

Willow Creek Stake's Adult Session

September 20, 2019

Davis Smith conducting – Joe Staples presiding

Opening Hymn 66 – “Rejoice the Lord is King”

Opening Prayer – Sister Sorenson

Eryn Sanchez – 1st Ward. **“Where do I go for Spiritual Experiences?”** Diane’s notes

Christ will send the comforter—the Holy Ghost will bring all things to our remembrance. Memories can bring peace in difficult times. Christ promised this to his ancient apostles as they went throughout the world exercising faith and spreading the gospel.

In 2016 when her five children were ages 2 through 14, her husband decided to stop being active in the church. They looked to her for guidance. She found peace in remembering the exact words she received in a student ward. These words confirmed her choice to marry him in 2003.

She remembered her worth as a daughter of God as words of hymns, scriptures, and priesthood blessing that came to mind. These sustained her as did the Comforter--the Holy Ghost, who brought inspiration and peace. When loved ones stray and say they aren’t getting answers, it’s because they are distracted and have distanced themselves from the spirit. Enduring peace is possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief”

By Davis Smith

Earlier this year, President Staples, President Matheson, and I set off on an adventure, sailing island to island in the Exumas, surviving by spearing fish and eating coconuts along the way. Half way through the trip, I started feeling awful. I ate a bad coconut, contracted salmonella, and lost 14 pounds over the next three days. For those looking to lose a few pounds, come talk to me afterwards, and I’ll share my secrets. As we concluded our trip and began sailing back, I was completely exhausted. I needed to lay my head down and turn the helm over to President Staples and President Matheson to sail our boat. They weren’t experienced sailors. They wouldn’t have been able to answer every question about how to sail a vessel, but they knew enough that I put my trust in them, and we stayed the course, continuing our journey until we arrived back safely. How grateful I was to have them with me, when I was weak, weary, and in need of help.

Of course they were simply following the counsel we’ve been given by the Lord, “Wherefore, be faithful; ... succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.” (D&C 81:5)

As followers of Jesus Christ, this is our charge. In today's talk, I'd like to address those struggling with questions; some simple, others complex that may weigh them down, that make them feel weary, weak, and spiritually exhausted. Some of you may recall that I previously spoke to the wards in our stake about Doubt, so when President Staples gave me this theme for tonight's talk, I realized I either needed to do a better job this time, or the Lord had something He wanted me to learn still. I can tell you that my preparation for this talk, over the last couple months, has been a beautiful spiritual experience for me.

Many who attend this Saturday evening session have deep convictions and may not be struggling with major faith issues. However, most everyone here has likely had their own questions and doubts along the way, and certainly there are many here who have loved ones battling through their own faith journey. Like President Staples and President Matheson in our sailboat, you may not know every answer, but you know enough to stay the course.

In our church, there is often a wide perceived gap between nonbelievers or doubters and those who believe, but the reality is that within the church there is a wide spectrum of belief, and there is a place for all of us within the gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter how great or small our testimonies, no matter if our faith is sure and solid, or if our faith is unsure and as small as a mustard seed.

I'd like to address the first part of my talk to those whose faith is strong and the second part of my talk to those whose faith has been challenged or changed or to those who are struggling with deep questions.

To Those Whose Faith Is Strong:

To those whose faith is strong, many of you were blessed with the gift of faith or you have worked diligently to build and strengthen your faith. So, what are your corresponding duties, and how do you help those who struggle with their faith?

I believe the answer is simple, and I'll refer to it as the "Two L's" ... Love and Listen.

The first "L" is LOVE:

What if our first response to a loved one confiding in us that they are struggling with their faith, was to tell them, "come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."? What if we embraced them, loved them, and wept with them like Christ did with the little children? Let us be like Christ, "meek and lowly in heart." Let us do our best to "give them rest." We must assure them that there is a place for them among us. (Matthew 11:28-30)

As baptized members of Christ's church, we promised, as did Christ's followers at the Waters of Mormon, to "mourn with those who mourn" and "comfort those who stand in need of comfort." (Mosiah 18:8-11)

If there was ever someone mourning or in need of comfort, it is someone struggling with their testimony.

I grew up going to a Jesuit school where many of my teachers were nuns. Through those years, I developed a deep respect for the Catholic church and its members. A famous author in the Catholic church was Father Henri Nouwen. He wrote: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out

with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”

Of course, as we work to help those who struggle with their faith, we need to remember to diligently work on our own faith. Elder Holland said, “For those of you who earnestly seek to bear another’s burdens, it is important that you re-fortify yourself and build yourself back up. No one is so strong that he or she does not ever feel fatigued or frustrated or recognize the need to care for themselves. Jesus certainly experienced that fatigue. He gave and gave, but there was a cost attached to that, and he felt the effects of so many relying on him. When the woman with an issue of blood touched him in the crowd, he healed her, but he also noted that ‘virtue had gone out of him.’” Let us not forget the need to constantly nourish our spirits.

The second “L,” LISTEN:

Good listening is indicative of a humble heart and of Christ-like love. It shows that we value others more significantly than ourselves. It shows patience and kindness.

James 1:19: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

Good listening is especially important when working with younger generations. Among younger people, there is a high sensitivity to being judged. These generations “turn off” very easily when they feel they are being judged or if a conversation feels condescending. One person’s understanding, or “truth,” might be slightly different from yours. We don’t need to force them to believe precisely as you and me.

In order to effectively listen, we must spend time understanding the issues that may be of concern to others. In a message to Seminary and Institute teachers - President Ballard said, “The 13 Gospel Topics Essays provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar church related subjects. It is important that you know the content in these essays like you know the back of your hand.”

With a new emphasis on a home-centered, church-supported gospel, how much more important is it for parents to also understand these issues and to study these church released essays.

As I have watched individuals close to me grapple with faith issues, I’ve seen people I loved who were mourning and in need of comfort as they struggled with decisions that would change their lives forever. The temptation, as believers, who also love them, is to try to set them straight. But those conversations are rarely helpful, and oftentimes create a divide where those struggling no longer want to talk about their challenges. They will feel even more isolated and alone. We and our loved ones would be better served if we spent more time listening than talking. If we showed more unconditional love, acknowledged the pain they are experiencing, assured them they are not alone, and lastly if we shared pure and simple testimony about what we do know.

So my question for those whose faith is strong is: “Are you ensuring there is a place in our congregations for those who cannot say “I know.” I immediately think of one of my teenage daughters that cannot yet say, “I know.” ... Is there a place for her here?”

Have we loved enough? Have we listened enough?

To Those Who Struggle With Their Faith or Whose Faith Has Changed:

I'd like to shift the discussion to those who feel emptiness, to those who struggle with their faith or feel that their faith has changed, or to those who have a loved one feeling this way.

I'm going to suggest to this group "Two P's," Persistence and Patience.

The first "P" is PERSISTENCE

Be persistent in your faithful search for truth and in building a relationship with your Savior. If you feel your testimony has weakened, then do something about it. Be persistent in your daily habits. Don't let time pass by thinking you can figure it out tomorrow. Start today.

As you seek and study for answers, do not forget God's counsel "as all have not faith, seek ye diligently ... yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." (D&C 88:118)

The second "P" is PATIENCE

Mother Teresa, the Roman Catholic nun spent her life living in poverty serving the poorest of the poor, those dying of leprosy, AIDS, and tuberculosis. If there are people on earth who never seem to struggle with faith or their connection to God, Mother Teresa sure seemed like one of those people. After Mother Teresa's passing, her journals revealed something many found surprising. For decades, her writings reflected deep pain. She wrote, "Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer – no one on whom I cling – no, no one. Alone. The darkness is so dark – and I am alone. Unwanted, forsaken. Where is my faith? So many unanswered questions live within me. I am afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy. If there be God, please forgive me. Trust that all will end in Heaven with Jesus."

Similarly, Joseph Smith wrote: "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed ...?" (D&C 121:1-2)

Even the very Son of God understood what it felt like to be alone:

(Matthew 27)

46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, ... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

48 And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

In one way or another, each one of us will find ourselves in our own Calcutta, our own Liberty Jail, or our own Golgotha. Great or small, dramatic or incidental, we will have our faith challenged because it is part of God's plan. For some this feeling can be persistent and painful, for others it can be seasonal and subtle.

Ultimately, doubt can be faith's partner, or its enemy. Doubt can spark deep spiritual yearnings, as it did for Joseph Smith. It depends on how we respond to it.

In a world where every answer seems just a keystroke away, we have to learn that when it comes to questions of the heart, it is okay to not have all the answers. It is part of our mortal probation to have deep, unanswered questions. The quest to eradicate all doubt becomes counterproductive to God's call to live by faith in our mortal existence, and this desire is derived from Satan. Be patient in your search for answers.

What if you've lost faith in leaders of the church because of past mistakes or something you feel is not aligned with Christ's teachings? David Ostler, a former mission president and stake president wrote in his recent book, "We can sustain, respect, and revere our leaders while at the same time acknowledging that they are human and make mistakes. From our limited perspective, we may not know whether the mistakes made by our leaders are big or little or whether they affect a few people in a small way or more people in a significant way. We may not even know if something we find challenging is really a mistake at all or simply something we do not yet understand. Remembering that our leaders are just like us and make mistakes can help give us patience when dealing with challenging issues. We can have strong faith in Jesus Christ and the doctrines of the restored gospel even while believing that there have been mistakes in our past."

Elder Holland said it beautifully when he said: "When problems come and questions arise, do not start your quest for faith by saying how much you do not have, leading as it were with your 'unbelief.' Let me be clear on this point I am not asking you to pretend to faith you do not have. I'm asking you to be true to the faith you do have. Hope on. Journey on. Honestly acknowledge your questions and your concerns, but first and foremost fan the flame of your faith, because all things are possible to them that believe."

Ultimately, doubt is not a badge of honor but neither is it a mark of shame. It is something we all must struggle with during mortality.

Conclusion:

Some people are given the gift of faith. My mother, for example, has never doubted. She has deep faith, deep trust, and deep belief. Not all of us have been given that gift. From the time I was a child I had a profound desire to come close to God, and I felt and heard his voice multiple times in my childhood and teenage years, but I've always had lingering questions. Sometime during my teenage years, I wondered if something was wrong with me that I didn't have unfaltering faith like my mother. As I've grown older, I have found answers to some of those questions through study, pondering, prayer, and patience. But many of the questions remain unanswered, and many new questions have appeared in my mind and heart. However, I have continued to feel the loving guidance of my Savior. I've had deep spiritual experiences that I could never deny, but there are a few loose ends. I understand that I will not receive an answer to most of these questions during this life. But what I do know, is that the restoration is real and ongoing. I know that I've felt the tender love of God during some of my darkest hours. I know that I've felt the power of the atonement and Christ's personal love for me. It is my prayer that just like the father who came to Jesus with his ailing child, that we can lead with our faith and respond humbly, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Joe Staples – further described the fishing trip. He said when Davis took them to a fishing area guarded by a six-foot shark, Davis became ill and could not row the boat. He and Matheson spent 6 ½ hours rowing and sailing against the wind, fearing they would capsize. Davis feeling ghastly ill commented, “I was hoping we would.”

One of my favorite songs describes what I want to share this evening: “We thank thee oh God for a prophet to guide us in these Latter days.” As members of this church we have scriptures, inspiration and living prophets to lead and guide us. Our priesthood leaders will help lead us into the presence of God. Every time we listen to the prophet we move toward safety.

This is the Church of Jesus Christ. Since it is led by Christ, we need to follow his prophet and his ordained representatives. We cannot pick and choose what we want to follow if we want to live in the presence of God in the hereafter. Direction comes from our Father in Heaven, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and prophets, seers and revelators. We are to heed and follow their direction. The apostles are Jesus Christ’s special witnesses ordained to testify of him. They see the broad perspective of eternal life and teach and inspire us to us to hold to the Iron Rod.

I marvel at President Hinkley’s warning to avoid pornography. Revelation made known the Lord’s specific concerns for us in these latter days, before it became evident that this was becoming a serious problem. I testify that President Nelson’s council that we become a home centered church is exactly what we need. Also, he testifies that we are here, at this time in life, to gather Israel on both sides of the veil. The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ and the prophet and disciples are to preach His gospel. They teach truth while policy can be adjusted to meet changing circumstances. I keep two notebooks: in one I record things I learn day by day. In the second, I keep feelings received through inspiration for myself and the stake. I ask you, what changes have impacted your life since President Nelson was called as our new prophet? (Various members responded as follows):

1. I like the 2-hour meeting schedule. It gives me time to review and share with my family what we have learned. My children have an opportunity to ask questions. As parents we are now in a better position to answer.
2. Ministering enables me to know the sisters of my ward better. They are my flock. Just as the Savior led, ministering enables me to better help them. (Sister Robinson is a Relief Society president)
3. I watch for opportunities to help people I may not have been assigned to serve. I believe angels on the other side of the veil minister to myself and others.
4. When I go to the temple with a question, the endowment can give me inspiration in answer to my question.
5. I like using the proper name of the church rather than just saying “I am a Mormon.”

6. I appreciate the “Come Follow me Program” which enables me to teach and guide my children at home. Also, it coordinates well with what my older children are learning in Seminary.
7. I’ve enjoyed President Nelson’s challenge to read the Book of Mormon. It’s the first time I’ve gotten through it. When President Nelson first challenged us to do this, I said to myself: “Yes, I can do this! It’s only three chapters a day.”
8. The shorter endowment has enabled me to get to the temple more often. I have a young family and need that extra time with my little ones.

We need to be spiritually, emotionally and physically prepared for things that are to come. What wonderful blessings we receive by being led by a living prophet. I am going to ask you to do these four things before General Conference in October:

1. Arrange your schedule to watch all sessions live.
2. Read about the lives of the twelve apostles. Review their biographies.
3. Talk about what you learned and what you felt in previous conferences.
4. Find something you have talked about that you can use as guidance in your life.

If you give heed to what you hear, I promise that you will not be moved out of your rightful place in the kingdom of God.

Closing Song - 98: “I Need Thee Every Hour”

Closing Prayer: