

A Community of Abundance

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Editor's Note: *This essay is revised from a talk given in Belmont First Ward, Belmont, Massachusetts, on May 8, 2011.*

I have never spoken on Mother's Day in church before, nor have I wanted to. One cannot talk in church on Mother's Day without venturing into territory like women's role in the Church and its relation to motherhood. Antique maps mark such territories with warnings like "There Be Dragons"; in that territory, there is no safe ground for man.

Once, about twenty years ago, I wrote something flip and sardonic about the environment in a memo which my boss at the World Bank at the time, Larry Summers, signed. This turned out to be a huge mistake—the kind of mistake that my mother, living in Boise, Idaho, read about in her morning paper, a local paper that devotes one small column to national news. You know when you make a mistake in Washington, D.C., that your mother reads about in Boise, Idaho, you've made a big mistake. Sometime later, after the crisis died down a bit, Larry said to me, "You know, this topic is now dead to us. Neither of us can ever say or write anything about the environment without its dredging up this mistake."¹ I have always regarded the topic of women and the church as "dead to me.") As it turns out, my friend Larry probably should have kept the topic of women dead to him as well, but that's another story.²)

My wife, Diane, grew up in the Foreign Service, moving every four years. After about eight years in a D.C. suburb, she said to me: "We've gotta go. I cannot live like this. How do people live like this?" My protestations that staying in one place while raising kids

was, in fact, how nearly everyone lived had no effect. So we moved to Indonesia. If you want to move somewhere that will make you rethink many things, including gender, I recommend Indonesia.

Some years later our daughter, Hannah, returned to Indonesia to study Javanese. She lived in a smallish provincial city. Being a foreigner, a tall white girl, and fluent in Indonesian brought attention. She was invited to appear on local television and radio shows. In her role as a minor celebrity, she was asked to be one of three judges in a local beauty pageant. The other two were a former winner of the pageant and a local government official.

It turns out the beauty pageant was the Miss Indonesia He/She-Male pageant for men dressed as women. We might think this was strange. In Indonesia, however, there is a long history of three genders. In fact, people who exhibit characteristics of more than one gender were not an embarrassment but were thought of as special. It does make some sense that, since most of us plebeians have only one boring gender, people who are able to have aspects of two genders must be gifted.

In this large beauty pageant sponsored by the local government, one of the contestants was a religious Muslim. So when the contestants were first introduced, this Muslim participant came out wearing a *hijab*, the head covering that many Muslim women wear as a sign of religious devotion. Clearly a Muslim man dressing as a woman should dress as a *Muslim* woman. Impressively, throughout the pageant, while most of the contestants went for quite revealing costumes, this one contestant wore modest clothing, such as evening wear with long sleeves.

Clearly as a good and modest young Mormon woman, my daughter was impressed and wanted to vote for the Muslim man who, even when dressed as a woman, was committed to Islamic principles of modesty in dress. He/She did not win in spite of Hannah's vote. In typical fashion the world over, the majority of judges went for the prettiest.³

Now I am sure that, when most of you think of Islam, cross-dressing is not the first thing that comes to mind. We think of Islam as conservative. But in Indonesia the religion has mixed with the local culture in ways that produce unexpected results.

If you are not confused yet, let me tell you a second story. Another place we lived as a family was India. When you think of In-

dia and women, it is typical to think of it being a place where women are oppressed. Indeed, in parts of India the ratio of girl-to-boy births has been falling as a result of gender-selective abortion. In some places, it is as low as 800 girls per 1,000 boys. But if you were to go to India, what you would be more likely to *experience* as a foreigner is women yelling at men and men responding with subservience.

One of our good friends while we were in India was a woman I'll call Mita. Mita was from a prominent family. Her father was a politician and minister in the government. I once asked her what her mother did. "She yells at people." "Really?" we asked. "Does she have a purpose in yelling at people, or is it just an avocation?" It turns out that her mother runs a business; and to run her business, she yells a lot. Once Mita said she came upon her mother yelling at some workers and said, "Mom, they haven't even made a mistake yet." The response was: "I am just making sure they won't." When we were having trouble getting a simple household item repaired, Mita offered to have her mother come over and yell at our workers as well. Whenever we were having trouble interacting with the local system, we would ask ourselves, "What would Mita's mother do?"

How was it that, in a place in which women are oppressed, what we personally observed was women yelling at men who immediately reacted with obeisance? Well, in addition to the social stratification of gender, there is also caste in India. The gaps across caste are large enough that caste trumps gender. So as elite foreigners hanging out with high-caste and high-status women, we mostly saw the class and caste divide that allowed women to act with power and authority toward lower-class and lower-caste men, not the gender divide.

Before you start worrying about whether I've forgotten I'm giving a Mother's Day talk, let me tell you where I'm going with these two stories. We all live in complex societies. We are embedded in numerous social roles that come with norms about how we should behave. When we conform to those norms, our respective communities reward us with approbation; and when we rub across the grain of social norms, we get friction. But we are all embedded in multiple overlapping communities with different norms. What trumps what?

When we become Christian disciples, we are freed from existing social norms into communities of abundance. Being followers of Christ trumps the stratifications and distinctions in society at large. As Galatians 3:27–28 says:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

These were the important social distinctions that existed in the world of the early Christians. Slavery was still prevalent, and “master/slave” was a primary social distinction. “Greek/Jew” distinguished whom people interacted with and had created important distinctions. Male and female roles were carefully prescribed in those cultures, as they are in the cultures we inhabit today. Joining the community of believers included, as a religious duty, erasing those roles.

There is no question that the early Christians took that freedom from existing social strictures on male and female seriously. From the woman at the well, to the women who, without chaperone, accompanied Jesus, to Mary choosing the better part of sitting and listening to the teaching rather than serving busily like her sister Martha, it is clear that something was different. The resurrection story itself reads like the first bishopric-Relief Society meeting: “While you men were here moping, we sisters have been down to the tomb to do service and you might want to know the tomb is empty”—which of course the men dismissed initially as women’s gossip.

One reason the early Church was persecuted was because it was overturning the traditional roles defined for women and allowing the freedom to challenge existing norms.

But this freedom from one set of social norms implies the creation of a new set of norms within the new community. These norms can be different—in that different sets of behaviors are rewarded—but they can also be narrower or wider. The question is: What does the community in Christ that we create in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints require from us to get the love, respect, status, and appreciation that all humans yearn for?

In last week's priesthood lesson, Paul Carlisle talked about our fears. I took away that many of our fears come out of scarcity. We worry that we won't get enough. In our wealthy society, we have material abundance, so the main scarcity we worry about is scarcity of status, of approval, of love from others, of respect. Our fears of scarcity are based on the idea that life is a competition. If someone wins, someone else loses.

What Jesus had to offer to his disciples and what He offers to us today is the teaching that the kingdom of God is a community of abundance. Most of what His New Testament teachings are trying to communicate about the kingdom is *not* that the righteous will rule and the evil suffer but that there is enough of God's love for everyone.

The story of the prodigal son is really about both sons (Luke 15:11–32). The prodigal son wastes his inheritance on riotous living; but when he returns, his father has more for him. The other son thinks of a world of scarcity and complains, only to have his father remind him that he always has abundance and that he can partake of it whenever he chooses.

One of the hardest scriptures for us good modern capitalists to take in is about the workers in the field in Matthew 20. The employer hires some people at the beginning of the day, agreeing on a wage for the day's work. Throughout the day he hires more and more people, who face a workday of progressively fewer hours. At the end of the day, he pays the last hired first and gives them an entire day's wage. The first hired rejoice, thinking they will get more; but when their turn to be paid comes, they get exactly the same: the agreed-upon day's wage. They complain. Their argument is based on an economy of scarcity: "We should get more and they should get less because we worked longer." The response explains that everyone gets the same because there is plenty for everyone.

In offering us freedom to enter into a community with new norms, Christ invites us to create a community of abundance. In a community where love abounds, we don't need to narrow the circle of who gets our love, our respect, our approval, by imposing a new set of narrow norms. We can afford to expand our love, respect, and approval to more and more people in our community.

How do we create abundance? There are two ways.

First, we channel God's abundance. As His love is infinite there is plenty for everyone. When we share God's love for others, there is not less left for us; there is just more in the world.

Second, to have a community of abundance, we have to give more than we get. If we are worried about getting respect and getting status and getting honor and think in scarcity terms, we are tempted to detract from others, to try to get just a little more than they do. To create abundance we have to put in more than we try to take out. We need to give more love than we seek. We need to give respect to more people than we try to make respect us. We need to give support to people who make choices different than ours.

Which finally brings us to Mother's Day. This is what mothers do: give love, give respect, give status, and give nurturing freely away to others without expectation of any reward except more love. On Mother's Day, we shouldn't let social norms or expectations define or divide us. Rather we should consider the ways each of us, male and female, can live up to the freedom granted us through Christ to create and nurture a community of abundance.

Notes

1. For the backstory on this episode, see <http://harvardmagazine.com/2001/05/toxic-memo.htm> (accessed October 1, 2011).

2. For yet more backstory, see http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2005/01/17/summers_remarks_on_women_draw_fire/ (accessed October 1, 2011).

3. For a first-hand account, see <http://purplepetra.blogspot.com/2007/05/here-she-is-miss-central-java.html> (accessed October 1, 2011).