

LEVELING THE EARTH, EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

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Hi, my name is Eunice McMurray. I'm married to Peter, who is an ethnomusicologist, and I'm a mom to four-year-old Penny, who is currently my job. We've been in the ward about ten years. I was originally asked to speak last week, but I was in Korea visiting my grandfather who is sick. He and my grandmother raised me on a chicken farm until I was five and I moved to the US with my parents. I joined the Church when I was twelve and, not having had the public speaking training from going to Primary, I am perpetually terrified of giving sacrament meeting talks. I even asked Penny to give this talk for me, but she said no because this pulpit is too big for her.

Questions

After Christ came to the Americas following his resurrection, he gave the people the new law and outlined his doctrine and emphasized its simplicity. He starts with this exhortation and then follows with essentially the Sermon on the Mount.

And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been.

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.

Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine.
(3 Nephi 11:28–31)

He continues, in sum: believe in me (Christ), repent, be baptized.

Why does Jesus begin by talking about contention? Presumably because there was contention among the people that was very important to resolve. He says, “there shall be no disputations among you” concerning the points of his doctrine, stressing that the “spirit of contention” that “stirreth up the hearts of men” is of the devil.

At first glance, this passage seems to be saying we should all avoid disagreement.

Certainly, our ward has seen its share of what some would call contention. In my ten years in the ward, I’ve seen camps and cliques form, firesides held to address disagreements, and many become offended and even end up leaving the Church. I think if there were a clear way to resolve our differences, to convince the other of our own right-ness, we would have welcomed the solution. We have gathered as believers and members bound by baptism and commitment to repentance, so why can’t we all just get along?

With contention over right and wrong ever increasing in the world, how can we ensure that our faith remains based upon Christ’s doctrine? How might we focus on the simple truths he offers when life seems to grow more complicated?

This topic is a tricky one for me, since—as Peter will tell you—I have a genius-level ability to break down even the simplest notions into a trillion tiny little problems. At one time, I was so astounding in my problematizing and catastrophizing daily trivialities that he suggested I would be an excellent asset for FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Not only am I unable to grasp the simple truth of most things, but I have been conditioned through many years of rigorous academic training to consistently employ critical thinking, which boils down to disagreeing with others pretty much all the time. So as a pretty contentious, complex person, I will speak to you today about simplicity and how really, really bad contention is.

Answers, Part I

Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the scriptures and the Other in our community. The part of the answer in the scriptures reveals itself through a close look at the wording of the text: “And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been.” As I hope will become clear as I continue, I believe what Christ is saying here is not that the disputations are the real problem, but that there’s a clear, right way that precludes disputation.

“For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.” Again, Christ is talking about the pride underlying disagreement rather than disagreement itself. So if you’re following my argument, there is something underlying the disputation that is the real source of evil. This becomes clear as the record unfolds. After Christ instructs and leaves the people of Lehi, we are told in the first chapter of 4 Nephi that amazing things happen: the people repent, are baptized, and Mormon tells us, “there were no contentions and disputations among them” (4 Nephi 1:2). Again, these were the very words Christ himself used: contention and disputation.

Furthermore, the scriptures state that “they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift” (4 Nephi

1:3). The record continues by saying there were literally miracles among them: healings and even people raised from the dead. And the Lord blessed them all spiritually and temporally.

Which brings us to the trouble. Mormon writes:

And . . . there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world.

And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them.

And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ. (4 Nephi 1:24–26)

We see here that the contention that Jesus decries stems from inequality, specifically of material wealth. I am no scriptorian, but reading about the ills of class division in the Book of Mormon is pretty startling. And also kind of amazing. And also deeply uncomfortable.

This idea of economic disparity in Christianity is a difficult topic, and one which I am utterly fascinated and perplexed by. I remember a few months ago a friend brought this up in Sunday school, and I was so grateful when he—who is so well-versed in scriptures and doctrine—said, in effect, “Is it bad to be rich if you’re a follower of Christ? The scriptures say so. But also, I want to be rich some day.” (Which, by the way, I think he meant as a joke because he’s in the humanities.)

Aren’t many of us striving to get to a point in our careers where we don’t have to worry about our student loans, or debt, or bills, and can enjoy the life we feel we’ve earned?

Well, while many of us enjoy temporal blessings, I believe we do have a moral imperative to constantly recognize that our relative wealth—like other aspects of privilege—is not earned by our skill or righteousness but, rather, won via the lottery of circumstances of our lives or gifts of grace. And while I doubt many of you here today will devote your lives to

eradicating poverty, I urge you to keep in mind this very uncomfortable but core tenet of Christ's doctrine as you work, play, and vote.

As a practical starting point, I present to you the famous philosophical scenario of the drowning child from Peter Singer's 1997 article, "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle" (as adapted by philosophy-experiments.com¹):

Your route to work takes you past a shallow pond. One morning you notice that a small child has fallen in and appears to be in difficulty in the water. The child is crying in distress and it seems is at risk of drowning. You are tall and strong, so you can easily wade in and pull the child out. However, although you'll come to no physical harm if you rescue the child, you will get your clothes wet and muddy, which means you'll have to go home to change, and likely you'll be late for work.

In this situation, do you have a moral obligation to rescue the child?

As part of the interactive scenario activity, the website then encourages the visitor to click a radio button next to one of two options: "I have a moral obligation to rescue the child" or "I have no moral obligation to rescue the child."

The first answer seems as if it must be the right one, right? Noted ethicist Peter Singer has stated that his students, when asked about this scenario, unanimously respond that they have a moral obligation to save the child. Okay, now suppose that there are other people walking past who would equally be able to rescue the child but are not doing so. Does the fact that they are not doing what ought to be done mean that you're no longer obligated to save the child? How about if there were a degree of uncertainty of a successful rescue, or if your expensive hipster bike might be stolen during your attempt, or if you rescued a child last week and you ruined your shirt doing it, or if this particular

1. "The Drowning Child," Philosophy Experiments, retrieved from <http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/singer/>. The experiment is based on Peter Singer, "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle," *New Internationalist*, no. 289 (April 1997), retrieved from <http://newint.org/features/1997/04/05/drowning/>.

effort won't eradicate the problem of drownings in general? What if the child were far away, in another country perhaps, but similarly in danger of death, and equally within your means to save, at no great cost—and absolutely no danger—to yourself?²

The final question of the hypothetical scenario is based on this fact: Research estimates that 16,000 children under the age of five die each day from preventable causes associated with extreme poverty. Given that, “Are you morally obliged to make a relatively small donation, perhaps to the value of a new shirt or a night out at a restaurant, to an overseas aid agency such as Oxfam [or, I would add, LDS Humanitarian Services] within the next few days (and even if you have previously made such a donation, perhaps even recently)?”³

Recent figures put out by efficient aid organizations estimate that it costs roughly \$2,000 to save a human life.⁴ We could contribute that much today if every adult in the room gave \$25. This would be a miracle just like the miracles we read about in 4 Nephi—healing the sick, causing the lame to walk, and quite literally bringing the dead back to life. And I say all this as the mom of a child who thinks the two best things in the world are jewelry and money. More seriously, some of the toughest discussions Peter and I have are about precisely this issue.

Answers, Part II

So that's the first answer: the scriptures say the source of contention is economic inequality. A second source of contention would seem to

2. These questions are based on those found in the scenario activity from “The Drowning Child.” Each is asked with corresponding radio buttons with variations of the responses “Yes, I am morally obliged” or “No, I am not morally obliged.”

3. Ibid. This question appears on the last page of the scenario activity before the respondent is invited to answer questions about his or her gender, nationality, age, and religion.

4. Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2010), 111.

be ourselves, or rather, our imperfect ability to accept inherent differences among us. I hope you'll consider this thought exercise and its humble request.

Certainly there are times when pride and the spirit of contention underlie disagreements, but I also believe that the members of this ward often truly want to share their understanding of the truth with others in the ward. Sometimes, the sums of our bloodlines, environments, and experiences don't lead us to the same conclusions, and I would argue that that's not a bad thing.

Confrontation is not contention. Avoiding confrontation is not inherently right or even peaceful. I hold dear the sometimes prickly discussions that pepper our lessons. We all care deeply about believing and doing the right thing, and, like Jesus cleansing the temple, sometimes we get riled up. There should, of course, be a balance between having a safe space to be devotional as well as a space to question and push. But it's up to us as a community—as the body of Christ, as Paul says—to figure out what that balance is.

Last week, the Pope and Donald Trump started a Twitter war (no, really!) when Pope Francis said, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” His namesake, Francis of Assisi, was so inclusive in embracing the gospel that he called all creatures his brothers and sisters and even preached to the birds. If we are truly a global church community, we have to recognize that there is an unprecedented diversity of backgrounds and thoughts among Church members and consequent change and growth in the Church today—both qualitative and quantitative. We have diversity and representation in ways that couldn't even be addressed in the scriptures, and for that I'm deeply grateful.

It also means that some of our church conversations may be more complex. They may require more empathy than we're accustomed to. But with open ears and open hearts, those conversations aren't doomed to be “contentions.”

My Truth

In preparing this talk, I tried to isolate the simple truth of the gospel that I turn to when things get complicated, but I couldn't. Frankly, what I love about hearing others' testimonies is recognizing that many of us hold dear different facets of the gem that is the gospel. For some, it's the truthfulness of the scriptures, for others it's their beauty. People variously seem to hold dear a living prophet, modern-day revelation, the Restoration, connection to the dead, promise of eternal progression, and the benefits of ward charity each as *the* heart of the gospel. Ultimately, I guess the simple truth of the gospel for me is its universality—that it's for everyone.

I am a member of this church because I desire light and a bigger sense of purpose, a community that expands the circle of people that I care about. A group of which I am part deserves my devotion and sustaining efforts using my God-given faith for devotion, my intellect for questioning, and my hands for good works.

We are different. We each have thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the literalness of the scriptures and also about whether you should mix prints in your church outfit. About whether giving snacks to your kids during sacrament meeting is acceptable, about whether choosing a career making less than \$100,000 a year is not responsible family planning, whether working in the private sector helping the rich become richer is immoral or not, whether we should Feel the Bern or Make America Great Again.

As these things suggest, ours is a temporal and spiritual gospel. All of the things you could possibly bear your testimony about or say over the pulpit—including the above—are, in fact, part of God's great plan and thus are aspects of the gospel for us to ponder, discuss, and mindfully consider. We are gathered here in hope and yearning for meaning and purpose, to do good work, to find a space that allows for devotion and exploration of the biggest questions. Whatever the angle of our approach, we are here, we belong here, and I am grateful for each one of you.

I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.