

And When He Came to Himself
(Luke 15:17)

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I am grateful to participate with you in the Religious Freedom Annual Review at the J. Reuben Clark School of Law at Brigham Young University. This is a most opportune time to consider together the importance of religious freedom. And I appreciate the invitation to share a few of my thoughts with you.

The Prodigal Son

In the 15th chapter of Luke in the New Testament, we learn about a young man who obtained his inheritance from his father and then traveled to a far country.¹ This young man “wasted his substance with riotous living.”² When he had squandered all of his resources, a mighty famine arose in that land, and “*he began to be in want.*”³

“And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

“And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

“*And when he came to himself*, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

“*I will arise and go to my father*, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

“And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

“And he arose, and came to his father.”⁴

This story has a marvelously happy ending. The return of this son to his home led to a loving reconciliation with his father and a restoration of his station in his family.

A Wake-Up Call

The parable of the prodigal son describes the experience of a young man who became lost and subsequently found his way back home. Please note two key aspects of this young man's experience.

First, he "*began to be in want*" when a mighty famine arose in the land. As this natural calamity unleashed its negative effects, I presume his inheritance was gone. I also imagine that many of the friends who enjoyed his companionship while he had plenty of money had long since told him goodbye. He may have been homeless. But ultimately, it was the famine and his resultant hunger that constituted a strong wake-up call. He was shaken awake from the customary patterns of his lifestyle by an increasing realization of his inability to fulfill his most basic needs.

Second, the young man's wake-up call led him to "*come to himself.*" This poignant phrase suggests to me a process of examining aspects of his life that previously had been unexamined, resulting in a piercing personal realization of his present circumstances and what he had become. He also was willing to strive for a timely and needed course correction: "*I will arise and go to my father.*"

Our world has seemingly been filled recently with strong wake-up calls. From natural disasters to a deadly pandemic sweeping the globe to a most pernicious social plague of racism, we are daily reminded that we need to awaken to the perilous times that surround us, come to ourselves, and arise and turn to our Divine Father, who desires to instruct and edify us through our trials.

COVID-19 Constraints Can Be Blessings

Just as the famine for the prodigal son was a pivotal turning point in his life, so COVID-19 can help us to realize what we have not fully realized before. The following video highlights a number of simple wake-up calls that people have received because of COVID-19.

Video – *The Great Realization* (4:00)

Several years ago, I spent a Sunday afternoon in the home of my apostolic associate, Elder Robert D. Hales, as he was recovering from a serious illness. We discussed our families, our quorum responsibilities, and important life experiences.

At one point I asked Elder Hales, “You have been a successful husband, father, athlete, pilot, business executive, and Church leader. What lessons have you learned as you have grown older and been constrained by decreased physical capacity?”

Elder Hales paused for a moment and responded, “*When you cannot do what you have always done, then you only do what matters most.*”

I was struck by the simplicity and comprehensiveness of his answer. My beloved friend shared with me a lesson of a lifetime—a lesson learned through the crucible of physical suffering and spiritual searching.

For Elder Hales, the limitations that were the natural consequence of advancing age, in fact, had become remarkable sources of spiritual learning and insight. The very factors that may have appeared to limit his effectiveness became some of his greatest strengths. Physical restrictions expanded his vision. Limited

stamina clarified his priorities. Inability to do many things directed his focus to a few things of greatest importance.

Thus, constraints and limitations can be remarkable blessings, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. And this same truth applies to all of us today as we wrestle with the effects of a pandemic.

COVID-19 Wake-Up Calls

The following examples highlight some of the things we may now see and hear more distinctly because of the demands and constraints imposed upon us by COVID-19.

COVID-19 has alerted us to many of the limitations in the supply chain processes that bring food from the fields, farms, and processing plants to our local grocery stores and kitchen tables.

COVID-19 has alerted us to our dependence upon foreign nations for many of our essential medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, and a wide variety of other strategically important products.

COVID-19 has alerted us to many of the constraints of just-in-time inventory and delivery systems for manufacturing plants and retail businesses.

COVID-19 has alerted us to many of the deficiencies in our national and local health care systems.

COVID-19 has alerted us to the importance of defending the borders between personal liberty, constitutional rights, and governmental authority.

COVID-19 has alerted us to many attacks on the freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly.

And the list goes on. The buzzer on the COVID-19 alarm clock just continues to ring and ring and ring.

COVID-19 and Religious Freedom

The Annual Review is a time to reflect on religious freedom and its place in the law, the nation, and our personal lives. Doing so in the midst of COVID-19 sharpens our focus. This present crisis may well be a moment when we too “come to ourselves” and realize, perhaps as never before, just how precious and fragile religious freedom is.

Religious Freedom and the Right to Gather with the Faithful

One key realization is that for most faith communities, gathering for worship, ritual, and fellowship is essential; it is not merely an enjoyable social activity.

For example, gathering is an especially powerful element in the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A central mission of the Church is to gather together the scattered family of Abraham—and indeed all who are willing—to the ordinances and covenants of the Savior’s gospel. Through that gathering, we believe God will establish a people who are of one heart and one mind, who dwell together in righteousness and peace, and who love and care for each other so completely that no poor, spiritually or physically, are found among them.⁵

In ancient and modern scripture, the Lord calls such a people and such a place “Zion.” Zion is where “the pure in heart”⁶ dwell. And it is where God Himself can dwell in the midst of His people.⁷ We believe that such a gathering is essential before the Messiah returns again.⁸

This vision of gathering has been a driving motivation for the Latter-day Saints since the Church’s earliest days and inspired our members to assemble first in Ohio and then in Missouri and Illinois. At each stage, government and mobs combined to persecute and scatter our members until they eventually found a place of gathering outside the United States—in what later became the state of Utah.

This vision has inspired our building of holy temples, where through sacred ordinances and covenants we eternally gather our families to God.

And this vision continues to inspire Latter-day Saints to gather together in their local congregations to worship God and His Son Jesus Christ, partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and strengthen, serve, and fellowship each other.⁹

Being in each other's presence is a unique and irreplaceable experience. In Christianity, the God of the Old Testament came to His people in the flesh. Jesus Christ touched people, embraced them, healed them, ministered to them. And we believe we are called to do as He did.¹⁰ He taught, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."¹¹

Of course, Latter-day Saints are hardly alone in this need to gather as a religious community. Our Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical friends gather for mass, baptisms, confirmations, sermons, and myriad other religious purposes.

Our Jewish friends gather for worship in their synagogues.

Our Muslim friends gather in their mosques.

Our friends in the Buddhist, Sikh, and other faith traditions likewise have sacred places to gather and worship together.

Gathering, in short, is at the core of faith and religion. Indeed, if the faithful are not gathering, sooner or later they will begin to scatter.

And because gathering lies at the very heart of religion, the right to gather lies at the very heart of religious freedom.

COVID-19 and Unprecedented Restrictions on Religious Exercise

I believe it is vital for us to recognize that the sweeping governmental restrictions that were placed on religious gatherings at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis truly were extraordinary. In what seemed like an instant, most Western

governments and many others simply banned communal worship. These restrictions eliminated public celebrations of Easter, Passover, Ramadan, and other holy days around the world.

No other event in our lifetime—and perhaps no other event since the founding of this nation—has caused quite this kind of widespread disruption of religious gatherings and worship.

The COVID-19 restrictions affected The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a unique way. The Church’s April 2020 General Conference—a celebration of the bicentennial of the First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith—had to be broadcast to a global audience from a small auditorium with only a handful of people attending instead of from our large conference center with a congregation of more than 20,000 people.

Clearly, governments have an affirmative duty to protect public health and safety.¹² And I believe public officials have most often sought to do the right things to protect the public from the virus. Drawing proper lines to protect both public health and religious exercise in a pandemic is very challenging.

But we cannot deny and we should not forget the speed and intensity with which government power was used to shut down fundamental aspects of religious exercise. These decisions and regulations were unprecedented. For nearly two months, Americans and many others throughout the free world learned firsthand what it means for government to directly prohibit the free exercise of religion.

Reflections on the Nature of Government and the Importance and Fragility of Religious Freedom

Like the prodigal son who “came to himself” in the midst of crisis, our own time of being “in want” invites us to carefully reflect on fundamental principles that perhaps we have long taken for granted. Here are a few of my own reflections.

First reflection: *Government power can never be unlimited.* In our political system, the government “derives its just powers from the consent of the governed,” to quote the Declaration of Independence. But the “just powers” of government cannot be unlimited, because they exist most fundamentally to secure the God-given rights of life and liberty, so that each of us can exercise our moral agency—the ability “to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon”¹³—and be accountable before God for our choices and actions.

Constitutions, representative government, checks and balances, and the rule of law help constrain the tendency of government to exercise unlimited power. Of course, liberty has limits. Government has a just role in fostering a moral environment in which people can live good and honorable lives. But whatever else government officials may be called upon to do, we the people must never allow them to forget that their offices and powers exist to secure our fundamental freedoms and the conditions for exercising those freedoms.

Thus, despite the obvious need for a proper response to COVID-19, we must not become accustomed to sweeping assertions of governmental power. Invoking emergency powers, government executives summarily imposed numerous orders and directives that in many ways are analogous to martial law. These executive orders are unlike laws enacted through the ordinary give-and-take of the democratic process.

No doubt an emergency on the scale of COVID-19 justifies strong measures to protect the public, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that many of these measures are extraordinary assertions of governmental power that can dramatically constrain our basic freedoms. The power of government must have limits.

Second reflection: *Religious freedom is paramount among our fundamental rights.* This time of restriction and confinement has confirmed for me

that no freedom is more important than religious freedom. The freedom of religion properly has been called our first freedom. It is first not only because of its placement as the first right in the First Amendment, but also because of the paramount importance of respecting the moral agency of each person. Living even for a brief few weeks under the restrictions imposed on religious activity by COVID-19 is a stark reminder that nothing is more precious to people of faith than the freedom to “worship Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience”¹⁴ and to openly and freely live according to our convictions.

Religious liberty is one of the “just and holy principles”¹⁵ underlying the Constitution of the United States. That liberty draws from and in turn reinforces the other rights protected by the First Amendment—the right to speak freely, to make use of a free press, to peaceably gather with others, and to petition the government to redress grievances.

Freedom of religion stands as a bulwark against unlimited government power. It safeguards the right to think for oneself, to believe what one feels to be true, and to exercise moral agency accordingly. It secures the space necessary to live with faith, integrity, and devotion. It nurtures strong families. It protects communities of faith and the rich and sacred relationships they make possible.

Nothing government does is more important than fostering the conditions wherein religion can flourish.

Third reflection: *Religious freedom is fragile.* As we have just experienced, religious freedom can quickly be swept aside in the name of protecting other societal interests. Despite COVID-19 risks, North American jurisdictions declared as essential numerous services related to alcohol, animals, marijuana, and other concerns. But often religious organizations and their services were simply deemed nonessential, even when their activities could be conducted safely. In the name of

protecting physical health and security or advancing other social values, government often acted without regard to the importance of protecting spiritual health and security. It often seemed to forget that securing religious freedom is as vital as physical health.

Fourth reflection: *In a time of crisis, sensitive tools are necessary to balance the demands of religious liberty with the just interests of society.* I am *not* for a moment saying that religious freedom can be unlimited in the middle of a pandemic. Nor am I saying that all government officials have disregarded religious rights. Far from it.

What I *am* saying is that we can no more disregard the valid claims of religious freedom in a time of crisis than we can disregard the valid claims of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures. Nor should we prioritize secular interests above religious ones. A health crisis should not become an excuse for a religious freedom crisis.

I believe we must always remember a key principle: specifically, religion should not be treated less favorably than analogous secular activities.

For example, the orders of one state barred Catholic priests from anointing a parishioner with holy oil in the performance of last rites—even if the person was not sick with COVID-19, even if the priest and parishioner were protected with masks and gloves, and even if the oil was applied with a swab. In the same state, my Church could not perform baptisms even under the safest of conditions.

Protecting a person's physical health from the coronavirus is, of course, important, but so is a person's spiritual health. That same state allowed lawyers to meet with people to administer to their legal needs, allowed doctors to meet with people to administer to their health needs, and allowed caregivers to administer food to satisfy nutritional needs. But it did not allow a clergyperson to administer to a

person's *religious* needs, even when the risk of all these activities was essentially the same.

This example and many more like it illustrate a profound devaluing of religion. We can and must do better.

I also believe we must always remember a second essential principle: namely, policy makers, even in a crisis, should limit the exercise of religion only when it truly is necessary to preserve public health and safety.

When the needs of society are great, officials should still ask whether there is some way of addressing those needs other than by burdening or banning the exercise of religion. With goodwill and a little creativity, ways can almost always be found to fulfill both society's needs and the imperative to protect religious freedom.

After all, the COVID-19 virus is not attracted uniquely to religious people. As most of us now recognize, a variety of methods can be used to mitigate the risk of the virus that do not require outright prohibitions on religious worship or gatherings.

The Opportunity Before Us

The COVID-19 crisis has presented us with a unique opportunity to reaffirm and shore up religious freedom. We have witnessed the government's swift, well-intentioned, but often dangerous breaching of the boundaries that protect the free exercise of religion. Do we hear the buzzer on the alarm clock? This is a wake-up call for all of us. Those fundamental boundaries and protections must be healed, renewed, and fortified.

While believers and their religious organizations must be good citizens in a time of crisis, never again can we allow government officials to treat the exercise of religion as simply nonessential. Never again must the fundamental right to worship God be trivialized below the ability to buy gasoline.

Conclusion

In the midst of crisis, the prodigal son in the biblical parable “came to himself” and began the long journey back to his home. No doubt in that moment he realized the error of his ways. But more fundamentally, I think he also realized that he had forgotten who he was. There, among the swine, he remembered. And then everything changed.

In our understandable desire to combat COVID-19, we, too, as a society may have forgotten something about who we are and what is most precious. Perhaps we have not fully remembered that faith and the right to exercise it are central to our identity as believers and to all that we deem good and right and worthy of protection. Now is the time for us to heed the wake-up call, to remember, and to act. That we may do so is my hope and my earnest prayer.

As I now come to the end of my message, I joyfully exercise what for me, personally, is one of the greatest religious liberties. I express these thoughts in the name of Him whom I serve, whom I love, and whom I represent, even Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ See Luke 15:11–32.

² Luke 15:13.

³ Luke 15:14.

⁴ Luke 15:14–20; emphasis added.

⁵ See Moses 7:18; Mosiah 18:21–22.

⁶ D&C 97:21.

⁷ See Moses 7:69; Matthew 5:8.

⁸ See Russell M. Nelson, “The Future of the Church: Preparing the World for the Savior’s Second Coming,” *Ensign*, April 2020, 13–17.

⁹ See Moroni 6:5–6.

¹⁰ See 3 Nephi 27:27.

¹¹ Matthew 18:20.

¹² See D&C 134:1.

¹³ 2 Nephi 2:26.

¹⁴ Articles of Faith 1:11.

¹⁵ D&C 101:77.