation with the Lord through prayer and even fasting for others. This helps us become aware of the great power the Lord grants us to make a difference

for our brothers and sisters. In short, we can initiate and partake in small miracles on behalf of others—miracles that we are uniquely prepared to do, and that *only* we can do.

Wherever and whenever we are ministering, we are sharing God’s love. Then, as He always does, both the giver and the receiver are blessed. May I suggest that finding your personal ministry begins with making a decision about a consistent way of being: a way that seeks to nurture, to be entirely helpful—not just now and again, but always. Ultimately, it is a decision to further consecrate ourselves to the Lord, to more fully take upon ourselves His name—to do as He did. Making this decision deepens our connectedness to one another and to the Lord. Such a responsive way of being is who we really are—from before this life.

I’d like to share part of a letter from someone who experienced this connection with another and with the Lord:

Dear Sister Parkin,

We fly quite a bit, and when we got our boarding passes, we had been upgraded to first class. This has never happened before, and may not again, but it was a little exciting.

As I was getting on the plane, I saw to my left a young woman in military uniform. The thought immediately came to me, “You need to give her your seat.” It was quite a strong impression, and one I could not ignore. So, not being totally obedient, I went to my seat and put my bag down and sat down. I could not sit there though, and I walked back to talk to the stewards. I told them I wanted to give my seat to someone I had seen while getting on. Then I went back to get my bag.

I stood by the stewards until this young woman boarded the plane, and I pointed her out. They stopped her and informed her that I wanted to give her my seat. She was very appreciative, and I told her that I appreciated all she did for our country and I was happy to do this. I found out her seat assignment and went back and settled in.

About halfway through the flight this young woman came back to my seat and thanked me again. She kept calling me ma’am and telling me how grateful she was for this kindness. Then she handed me a little piece of paper and walked back to her seat. The note said, “Ma’am, I just wanted to say thank you so much! You helped me out in my hour of need. This soldier is forever thankful for your kindness. I am heading home to attend my mother’s funeral. She passed away yesterday in a car accident. I thought God left me and punished me for something, but through this He gave me an angel to help my travel. Thank you. Here is a little something that helped me out. Now I’m passing it to you.” Enclosed with the note was a little metal cross that said, “God loves you.”

The letter concludes:

I am so grateful that I listened to the Holy Ghost and acted on that prompting. I don’t know her name or where she was going. I really only know that she was a soldier. But I know that Heavenly Father knows her name and where she was going and that she was hurting. He wanted her to know that He loves her and was comforting her at this difficult time. I know that Heavenly Father loves me, too, and that He trusts me. It was such a simple thing to do. I guess that is what most service is—very simple things.¹⁶

My dear brothers and sisters, we are each called to reach out to others—most of the time it happens through simple acts of kindness, one to one. These are the events that really matter!

Our personal ministry is sacred and precious. It allows us to become an extension of the Lord’s love. It embraces all who cross our path. What are those things you can do for another person that only you can do? I invite you to find out.

As you leave the Marriott Center today, you will have immediate opportunities to practice

your personal ministry. Please, never suppress a generous thought.

God bless you to follow your promptings, and, as you do, I promise that He will expand your heart to become more like His. My heart has expanded as I have ministered and been ministered to. It's in those ministering moments that I know that God loves me, and I testify that He also loves you and pray that you can feel His love daily. I testify that Jesus is the Christ. I know this for myself. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Role of Righteous Women," *Ensign*, November 1979, 102.

2. Bible Dictionary, s.v. "ministry," 732.

3. Neal A. Maxwell, "A More Excellent Way": *Essays on Leadership for Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 74.

4. 2 Timothy 2:24.

5. 1 Peter 1:22.

6. Matthew 9:12–13.

7. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 40.

8. Personal correspondence.

9. Personal correspondence.

10. Personal correspondence.

11. John 21:15–17.

12. Gordon B. Hinckley, San Diego youth and young adult firesides, March 1996, reported in "'Strengthen Belief in God and Self,' Prophet Counsels," *Church News*, 30 March 1996, Z3.

13. Mosiah 18:8–10; emphasis added.

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Our Mission of Saving," *Ensign*, November 1991, 59.

15. See Eric B. Shumway, "Unto the Least of These," BYU–Idaho devotional, 1 April 2003; www.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/Devotionals/2003_04_01_Shumway.htm.

16. Personal correspondence.