

Several months ago, my five-year-old daughter, Erin, and I spent some time at the North Visitors' Center on Temple Square. Ever since Erin was tiny, she has loved the Christus statue, and we had not visited it for a long time. We walked up the ramp to the statue only to find a rather large group of visitors crowded around a tour guide. Except for the guide's voice, the room was hushed, all attention focused on the statue. Erin tugged on my skirt. "Can I go up?" she asked. I hesitated. She would have to walk right through the group of listeners. She might distract the tour guide. Then I thought of the Savior: "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). I nodded to Erin that she could go. She walked as close as she could to the statue and then looked up—a very long way for a small child. And then she just stood there for a very long time, minutes, looking at Jesus. She did not move. I watched her through misting eyes. I wondered if some of those visiting Temple Square for the first time did, too.

Erin knows Jesus, and she loves him. And she knows that he loves her. She does not feel alone; she feels part of his eternal family. Part of this she has learned at home, part through her prayers, and part at Primary. It is a gift to feel this way. In this troubled world, it is a tremendous gift. And I hope that if we do nothing else in our Church and in Primary, we will give each other and each other's children the sense that we are loved, that there is someone beside us as we walk over the burning coals of life. "Let us love one another:" we find in 1 John 4:7, "for love is of God; and every one that loveth . . . knoweth God" (1 John 4:7).

Busier Than Thou: The Primary

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MY CALL TO SERVE AS Primary president eight years ago came at a time in my life when I was especially—maybe even uniquely—unsuited for the job. I was thirty-six, married only four years. I was the ward-

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newsletter-editor type, overeducated and seriously introverted. Single most of my life, I had never before held a position of any sort in the Primary. I did have two children; but they were only one and three years old, produced in somewhat of a rush when I finally got married in graduate school. And I was very much a novice parent, unable to effectively discipline my own children, which was embarrassing to me since I had on a number of occasions sat behind families in Church and foolishly commented, "I will never let *my* children behave like that!" I received my just comeuppance and learned never to criticize people in authority for the unseemly behavior of their underlings, minions, or children—even God. I don't hold him as accountable for Stalins or Joseph Mengeles as I once did (or even for Church leaders who want to rid the Church of alternate opinions). My children have taught me that even though I'm bigger and smarter and The Boss, I don't know what they are going to think of doing next.

So at age thirty-six, I was frightened of children in large numbers, more than, say, three or four. Oh, and I was also two weeks pregnant, as it turned out. Frankly, I spent most of my very long year and a half as Primary president trying to avoid any direct contact with the children. I became a master delegator. I excelled at presidency meeting agendas, telephone calls, and orientation manuals.

Yet I did not accept the calling expecting to spend all my energy on administrative tasks.

We were newcomers to our Salt Lake ward, fresh from the graduate schools of Penn State University. Our new ward had an unusually high ratio of active to inactive—not to mention those stalwart souls, the overactive—members. During our one year there, I had had another calling for which I was perhaps better suited: assistant to the Table Decorations Chairman for the Relief Society luncheons. (We weren't chairwomen or chairpersons yet—not in my ward, anyway.) It was a nice, low-profile job; I mostly set tables and tied yarn bows on sixty to seventy napkins a month. After coming from a small ward where I had juggled four callings while teaching freshman literature and composition courses and struggling to keep up with graduate seminars, pregnancy, and preschoolers, I was ready to tie yarn bows on napkins into the millennium if the need arose. All my ambitions to be productive and creative had been temporarily burned out.

But our bishop was concerned that we would not feel part of our ward or that our spirits might atrophy without a chance to be of more significant service. And I believe he was right: I need to serve, and only the Church makes me stretch beyond my comfort zones. I was called to Primary, and my husband was called to the elder's quorum presidency. He was at the time a zealous new convert of three years

who compulsively signed up for the welfare farm assignments every time a list was passed. I still admire him for that.

I rarely volunteer, but I expected that I, too, would rise to the occasion of my calling. I'd been teaching freshman composition courses for five years and, after the first two weeks of stage fright each semester, I would settle into having fun with the classes. And I believed—without confirmation—that I must have been called by inspiration, since nothing else could explain it.

In the bishop's office that Wednesday evening when the call was extended, I knew that I would accept (I always do), but I asked for time to think about it so I wouldn't seem shallow and easy. Once home, I called my sister and another friend who were in Primary presidencies to ask for advice. And that is how I knew enough to say, "I think I can handle this calling, Bishop, if you can call two sharing time leaders and two Primary quarterly party specialists." In our ward, with ninety children on the Primary rolls, junior sharing time and singing were held while the CTR B on up to Blazers and Merrie Misses were in class, and then they switched for the second forty-minute period. Sacrament meeting came last, much to the parents' perpetual chagrin. I was warned that the weekly sharing times were the presidency's responsibility and took a lot of preparation since no manuals were forthcoming from Primary headquarters—only themes and an overly general General Resource Manual. Even worse than preparation time as far as I was concerned, sharing time meant regularly interacting with a large group of children—way more than three or four: children of many ages all at once, children who were not afraid I would give them a bad grade if they didn't behave, children who had *nothing to lose*, children *camouflaged* in dressy dresses and shiny shoes and shirts with collars, wanting desperately to be home doing something more fun and creative, like emptying out the garbage cans to see if there's something good in there, or making Comet-cleanser and hand-lotion footprint trails to lead to their secret hideouts, or lobbing jam-jar grenades out of the storage shelves onto the concrete basement floor—children like mine. (I told you they were out of control.)

My very supportive bishop agreed to all my requests, though I soon found out that bishop support does not mean member support. Primary service is a low-prestige, high-stress call that brings forth from otherwise sweet-tempered sisters panic responses such as, "I've already served my turn in the Primary. Let the young mothers take *their* turn now." Or as one woman said when I telephoned to welcome her to her new calling in the Primary, "Listen, Sister Anderson, I've accepted this call, but only because I've always told my own children never to turn down a calling. I'm not happy about it, and I want *you* to

know that. I'll only do it for six months—I told the bishop that—so start thinking of someone to replace me now.”

“Well, uh, thanks Sister Cromar and welcome to Primary,” I answered cheerily, on automatic pilot. (I do everything possible on automatic pilot when I'm pregnant.)

We did get two exceptional sharing time leaders. One was a recently divorced mother of two, Joanne Smith, who had just moved into our area from Detroit where she had taught art in the inner-city schools and lived to tell the tale. She was good. She specialized in managing our senior sharing time and Russell Baker, ringleader of the Blazer B rowdies. Russell was a master of preteen sarcasm and “Boy is this ever stupid” eyerolls. “It won't be so bad,” the outgoing president had encouraged me, after I sat in on her last week of conducting Primary to get oriented. “It won't be so bad. Russell's birthday is in April. Only six more months.”

A number of people told me it would “not be so bad”; but, you know, it was. It was true adversity for me. Even the second Christmas, after fifteen months to get used to it, I was noting in my journal how great it was to go visit in-laws for Christmas and escape Salt Lake and “the oppressions of Primary.” I was always afraid of innovating some new program or idea I'd heard about in stake meetings for fear I would not be able to keep up with it. I'd set the ball rolling and be crushed underneath it as the kingdom rolled forth. That scripture in Isaiah about the stone cut without hands and rolling forth to cover the whole earth always conjured up for me the opening scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

For instance, I heard of a ward that held a Back-to-Primary Night on a Sunday evening in January. Parents met their children's new teachers (or at least their teachers for the next month before burnout or a move from the ward). Teachers might even supply outlines of lesson topics from their manual's table of contents so parents could discuss topics at Sunday dinner with their children. (Yes, I was naive.)

I experimented: “Well, what did you learn about today in your class?” I asked my son Basil.

“She gave us some candy,” was his answer.

A Back-to-Primary open house sounded like a great idea, but we never had one. I could hear the immense granitic mass of the Primary thundering up behind me; it was already too near.

You can't get much out of a calling in the Primary if you are too busy to be with the children. And it is so easy not to be with the children. There is so much to keep track of, from Cub Scouts to quarterly activity days to neverending staffing problems. I have learned some things in retrospect. As I have read the New Testament along

with the rest of the Church this year, I find that I identify with the disciples. I am impressed at how often we hear of the disciples being chastised. “Do ye not yet understand?” and “Oh ye of little faith” are fairly common refrains in Christ’s remarks to them. Once he chastises Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Matt. 16:23). That is a rather stiff rebuke. No “Let me see, how do I put this tactfully” Junior League training evident here. I am grateful that the keepers of the oral tradition did not try to promote an image of Christ’s disciples as having been perfect in their understanding nor gloss over or omit their errors from the history, letting the Pharisees and Sadducees be the only ones to take the flack. Just as the disciples were easily distracted from what is really important, I as a Primary president was easily distracted from the real stuff of Primary.

The disciples seemed to think that Christ was there to set up a new kingdom on earth right away. Like the early Mormon Saints, many believed the Second Coming and the millennial order were imminent. Thus James and John were not thinking of the afterlife when they requested to sit on his right and left hand when Christ came in glory. They wanted to secure a position of importance in the new hierarchy. (In Matthew 20:20 the account has their mother urging them forward and asking the question in their behalf. She is omitted as the instigator from the Mark 10:37 account.) Christ first says to them, rather ironically I think, that they shall indeed drink from the same cup as he. He doesn’t mention it is a bitter cup. He then points out that such positions of power are not his, but his Father’s, to give anyway (Matt. 20:24).

The real issue is that they have misunderstood again. He tries to explain the distinction between the kind of power they are anticipating (the hierarchical or formal power of institutions where power resides in offices and where people have authority over one another by virtue of those offices) and the power of God, which is not the power to exert one’s will over another but to bless others through gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned (D&C 121:41).

Christ said to James and John, “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.” Exercising authority upon them: exercising authority *over* people and *upon* them is power as the world understands it. “But it shall not be so among you,” Christ goes on to explain to them, “but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister. And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Mark 10:42–43).

The need for order and for a hierarchy in administrative matters clouds our understanding of this message that Christ kept repeating.

We sometimes confuse the Church's necessary administrative hierarchy for a tiered, pyramidal system of worthiness. For example, as Primary president I had initially asked the bishop for counselors who were experienced in Primary already and could help me figure out the program. He agreed, and I asked for one woman, a mother of eight, who had been a Primary president, ward and stake level, in Ohio. She was experienced. She was organized. She was gutsy. She accepted. I also suggested another woman in our ward who was in her sixties. She had been on the Primary or Relief Society General Board—I can't remember which—and also had served as a stake Primary president in one of the Salt Lake stakes. I wanted her expertise and advice, and I also hoped to draw other grandmotherly women into Primary. We are so often restricted to singles and to young, inexperienced mothers—or in my case, old, inexperienced mothers. However, this elderly woman refused, claiming that she was “expecting a stake call.” I assumed that perhaps children made her nervous, too, and this was simply a desperate spur-of-the-moment excuse like, “Gee, I'd *really* like to, but I think I'm going to be . . . a staghorn beetle next week.” “Well okay, Sister Kafka. Maybe next time.”

However, her excuse implied to my bishopric counselor, who was disgusted, that any stake call pre-empted in importance work on the front lines and as a mere counselor in a, let's face it, low-status ward organization like the Primary.

Her comment led me to wonder: the message of the Church is always that we should seek to be humble and serve in whatever calling we are given, since all callings are opportunities for significant service. Do we actually believe this, or do we believe that spiritual giants rise through the administrative ranks of the Church hierarchy? Christ warns us not to be too certain: the order of heaven may be a great reversal, “many that are first shall be last; and the last first” (Mark 10:31). If spiritual growth comes from blessing people's lives one on one, those in the front lines of Church service may be in a much better position to grow and enlarge their souls and not be afflicted by pride of office or insulated by layers of bureaucracy from loving relationships with those who most need and benefit from our love.

Remember when the disciples, always seeming to seek the principle, always wanting—as don't we all—to be in the right, thought they had a sure thing when they criticized the woman who anointed Christ's head with a box of “very precious ointment.” “But when the disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, ‘To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor’” (Matt. 26:7–13). In the chapter immediately preceding is recorded the powerful parable defining who should inherit the king-

dom: "For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat. . . . Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these, ye do it unto me" (Matt. 25:42-45). All Christ's sermons on not turning away from the sinners and the poor and the socially outcast emphasized the give-to-the-poor commandment, which the disciples must feel quite certain they understand at this point. Yet they are simply building a counter set of laws and rules and being as self-justifying in their application of principles as the scribes and Pharisees. They wrongly seek to use obedience to a set of rules as a way of ensuring their places in another kingdom, another status structure.

Christ's concern is not with who is right or wrong according to law but with the individual heart and its motives.

He cares about the woman and her gift of love, and when he hears that the disciples are lecturing the woman, he intervenes. "When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me" (Matt. 26:10). He does not want her to be criticized for her offering. Perhaps it *would* have been more useful to sell the ointment and give the money to the poor, but why reject her offering of love? Instead he affirms her act, her choice, her feelings. "Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world," he says, "there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial to her" (Matt. 26:13). He is always life- rather than law-affirming.

Yet this must be frustrating to the disciples, who are being schooled in a new understanding of religion, power, and law that is revolutionary in a way they do not yet understand. They seek to depose the old rulers, yet inhabit the same building. They do not yet understand that there is to be no building. The scaffoldings of power will remain as organizational tools (order and reporting are necessary and important); but the power to change lives is personal, informal, and resides in the servants, not the masters, the last not the first, those without status, those in the front lines of hazardous duty in the kingdom.

Let me say on behalf of these wonderful men, the disciples, that they were teachable. They did not omit these incidents from the record. They did not insist on a "faith-promoting" version of history that kindly skipped over their mistakes. They did not *yet* understand, but clearly these men who followed Christ were determined to understand. And they were ultimately more interested in truth than in their own vanity as they sought understanding.

Like the disciples, I as a Primary president did not get the message. I continued to feel that the oil I was pouring upon the heads of the children was the waste of a valuable offering. I missed this oppor-

tunity to bless the children's lives. I did learn how to organize, and I served the Church by setting up and keeping in motion the structure where others could teach the children and learn to love them. But I missed being part of that, and that is where the real rewards of service in any Church program come—in learning to love the people we serve. Only as we learn to love them do we have an impact on their lives. The irate woman who planned to leave the Primary in six months never did. She fell in love with her CTR B class and stayed on.

As I mentioned, I did learn how to delegate handsomely and generously, especially during the nine months of pregnancy when I was too nauseated to care and the six months after that when I was too tired to care. I was only energetically meddlesome and creative for about four or five months. This, at least, proved a blessing: during those four or five months I made enough enemies to feel truly meshed in my ward. You don't really become part of a group, a ward community, unless you've offended a few people. If everyone approves of you, you're holding back your all, not risking anything in the relationship. Being Primary president allowed me to stomp on a few toes, make some serious errors of judgment, and really feel a part of my new ward family.

I also learned what it is like to be in a position of authority: how little control you really have compared to how much responsibility you are awarded for whatever happens. This works in positive as well as the more obvious negative ways. One of the children's sacrament meeting programs, "Turn the Hearts of the Children," was delightful, thanks to family portraits done by the children under the supervision of our Detroit-trained art specialist. We labeled and displayed the artwork at the end of the meeting on an overhead projector while the children sang "Genealogy I Am Doing It," their favorite song that year. Thanks to our relentlessly energetic music leaders, the singing was loud and exuberant, the juvenile equivalent to harmonious. Everyone enjoyed seeing the child's eye view of his or her own family. Humor was scripted into the program that year instead of coming only from the children's charming mistakes, always my favorite part of a children's program, and the children's speaking parts had been coached to perfection by parents. But I received compliments—"best year ever," "you are so creative." I basked graciously in the warmth of these misdirected accolades while realizing that when someone says, "I can't take credit for this," they are not being modest. They are being honest. And I wish that when Primary erupted in irreverence that day when the stake leaders were visiting, I could have modestly said, "I can't take credit for this either. I never intended them to have so much fun today."