

Alliance Texas Stake Conference
August 23, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters-

I hope you are all well. Please know that we look forward to the opportunity to be with you again in person. Until then, I pray that these remarks and our virtual interactions may help you feel the love of our Savior in some small way.

Earlier this week, in preparation for a training with Young Women leaders across the stake, I watched a video clip of Elder David A. Bednar where he talked about having a “laser beam focus” as we engage in the work of salvation. Elder Bednar then promised that “astronomical miracles” would occur if we would engage in the work with that level of attention.

Additionally this week, I read a talk where Elder Carlos E. Asay, of the Seventy, was quoted as saying, “We, like Israel of old, must rivet our eyes and minds upon Christ if we hope to gain eternal life. ... Our looks must not be allowed to wander across the way or to become fixed upon the perishable things of the world.

Elder Asay’s choice of the word “rivet” and Elder Bednar’s use of the term “laser beam focus” reminded me of a psychological study I learned about many years ago. Participants of the study are asked to watch a video of two teams, one dressed in white and one in black, passing a basketball. While focusing intently, participants are asked to count the number of times the team dressed in white completes a pass.

(see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo&t=1s> for the video)

Both teams then begin walking in a somewhat haphazard, chaotic manner while passing the ball to each other. It is difficult to follow the action and the exercise requires undivided attention. After about 90 seconds the video stops, and the participants are asked how many passes they counted.



Then, the participants are asked if they saw the Gorilla!

Unseen by approximately half of the participants, part-way through the video a gorilla calmly walks through the middle of the melee, turns to face the camera, beats on its chest spending a total of nine seconds on camera before calmly walking out of the scene.



It seems unthinkable that anyone would miss seeing the comic figure of the gorilla entering the scene, but so intent is their focus that many (half) participants do not ever see it. Psychologists call this phenomenon “inattentive blindness” and comment that when people focus with intent that everything else seems to fade away.

Recently, President Pray has asked that we focus on improving our ministering efforts here in the Alliance Texas Stake. Surely, these are unprecedented and difficult times, but I know that as we rivet our focus and attention on those for whom we have stewardship, miracles will happen and the distractions that often impair our ministering efforts will disappear.

Part of effectively focusing on ministering is understanding the essence of ministry – or said differently, when you strip away all the programmatic and organizational elements of ministry, what is left? What is the intrinsic nature or indispensable quality of ministry? In short, the answer is demonstrating Christlike care for others. It is motivated by our desire to follow the commandment to love our neighbor and includes serving people out of concern for their spiritual and temporal well-being.

A recent experience my family had in the temple highlights the essence of ministering. About eight months ago, I had the opportunity to be with my wife and all my children in the temple in Bountiful, UT. We were visiting family in the area and decided that we would wake up early a couple of days after Christmas and go the temple together as a family. It was the first time that all of us had been in the temple together and it was a red-letter day for the Brann family!

Unsurprisingly the baptistry in the Bountiful temple was very busy and after we dressed in our temple clothing, we sat in the waiting area for our turn. During that wait, my wife struck up a conversation with the woman sitting next to her who was in the temple with several of her grandchildren who were visiting from places across the country. They visited for 15 or 20 minutes about kids, life and what a joy it was to be in the temple with members of your family. After her grandchildren were finished with their baptisms, she and my wife said their goodbyes and the woman left.

My wife leaned over to me and said something to the effect of, "She was just wonderful and so very kind. I could feel her love." I smiled and said to her, "Do you have any idea who she was?" My wife did not; at which point I had the great pleasure of letting her know that she had spent the last 20 minutes speaking with Sister Jean Bingham the Relief Society General President of the Church.

My wife did not know who she was, nor of her title or her important calling in the church, but she felt of her love and concern and genuine interest.

As we work toward improving our focus and execution, may I share with you a couple of ideas that may help you in your efforts.

Do your best – imperfect efforts are okay.

I have the distinct pleasure of serving with President Pray and President Schindler, both of whom have tremendous singing voices. I enjoy singing along with them, pretending like I can hold my own, right up to the point where the music gets a little more complex or they decide to insert complexity by singing harmonies and parts - at which point I recognize how much I have to learn. Thankfully, they generally sing the melody for the first verse where most of the time I can join them in my full, slightly off-key voice.

I am the personification of Elder Holland's comment when he said, "that many of us who are "musically challenged" have had our confidence bolstered and our singing markedly improved by positioning ourselves next to someone with a stronger, more certain voice.

But it is only by singing with them imperfectly that I recognize my opportunity. If the only place I ever sang was in the privacy of my own home I would miss the chance to learn and improve. And I would probably think that I was singing just fine.

Likewise, it is by doing the work (ministering) imperfectly that we can learn how to improve and more effectively watch over our people and nourish them with things pertaining to righteousness.

Follow the promptings of the Spirit.

My wife shared with me a personal example of how thoughtful, individualized service from an inspired sister blessed her life. Almost 10 years ago, she and her business partner were trying to run a retail home decor business that they had started from scratch here in town. After a period, my wife found herself overwhelmed with reality that despite their best efforts the business was not going to survive long term.

My job at the time required that I travel three weeks out of four. Many evenings she loaded up the kids, took them to the store for a dinner of fast food and asked them to sit in the back room while she worked on inventory or other tasks. Her visiting teacher had been unable to connect with her on multiple occasions and following a spiritual prompting just decided just to show up at the store in work clothes. Upon arrival, she said “I am here to help. Put me to work”. This was exactly what my wife needed at that time and in that place. This act of ministering, service and consideration, started a long friendship for them both.

I testify that as we live worthy of inspiration, we will be guided, prompted, and directed on how to carry the gospel message in a way that strikes a chord with those whom we minister.

Working with others in a coordinated effort can improve outcomes.

A few years ago, my son Gavin and I visited the Pukalani Ward on the island of Maui. Not knowing exactly to how to get to the building, we left early and arrived almost 20 minutes before sacrament meeting began. As we walked into the foyer, the Bishop and his counselors pounced on us. They had structured their responsibilities and other Sunday obligations in such a way so that they could personally welcome each member of the ward as they walked into the building.

Expressing genuine interest, they visited with us for a few minutes. After we sat down in the chapel, the young men’s president came over and introduced himself and personally welcomed Gavin to the ward. He asked if he was old enough to bless the sacrament because it looked like they were going to be short a priest. He then personally invited us to leave Texas move into the ward boundaries, stating that “Maui is a pretty nice place to live”. Two or three other members came and greeted us and welcomed us to the ward including what I presume to be the relief society president. It was obvious to me that the members of this ward were engaged in a coordinated effort to make sure that all who visited their sacrament meeting felt welcomed and needed.

Brothers and Sisters, we can and will accomplish astronomical miracles through our ministering efforts. As we focus on this task with the laser beam intensity mentioned by Elder Bednar the distractions and excuses that sometimes cripple our efforts will fade away. Our united purpose is to help others feel our Savior’s love and invite them to make and keep sacred covenants. As we follow the spirit and work with others the Lord will magnify our imperfect efforts.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.