

Episode 8

Stories from General Relief Society Meetings

WOMANHOOD

NARRATOR: From the Conference Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, this is the Mormon Channel. Welcome to this episode of ‘Stories from General Relief Society Meetings’. Today’s episode is on womanhood. We start with a scriptural account explained by Sister Bonnie D. Parkin in the 2003 General Relief Society Meeting. Any woman trying to balance responsibilities can relate to these two biblical women, Mary and Martha.

(Bonnie D. Parkin, October 2003 General Relief Society Meeting)

In my office hangs a wonderful painting depicting Jesus with Mary and Martha. Every day as I am greeted by this piece, I reflect on our challenges as women. Sister Hughes, Sister Pingree, and I felt inspired to use the account of Mary and Martha as the theme for our meeting. The Lord taught one thing is needful: choose that good part. That is what we are going to talk about tonight, choosing that good part.

Martha lived in the small village of Bethany, where she "received [Jesus] into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which *also* sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word." *Both* women loved the Lord. And "Jesus loved Martha, and [Mary]." In fact, their relationship breached convention, for at that time women were not usually able to discuss the gospel with men.

On one occasion Martha was making dinner and, as the scripture says, "was cumbered about much serving." In other words, she was stressed out!

Mary, on the other hand, "sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word," while Martha became increasingly upset that no one was helping her. Does that sound familiar? Do you think she was thinking, "Why is Mary sitting there while I'm sweating over this stove?" So Martha turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me."

The Lord's gentle invitation to Martha may have surprised her. "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

The Savior's response strikingly clarified what mattered most. On that evening in Martha's home, the good part was not in the kitchen; it was at the Lord's feet. Dinner could wait.

Like Mary, I hunger to feast at the Savior's feet, while, like Martha, I need to somehow find the laundry room floor, empty my in-box, and serve my husband something other than cold pizza. I have 15 grandchildren whose tender little spirits and daily challenges I want to better understand, yet I also have a slightly demanding Church calling! I don't have lots of time. Like all of you, I have to choose. We all are trying to choose the good part which cannot be taken from us, to balance the spiritual and the temporal in our lives. Wouldn't it be easy if we were choosing between visiting teaching or robbing a bank? Instead, our choices are often more subtle. We must choose between many worthy options.

Mary and Martha are you and me; they are every sister in Relief Society. These two loved the Lord and wanted to show that love. On this occasion, it seems to me that Mary expressed her love by hearing His word, while Martha expressed hers by serving Him.

Martha thought she was doing right and that her sister should be helping her.

I don't believe the Lord was saying there are Martha's and there are Mary's. Jesus did not dismiss Martha's concern, but instead redirected her focus by saying choose "that good part." And what is that? The prophet Lehi taught that we "should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit."

The one thing that is needful is to choose eternal life. We choose daily. As we seek, listen, and follow the Lord, we are encircled in the arms of His love—a love that is pure...

NARRATOR: The story of Mary and Martha is a good example of the Relief Societies theme 'charity never faileth'. The purpose of the Relief Society is to provide relief to the poor and needy and to bring people to Christ. President James E. Faust now expands on the purpose of the Relief Society. This excerpt is from the 1999 General Relief Society Meeting.

(President James E. Faust, October 1999 General Relief Society Meeting)

Membership in Relief Society, which is a privilege for every adult woman in the Church, provides a home away from your heavenly home, where you can fellowship with others who share your beliefs and values.

I thought of this recently while we were in the historic city of Nauvoo. We visited the small building where the Relief Society was organized with 18 members on March 17, 1842. A few days later, on April 28, 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith declared, "This Society is to get instruction [through] the order which God has established--[through] the medium of those appointed to lead." Then came this significant and far-reaching, prophetic statement: "And I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time--this is the beginning of better days to this Society."

In both the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples, the women responded by grinding their precious china into small pieces to be used for the walls of the temple. Since the beginning of this society, great has been its effort and endless its accomplishments.

What is the Relief Society? Its focus, in my opinion, centers on four great concepts:

First, it is a divinely established sisterhood.

Second, the society is a place of learning.

Third, it is an organization whose basic charter is caring for others. Its motto is "Charity never faileth."

Fourth, the Relief Society is a place where the needs of women to socialize can be met.

NARRATOR: Every woman in the church 18 and older is a part of the Relief Society, the largest women's organization in the world. And with such a wide variety of personalities and talents, every woman can receive blessings from attending this great organization. In the 2002 General Relief Society meeting, President Faust talks about one of these blessings.

(President James E. Faust, October 2002 General Relief Society Meeting)

Following the dedication of the magnificent new temple in Nauvoo, we rode home on the airplane with Sister Parkin, Sister Hughes, Sister Pingree, and their noble husbands. I asked the sisters if they had gone to the red brick store in Nauvoo where the Prophet Joseph established the Relief Society on March 17, 1842, with only 20 members present. Sister Parkin responded that they indeed had.

As I was speaking to them, I was forcefully reminded that all of the sisters anywhere in the world can inherit and benefit from the blessings of the Lord for women. The Prophet Joseph Smith said: "I now turn the key to you in the name of God. . . . Knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time." This blessing of knowledge and intelligence comes to all righteous women in the Church, regardless of their race or nationality, and irrespective of whether they are new in the Church or descendants of one of the first 20 members in Nauvoo in 1842. These blessings flow to those sisters who willingly perform the work of angels.

NARRATOR: As the scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants section 82 verse three says... "unto whom much is given, much is required." Relief Society sisters have a responsibility to help and to be an example to others. In the 1999 General Relief Society Meeting, Sheri Dew explains how Relief Society sisters are a light unto the world.

(Sheri L. Dew, October 1999 General Relief Society Meeting)

This summer I had an unforgettable experience in the Holy Land. As I sat on the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee, I saw in the distance a city built on a hill. The visual image of a city that cannot be hid was stunning, and as I pondered the symbolism I had an overwhelming impression that we as women of God are like that city, that if we will leave behind the things of the world and come unto Christ so that the Spirit radiates through our lives and from our eyes, our uniqueness will be a light unto the world. As sisters of Relief Society, we belong to the most significant community of women on this side of the veil. We *are* a spectacular city on a hill. And the less we look and act like the women of the world, the more they will look to us as a wellspring of hope, peace, virtue, and joy.

NARRATOR: In that same address, Sister Dew tells about her grandmother who set aside things of the world and sought for greater things.

(Sheri L. Dew, October 1999 General Relief Society Meeting)

As a young girl I saw commitment in my grandmother, who helped Grandpa homestead our farm on the Kansas prairie. Somehow they outlasted the Dust Bowl, the Depression, and the tornadoes that terrorize the Great Plains. I've often wondered how Grandma put up with years of meager income and hard work and how she went on when her oldest son died in a tragic accident. Grandma's life wasn't easy. But do you know what I remember most about her? Her total joy in the gospel. She was never happier than when she was working on family history or teaching with her scriptures in hand. Grandma *had* laid aside the things of this world to seek for the things of a better.

To the world, my grandma was ordinary. But to me, she represents the unsung heroines of *this* century who lived up to their premortal promises and left a foundation of faith upon which we may build. Grandma wasn't perfect, but she was a woman of God. Now it is for you and for me to carry forward the banner into the next century. *We are not women of the world. We are women of God.* And women of God will be among the greatest heroines of the 21st century. As President Joseph F. Smith proclaimed, it is not for us "to be led by the women of the world; it is for [us] to lead . . . the women of the world, in everything that is praise-worthy" (*Teachings*, 184).

NARRATOR: You're listening to 'Stories from General Relief Society Meetings' on the Mormon Channel. The topic is womanhood. In the General Relief Society meeting of 2003, Sister Kathleen H. Hughes tells of a time when she saw Relief Society sisters react to a opportunity for service to another.

(Kathleen H. Hughes, October 2003 General Relief Society Meeting)

Recently our presidency was meeting with a Church leader. He commented that he wished Relief Society and priesthood meetings would be places where we would be able to say to one another, "Sisters, or brothers, I'm struggling right now. Will you help me?" I have been in Relief Society meetings like that. I will always remember the Sunday morning when testimonies were being borne and a single sister shared with us the loneliness of her life. She had experienced betrayal, a divorce, and subsequent financial hardships as she tried to work and raise her children on a small income. Now she knew the pain of loneliness as her grown children were gone from her home. The moment was sweet, the Spirit strong, and I saw sisters rallying around her, doing what we do best: love. The Relief Society room was a holy place that day. It was what every Relief Society room should be for each sister.

NARRATOR: Next, Sister Mary Ellen W. Smoot shares a story about the love President Joseph F. Smith developed for a sister who cared for him as she would have cared for her own son. This is from the 1999 General Relief Society meeting.

(Mary Ellen W. Smoot, October 1999 General Relief Society Meeting)

President Joseph F. Smith was left an orphan at the early age of 13. He was later sent on a mission to the Hawaiian Islands. On the island of Molokai he contracted a severe fever and was seriously ill for three months. A wonderful Hawaiian sister took him into her home and tended him as lovingly as though he were her own son.

Many years later President Smith visited the islands as President of the Church. Charles Nibley tenderly described the experience:

"It was a beautiful sight to see the deep-seated love, the even tearful affection, that these people had for him. In the midst of it all I noticed a poor, old, blind woman, tottering under the weight of about ninety years, being led in. She had a few choice bananas in her hand. It was her all--her offering. She was calling, 'Iosepa, Iosepa.' Instantly, when he saw her, he ran to her and clasped her in his arms, hugged her, and kissed her, . . . patting her on the head saying, 'Mama, Mama, my dear old Mama.'

"And with tears streaming down his cheeks he turned to me and said, 'Charlie, she nursed me when I was a boy, sick and without anyone to care for me. She took me in and was a mother to me'" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* [1998], xvi, 192).

We can all extend our arms in love to others and give gifts of compassion and tenderness that can only flow from a woman's heart.

NARRATOR: Young, old, single or married, all women have the responsibility to serve... and they will be remembered for it. In the same 1999 General Relief Society meeting, President James E. Faust tells us about his great aunt who, although single, lived a full life helping others.

(President James E. Faust, October 1999 General Relief Society Meeting)

My great-aunt Ada never married. Perhaps she believed in the philosophy: "When fretted by this single life, which seems to be my lot, I think of all the many men whose wife I'm glad I'm not." In any event, she was one of the first female medical doctors in the state of Utah. When I was a young boy, my brothers and I slept out in the enclosed back porch of our small home. One day I was jumping on the bed, trying to see how high I could go. I jumped too close to the wall and tore part of my face on a nail that was sticking out. I need some excuse for the way I look! Aunt Ada was called to come and sew up the wound. At other times, when we didn't feel well, she fed us castor oil and milk of magnesia. She came with mustard plasters and burned our chests when we had colds. Today when I have aches and pains, which is becoming more frequent as I get older, I wish Aunt Ada were here to keep me healthy. Every time I look in the mirror and see the scar--a permanent record of my encounter with the nail--a great love for Aunt Ada swells in my consciousness. She filled a precious, loving role in my life.

NARRATOR: A few years later, in the 2002 General Relief Society Meeting, President Faust shares a story of another single relief society sister who lived a rewarding life through her service.

(President James E. Faust, October 2002 General Relief Society Meeting)

Sister Margaret Anderson of Centerville, Utah, is a wonderful example of a single sister who has lived an exemplary and fulfilling life in the service of others. For many years, she lovingly cared for her aged mother, her aunt, and her disabled sister. She guided and influenced hundreds of children as an elementary school teacher. Now retired, she continues to volunteer each week, helping children learn to read. Her acts of service have been a special blessing to the members of her ward. One young lady commented: "When I was little, Margaret would make me a birthday cake every year. She would decorate the frosting with the activities that I had done the previous year, such as dancing or playing soccer." Not one missionary leaves from her ward without one of Margaret's leatherwork wallets. She is a valuable resource as a gospel scholar, particularly in Relief Society. For her neighbors and friends, she has willingly run errands, and driven them to the temple. Margaret is a gracious hostess. She makes delicious candies and paints beautiful pictures, which she enjoys sharing with others. She truly has blessed the lives of countless individuals.

The prophets of the Lord have repeatedly promised that no blessing will be denied to the righteous single sisters of the Church if, through no fault of their own, they have not been married in this life and sealed to a worthy priesthood holder. They will be able to enjoy that blessing forever in the next world. "On occasions when you ache for that acceptance and affection which belong to family life on earth, please know that our Father in Heaven is aware of your anguish, and that one day he will bless you beyond your capacity to express."

NARRATOR: President Thomas S. Monson learned at a young age how Relief Society sisters working together can lift the burden of others. This account comes from the 2001 General Relief Society Meeting.

(President Thomas S. Monson, October 2001 General Relief Society Meeting)

I remember when, as a young deacon, I would cover a portion of the ward on fast Sunday morning, giving the small envelope to each family, waiting while a contribution was placed in the envelope and then returning it to the bishop. On one such occasion, an elderly member, Brother Wright, who lived alone, welcomed me at the door and, with aged hands, fumbled at the tie of the envelope and placed within it a small sum. His eyes fairly glistened as he made his contribution. He invited me to sit down and then told me of a time many years before when his cupboard had been empty of food. In his hunger, he had prayed to Heavenly Father for food to eat. Not long thereafter, he gazed out his front window and beheld someone approaching his door, pulling behind her a red-colored wagon. It was Sister Balmforth, the Relief Society president, who had pulled that wagon

almost half a mile over the railroad tracks and to his door. The wagon overflowed with food collected from the sisters of the ward Relief Society, with which Sister Balmforth filled the empty shelves in Brother Wright's kitchen. He described her to me as "an angel sent from heaven."

Sisters, you are the epitome of love. You brighten your homes, you lead with kindness your children; and while your husbands may be head of the home, you surely are the heart of the home. Together, through respect for each other and sharing of responsibilities, you make an unbeatable team.

NARRATOR: Armed with love and the strength of the Lord, the Relief Society is unbeatable. To close this episode, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf shares his gratitude for the many Relief Society sisters who have helped him in his life.

(President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, October 2008, General Relief Society Meeting)

Since learning that I would be with you today, I have thought about the many women who have shaped my life: my wonderful wife, Harriet; my mother; my mother-in-law; my sister; my daughter; my daughter-in-law; and many friends. All my life I have been surrounded by women who inspired, taught, and encouraged me. I am who I am today in large part because of these singular women. Each time I meet with the sisters of the Church, I sense that I am in the midst of similar remarkable souls. I am grateful to be here, grateful for your talents, compassion, and service. Most of all, I am grateful for who you are: treasured daughters of our Heavenly Father with infinite worth.

NARRATOR: This episode of "Stories from General Relief Society meetings" has been on the topic of womanhood. Thank you for listening. This is the Mormon Channel. To learn more, go to radio.lds.org. Tell your friends about us!