

“Feed My Lambs”
September 2006 Primary Open House President’s Message
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Welcome, and thank you for being with us today. It is such a joy to serve with you as we strive to bless the lives of our children in Primary. These children are so amazing. They are strong in mind and spirit. And they are so ready to receive a knowledge and testimony of things eternal. We have been thrilled to see children all around the world engaged in their scriptures. Thank you for your efforts to take them there and to teach them directly from the words of the Lord. Their response has been truly wonderful, and I know that as we continue to use the scriptures with more confidence, the children will be able to build testimonies that will secure them to their Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

We are witnessing a fulfillment of the words found in 2 Timothy 3:15: “From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Today my message is titled “Feed My Lambs.” The objective is that our children might be “brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep” (Helaman 15:13).

From our Primary theme, found in 3 Nephi 22:13, “And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children,” there is a special phrase on which I would like to focus: “all thy children.”

Our Heavenly Father has given us a charge to teach all His children. How can we do this? How can we show our love and the love of our Heavenly Father to all of the children? This is big! I am well aware that all children are not the same. Some are more easily reached and taught. This can seem to be quite an overwhelming responsibility. I can remember as a ward Primary president, how much work went into just getting to Primary each week, let alone focusing on each child. I can remember all the stuff I had to gather: my scriptures, things for the teachers, things for my counselors, things for the secretary, things for Sharing Time, things for my own children—maybe one of them was giving a talk that day—my president’s book, sometimes a manual because I had just received word that one of the teachers was not going to be there. And this was all on top of the diaper bag and carrier for my own baby. I remember loading all this and my children into the car—by myself because my husband was already at church taking care of his priesthood responsibilities. And it seems to me that church always started at 8:00 a.m.

This sounds a little like the story we all have heard from our parents about how they walked miles to school every day in heavy snow, uphill both ways. But seriously, I do know that to work in Primary takes no small effort. And today we are going to talk about giving a little bit more. We are going to talk about loving and feeding the Lord’s lambs. We are going to talk about ministering to all of God’s children. I believe that this happens as we reach out individually, one-on-one, to each child. It is my prayer that as we visit today, the Spirit will speak to your hearts

and give you not only the understanding of Heavenly Father's will but a vision of how we can accomplish it.

Let's turn to the scriptures to learn His will. In John 13:34 we read, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

How did the Savior love God's children? Again, let's turn to the scriptures for an example. We read in Matthew 19:14–15:

"But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

"And he laid his hands on them."

Later in the New Testament, in John 21:15–17, the Savior taught Peter:

"Jesus saith to Simon Peter, . . . lovest thou me . . . ? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

"He saith to him again the second time, Simon, . . . lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

"He saith unto him the third time, Simon, . . . lovest thou me? . . . And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep."

He also taught His disciples in chapter 10 of John, verses 14–16:

"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

"As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd."

In 3 Nephi we read the account of the Savior coming to His sheep here in the Americas after his death. He did many things during that visit that give us a great example of how He showed His love. He taught the people, He prayed for them, He wept for them, and then, starting in 3 Nephi 17:11, we read:

"And it came to pass that he commanded that their little children should be brought. . . .

"And it came to pass that when they had all been brought, and Jesus stood in the midst, he commanded the multitude that they should kneel down upon the ground. . . .

"And . . . he himself also knelt upon the earth; and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written. . . .

“And it came to pass that when Jesus had made an end of praying unto the Father, he arose. . . .

“. . . And he said unto them: Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now behold, my joy is full.

“. . . And he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. . . .

“. . . And they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them” (3 Nephi 17:11, 13, 15, 18, 20–21, 24).

There are many things in this scripture account that touch my heart. One of them is the fact that Christ “took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.” It is like the teaching in 1 Nephi 22:25:

“He gathereth his children . . . ; and he numbereth his sheep . . . ; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture.”

Jesus knew each one of the children that He blessed in the New Testament account. He knew each of the Nephite children, and he knows each child today. He desires for each one of them to feel His love. He desires for each one of them to learn His word and gain a testimony. He desires for each one of them to receive the blessings of heaven that come through righteous living. Now, the scriptures have a big part to play in this, as does the Spirit. But so do we, as we strive to serve the children and strengthen families. The Lord’s example is before us. He blessed the children one by one, and so must we.

Let’s take a look at the children in a typical Primary. We have all kinds and all sizes. We have children of all ages who are happy, glad to be there, and engaged in all we do. We have others who have more difficulty listening and behaving appropriately. There are children who have situations in their environments that are beyond their control and disabilities that make it difficult for them to focus and learn. And we have the children who are not there and who greatly need us to reach out to them in love and gather them in. All of these children belong to our Father in Heaven. He loves them all. They are all the lambs that the Savior speaks of. How can we reach them all? Well, I of course do not have all of the answers. But I know who does, as do you, and I can give you a few principles that can help. The first is love; the second is communication; the third: pooling resources; the fourth: reaching out to serve.

For all of the children, it is important that we reach out in love every time we see them—in our neighborhoods, at school, at the store, and of course each Sunday at Primary. Greet each of them, calling them by name, mentioning something personal about them that lets them know that you know them and care about them. Remember their birthdays in Primary. Thank them for their participation and reverent behavior. Sometimes we can become so involved with the challenges in Primary that we forget to reinforce the positive behavior all around us. We can teach and

encourage our teachers to reach out. And we can encourage the nursery leaders to visit and prepare the little ones for their entrance into the nursery program.

Now, how do we handle those who are disruptive? Of course each child is different. And the reasons for their behavior are different. But here are a few principles on which to base our actions:

First we must cultivate a love for the child in our own hearts. No matter how difficult the child may be, he or she is a child of God. God loves each child, and so must we. We can pray to have this love. We can cultivate this love by going the extra mile to build relationships of trust. We can look beyond the behavior to the causes.

Next, we must communicate with the child's parents. In Primary, our responsibility is to support and strengthen families. We have to work together. But the first thing we have to communicate is that we love the child and want him or her to be successful. This is something you can't fake. You have to really feel it. We can also express our appreciation for all the good things the child is doing with his or her family.

Another thing that we can do is to pool our resources as we work with the teacher so that the approach that is taken with the child is consistent among the parents, the Primary leaders, and the teacher. Remember to stay calm, be consistent, base all you do on the principle of love, and go to your Heavenly Father for help. And don't give up. Behavioral patterns may have taken a long time to develop and will take some time to change. But with patience, you can make a difference for that child now and in the future.

I saw a great example of Primary leaders working effectively with a difficult child. From the moment that the child walked into the Primary room, I could see that here was a challenge. He looked old enough to control his actions, but he was everywhere in that room—everywhere but on his chair for more than a few seconds. But I noticed something else as well. The leaders seemed to not be frustrated with him. They had all kinds of assignments to keep him occupied. He would hold a picture, turn on the CD player, help look up a scripture. And if he really needed to be focused, they would point to him and give him a scripture reference or an article of faith number and he would stop dead in his tracks, stand tall, and repeat the scripture or the article of faith from memory. They accepted him for who he was and worked to help him not only to behave appropriately but to contribute as well. They hugged him often. They loved that little boy and wanted him to be in Primary where he could feel the Spirit and learn of God's love. Because of the leaders' feelings, the other children accepted him as well and wanted to help him.

What about the children with disabilities? We see them in every Primary. There are many kinds of disabilities, and they are of various degrees of severity. These precious children need the blessings of being in Primary, and their families need our love and support. Again, let us look at the principles on which we can base our actions. They are basically the same as for the disruptive child:

First, we must develop a genuine love for the child. This can be a gift directly from our Father in Heaven. Next, we must communicate with the parents. They know better than anyone what the

needs of their child are, and they can help us know how to help. We can pool our resources. We can seek additional help by going to LDS.org under “Serving in the Church,” “Primary,” “Teaching All Children,” and “Teaching Children with Disabilities.” Here you can find a lot of good information that will help you better understand the different disabilities and give you ideas about how to work with them. Counsel with your counselors as well as your priesthood leaders. You might even take it to the ward council.

We have seen some wonderful things happen as Primary leaders have followed these principles. For example, in a Primary where I was visiting, a child was brought into the Primary room by his mother. She sat him on a chair by an adult who had obviously been called especially to sit with him. The dear sister who had been assigned was not quite ready for him, and so as she rummaged through her bag, the boy was off his chair, onto the floor on his stomach, under the chair, through the back of the chair—everywhere he could get in just a matter of seconds. When she found what she was looking for, she helped him back onto his chair. She then placed on his lap a *Children’s Songbook*, opened to a picture page. The child immediately began to move his hand in a circular pattern over the picture while he softly hummed “I Feel My Savior’s Love” over and over again. This then became the background for the entire Primary opening exercises—even the prayer. It was not disruptive. It was sweet and tender and invited the Spirit to attend.

Now let’s talk about the children who are not coming to Primary. Who are they? Do you know who they are in your Primary? Do you know their names and their situations? We can reach out to them. Might I suggest that you go to the clerk in your ward and ask for a list of all the children in your ward who are of Primary age. Then go to your rolls and see if they are listed and if they are attending. These children are as much your responsibility as those who do attend. They have spirits that are yearning to be part of the group, to be included, to be fed by the Spirit, and to feel the love of the Lord. We need to gather them in. Together with your presidencies, priesthood leaders, teachers, and, in some cases, even the active children, we can make a plan. We can build relationships, friendships that will help them come back to church. We can help them overcome obstacles. We can let them know we care about them and miss them.

While I was in Brazil earlier this year, I visited a wonderful little branch during their Primary meeting. The Primary president, who was very young, was also the teacher for the CTR class. She had all of the CTRs together, ages 4 through 7. There were about eight of them. Her lesson for the day was lesson 23 in *Primary 2*, titled “Jesus Christ Is the Good Shepherd.” She had her manual open but knew the lesson so well that she was able to give it from her heart. First, she showed this picture from her picture packet. She talked to the children about what a shepherd was—why he dressed this way, how he cared for his sheep, how he led them to safety and guarded them from danger. She talked about how important every lamb is to the shepherd. She then told them a sweet story about two children who had to care for some lambs. When one was lost, they had to go out and find him. Next she put a puzzle on the table that she had made out of another picture from her picture packet. As the children put it together, they realized that one piece was missing. They also realized that the picture was of a shepherd who was looking for a lost sheep, and the piece that was missing was that lamb. The teacher told them to pretend to be shepherds and look for the lost sheep in their room. She had hidden it very well, and they had to really search for it before they found it. When they did, she pointed out to them that the picture

had been incomplete until they had all of the pieces, but now that they had found the lost sheep, the picture was complete and beautiful.

She then had the children open their scriptures and turn to the New Testament. They then found the book of Luke on page 1271. Next they found the 15th chapter on page 1305 and ran their fingers down the page to verse 4. All of the children were engaged in this and were helping one another. When they all found the place, one of the children read Luke 15:4:

“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?”

The class then turned to John 10:14:

“I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.”

The children were then taught that Jesus is the Shepherd and that each of us is one of His lambs.

Finally, this sweet teacher put little cutout lambs on the table. Each lamb had the name of one of the children in the class on it. The teacher read each name, and if the child was present, she moved the lamb to the right side of the table. If the child was not present, she moved the lamb to the left side. She then gave the children their lambs and said how sad Jesus was when other children were not in Primary. She picked up each remaining lamb and read the name. She then asked who knew that child. When a child responded, the teacher asked him or her to take the lamb to the child and invite that child to come to Primary next week. The children were very excited, and all wanted to help. The teacher then bore her testimony that Jesus loves each of Heavenly Father’s children. He doesn’t want to lose any of them. We can help Jesus by bringing our friends to Primary.

I once had a personal experience with seeking out a less-active child. I was the activity days leader in my ward. There were two little girls—sisters who never came to Primary. But they were on my list. So I called their mother and asked if I could come to their home to meet them. As I visited with them, I became acquainted with the family and their situation. The dad was a member but less active. The mom and the girls were not baptized. But they wanted to be involved with their school friends on activity days. So I gave them a list of the activities for the next few weeks and followed up with a reminder call each week. Well, they came through the summer, and when it was time for the mom-and-daughter party, the mom came with her girls. Eventually, as I reported to my president the success I was having, the mom was invited to share some special skills in a home, family, and personal enrichment meeting. The dad was invited to help in some service projects with the elders. More time passed, and they attended church, received the missionary lessons, and were baptized into the Church. It was such a joy to them to have the blessings of the gospel in their lives. And it was a joy to me to have played just a small part in bringing them back.

In all of these situations, the same principles—love; communication with the Lord, priesthood leaders, families, and each other, ; pooling our resources; and reaching out to serve—will help us to feed His lambs.

President Hinckley said, “Let us from this day forward be a little better, love one another a little more, treat one another with greater kindness and look to God and live” (*Stand a Little Taller: Counsel and Inspiration for Each Day of the Year* [2001], 65).

Sisters, let us “be not weary in well-doing” (D&C 64:33). With a testimony of Jesus Christ and a love of the children in our hearts, we can feed His lambs. We can bring them safely into His fold. In Doctrine and Covenants 112:14 He says, “Now, I say unto you...Arise and gird up your loins, take up your cross, follow me, and feed my sheep.”

I know that God lives. Jesus Christ is His Son and our personal Savior. We are on His errand as we love the children and teach them the saving principles of the gospel. We can bring them to Him as we instill in them testimonies of the living truth. The scriptures contain this truth. As we reach out to individually touch the lives of each child, bearing witness of the words of the Savior, we will find the great joy of the Good Shepherd.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.