

Although I have been asked to direct my remarks specifically to the young men and their leaders and advisors, I hope others will find application and value in this message as well.

“Connect Four” was a board game I played at my grandma’s house a lot when I was young. In case you aren’t familiar with this game, it’s a modified version of Tic-tac-toe. The object of the game is to get four of your color chips in a row or to “connect four” - vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. And as you try to “connect four”, you also try to block your opponent from doing the same.

Just like in this game, we want to make and maintain connections with many people in our lives including those in our wards and Aaronic Priesthood quorums. As we strive to connect with others, the COVID virus seems to be blocking our efforts at almost every opportunity. The social distancing policies in place in our communities, businesses, schools, and even in our church, make it difficult to connect and stay connected.

In thinking about these challenges and the importance of connecting with one another, I want to share four important connections that I invite you to focus on and prioritize in your life. I promise you that if you will focus on these connections, relationships, and priorities, your life will be richer and more meaningful, you will be blessed with love and happiness, and you will be a means of blessing others.

First, connect with family

Given the amount of time we have all been spending at home, this may seem obvious and even easy to you. But being in the same house is not the same as connecting with your family. Hopefully you have taken advantage of this unique opportunity to be together and to grow closer. Let me share some of our family’s experiences over the past several months as we have tried to strengthen our connections with one another.

In our family, we have tried to have more quality time together. We have worked, played and worshipped together. Working together has included yardwork every week, completing a garage cleaning project, and helping with weekly assignments to clean the house. This may not sound very entertaining, but working together in our home has brought us closer as a family.

Dinner together has been a great experience, and my son Thomas (18 yrs old) and daughter Emily (15 yrs old) have engaged in helping to prepare many of our meals. We like to eat grilled meat, and I willingly take this responsibility to do the grilling, and everyone else pitches in with preparing other parts of the meal. Emily has enjoyed making various desserts many evenings, and we have all enjoyed eating them. Occasionally, Thomas and Emily have been in charge of planning and providing the meal (with a little help from mom). The kids are a little less enthusiastic about helping with the dishes, but after dinner and clean up, we read the scriptures together as a family, and we may also play games or watch a movie together.

We have played a lot of card games, completed several puzzles together, and have had several movie marathons over the spring and summer. And because I have also been working from home, Emily and I have regularly taken a midday bike ride around our neighborhood. It’s great exercise and it is fun to do this together. Thomas and Emily have also been teaching me and their mom a Gen Z word of the day. No cap!

We have also made sure to connect with extended family via periodic Zoom or FaceTime calls. This has been a blessing to us and to our extended family members particularly grandparents who have been more isolated during the time than the rest of us.

One of the highlights for our family has been our Sunday sacrament meetings at home. With two teenagers who enjoy sleeping in on their “day of rest”, we quickly realized that an early home church schedule would not work. So our home sacrament meetings are at noon (and a few times have been around 2pm!). After the sacrament ordinance, we have enjoyed a variety of Sunday worship activities including watching the new Book of Mormon videos, watching and discussing a conference talk, or sharing a message and testimonies. Thomas and Emily have accepted assignments to choose a conference talk or gospel topic, prepare a message and lead a family

discussion. It has been a great experience for them to study and prepare a topic and then share with us the things they have thought about and what it means to them. We have enjoyed this opportunity to worship and learn and partake of the sacrament together, and this has strengthened our family.

If your family is like mine, not every minute of the day is full of love, patience, kindness and helpfulness! But I hope that because of the opportunity we have had these past few months that our love for one another has increased, and that we have truly grown closer and really connected. And most of all, I hope my teenage kids have made positive connections with each other and their parents, and that they know how much they are loved.

I hope your family has used this time effectively to work, play and worship together and that your relationships have strengthened as ours have.

Second, connect with friends and your quorum members

This one may also seem obvious, but maybe not as easy. With limitations on gathering with friends and quorum members, many of you are probably feeling somewhat isolated and have really missed the closer connections of spending time with them. This is not unexpected.

You probably have stayed “connected” with your friends through technology. Isn’t the miracle of technology a great blessing? Technology allows you to communicate and stay in touch, but connecting with your friends in a meaningful way can still be difficult. As school is starting this month, many of you will be able to see your friends and classmates again. Some of these friends and classmates are also members of your Aaronic priesthood quorums. I hope that as you re-engage with all of your friends, that you will commit to be a good friend, an even better friend than you have ever been.

As I think about connecting with friends and quorum members, I am reminded of this great teaching from the Book of Mormon: “by small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise” (Alma 37:6).

Connecting with your friends and quorum members should not be complicated. Certainly these teachings apply as we considering ministering and connecting with others: “Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you” and also “love thy neighbor as thyself”.

Simply treat others the way you would want to be treated. Simple kindness and love is all it takes. Your kindness is demonstrated as you show genuine interest in and concern for someone else. This can be done as you get out of your comfort zone and reach out to those who are already your friends and to others who need a friend. Our Heavenly Father needs you to minister to His children and there are simple opportunities around you every day. Showing genuine interest in others is as simple as sending them a text to ask how their day was or wishing them good luck on a quiz at school. You can show interest and express kindness by inviting someone who usually sits alone at lunch to sit with you and your friends (six feet apart!), and then engaging them in your group conversation.

As you go back to school and as you think about the members of your priesthood quorum, who comes to mind that doesn’t have a good friend? There are youth at school and in your ward who don’t have friends and they feel very alone. Maybe during this period of COVID quarantine, you have felt isolated and alone, and you know in a similar way now what that feels like. Ministering and connecting with others is as simple as praying to your Heavenly Father and asking Him who in your priesthood quorum needs a good friend and would be blessed by some kindness, and then getting off your knees and reaching out to the young man who the Lord has inspired you to serve.

And to leaders, advisors and parents, connecting with and ministering to the youth should not be as hard as it seems. In these very unique circumstances when we are experiencing limitations in gathering together, I believe the Lord wants all of us to learn to simplify our ministering efforts and make these efforts much more personal.

For example, planning and participating in a quorum mutual activity is difficult because of the many rules in place. So how can you minister and connect with the youth you have stewardship over without any mutual activities or Sunday quorum meetings? If I were an Aaronic Priesthood advisor, I would start by engaging with the quorum presidency in reaching out and contacting individual quorum members on a regular basis. I would help the presidency understand what a personal contact would look, sound and feel like. Maybe we would have to do some role playing or I would first mentor them by personally reaching out to each of them in the same way that they should reach out to their quorum members. Each quorum presidency member could then have an assignment to contact one of the young men in the quorum each week.

As the quorum advisor I could periodically reach out to the young men's parents and ask them how each is doing and how I and the quorum could serve him. And lastly, I could call or FaceTime each young man myself or make a personal visit to each young man on a regular basis. These personal visits may only take five or ten minutes on the front porch or driveway while wearing a mask and maintaining social distancing guidelines.

Again, this does not have to be complicated. Simple actions will be meaningful to each young man and will bless his life.

Third, connect with heaven

Your Heavenly Father is aware of the current global pandemic and He is aware of each of you individually. He knows all the good you are doing in your life and He is also aware of your struggles and weaknesses. He knew before the world was created that mortal life would be challenging, and at times, very challenging. He has provided a Savior to bless you with love, forgiveness, strengthen and comfort. God's love is available to all of His children and as you seek to feel His love and to draw upon it, you are each blessed through the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

We connect with heaven through ordinances and covenants. Each of you have been baptized and made promises to follow the Savior. We are reminded of our baptismal covenants as we partake of the sacrament. Young men of the Aaronic Priesthood have the unique opportunity to not only partake of the sacrament, but to also administer the sacrament. The Lord has given you the authority and responsibility to represent Him in the most important and sacred thing we do each Sunday. The Lord trusts you to represent Him in providing this ordinance to your family or to your ward. I hope you realize how important and sacred this responsibility is and what a unique opportunity you have.

As we partake of the sacrament, we renew our covenants to always remember the Savior, to take His name upon us, and to keep His commandments. We remember the Savior as we study His gospel, as we spend time reading the scriptures, attending seminary, and studying the words of living prophets. We take His name upon us as we use our priesthood to serve others as He would and as we fulfill our callings and assignments to minister to others. And lastly, as we keep the commandments, we are expressing our love and gratitude to the Savior for all He has done for us. The Savior taught, "If ye love me, keep my commandments".

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, your Heavenly Father has provided a means for you to be strengthened and guided during your life. Remember that Heavenly Father knew life would be hard, so He has provided a very special and important gift to bless His children who are willing to develop faith in Jesus Christ, repent and be baptized. This gift is the Gift of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is your constant connection to heaven. The purposes of the Holy Ghost are to teach, strengthen, guide and comfort you.

You will connect with heaven and have the Spirit with you as you engage in activities that invite the Spirit into your life. There are many "small and simple things" you can and should do to invite the Holy Ghost to be with you. Prayer and scripture study invite the Spirit to teach, strengthen and comfort you. Wholesome and uplifting music will also invite the Spirit. Standing in holy places like sabbath church meetings and the temple will give you access to the Spirit. And certainly, serving others brings peace and happiness which come from the Spirit.

But the most important thing you can do to have the Spirit to be with you is to keep the commandments. The prerequisite for the blessing of the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost is obedience and worthiness. As we are reminded in the sacrament prayer, the Lord's promise is that as you keep your baptismal covenants, you will "always have His spirit to be with" you.

Is there something in your life that needs to be changed so that you can have the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost? If so, please make those changes. If needed, speak to your bishop. He loves you and can help you make those changes. I know from personal experience what a great blessing it is to have a bishop who can help us when needed.

Your Heavenly Father loves you and wants to be a part of your life. His greatest desire is that you be happy. The source of this great happiness is the love of our Heavenly Father and His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Their love is shared with and expressed to you through the Holy Ghost. I hope you make every effort to connect and maintain a constant connection with your Heavenly Father and the Savior.

And fourth, connect with yourself and with your future

As important as it is to connect with family, friends, quorum members and with heaven, it is just as important that you invest some time and effort in improving yourself and focusing on your potential. Your Heavenly Father wants you to grow and progress and reach your potential. Your example and mentor is the Savior Himself. The new youth program is an inspired and natural way for you to do this, and many of you are already engaged in this program.

The Lord wants you to be a well-rounded person and reach your potential in all aspects of your life – intellectual, social, physical and spiritual. I hope you have set goals in each of these areas and are working on personal growth and improvement opportunities.

Some of my personal goals that relate to these four areas of personal growth are to read the Book of Mormon every day, exercise regularly, spend quality time with my family and learn to play the guitar. These are not earth shattering or unique goals that I have set, but they are another example of small and simple things that will help me learn and grow. If you haven't set any goals, you can do it now and then start working on them. As you make a plan, and then act on it, the Lord will bless you for your righteous efforts and will sustain you to achieve success.

Remember the lesson from Nephi's experience when he was asked to return to Jerusalem to get the brass plates from Laban. Nephi said: "I will go and do the things which the Lord has commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he hath commanded them".

The Lord wants to help you in reaching your goals and your potential. He wants you to be your best self now and in the future. Your future includes developing talents and skills, serving a mission, educating yourself and preparing yourself for a career, making temple covenants, and having an eternal marriage and family. But reaching this potential requires your faith and effort starting now. President Monson repeatedly said, "Decisions determine destiny". Your choices today will determine your current and future happiness and opportunities.

Time goes by very quickly. I know I sound like a "boomer" when I say that I remember when I was your age. But I do remember, and it seems like it was yesterday. When I was a young man, I considered the future impact of my daily decisions. Working hard in school, attending seminary, keeping the commandments, repenting when necessary, having good friends and serving a mission were all important and intentional decisions that I made that have determined the course of my life. As a youth, if my thoughts had only been on the present – what would have been perhaps more fun or easy or immediately gratifying – I would be in a different place today - a worse place with less happiness and meaning.

Please keep an eternal perspective as you make decisions each day. Consider two, three or four steps ahead as you make daily choices – particularly important, life changing decisions in your life. In Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken”, he wrote about choosing between paths. He wrote that “way leads on to way”. This means that each path leads to other paths, or in other words, each of our choices leads to other choices. As you think about your future, my hope is you will consider the importance of each choice you make and the impact it will have on your future.

Young men, I hope you will invest time and effort in the many connections in your life – connections with your family, with your friends and quorum members, with heaven, and with yourself and your future. The Lord will bless and sustain you in your righteous efforts, and you will be a blessing to others now and throughout your life. I know these principles are important and true.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.