One beautiful October day after forty-eight years of marriage, my father’s mortal life ended and my mother’s single life began. She sold their home of thirty-five years and left the ward where they were both well-known and well loved and had raised five of us. She moved to a condominium in Salt Lake City. She was a stranger in a strange land.

The first Sunday in her new ward, she decided she’d better jump right in and meet people, so she walked down the aisle of the crowded, noisy chapel until she found some empty spaces on the bench next to a family. As she began to sit down, she was told the area was being saved for other family members. She then moved down the aisle to the next open spot but was met with the same response. Feeling a bit foolish by now but undaunted in her resolve to become part of things, she tried several more times, finally giving up and walking to the back of the chapel, where she found a place to sit.

Later, when I phoned her to find out how the day had gone, she shared her experience but added brightly that Sunday School and Relief Society had gone better and she was able to meet some new friends. A happy ending, but I’ve never quite been able to get over her story. As a single Latter-day Saint, I’ve had that same experience more than once, but somehow the mental picture of my dear mother going down the aisle trying to find a seat still breaks my heart.

Being single and being married are both natural states, but I believe that if we are not careful, Satan can use our life situations to discourage or divide us. And so I’d like to focus my words on two basic principles: (1) Let us love and reach out to each other, irrespective of our marital status; and (2) Whether single or married, let us celebrate and support marriages and families.

When I think of Mom’s experience in the chapel that day, I wish she had sat down by someone like Barbara Cook. Barbara believed along with Will Rogers that strangers were just friends she hadn’t met yet. She was the “unofficial friendshopper” in my ward when I was a graduate student, a single among marrieds. If the Cooks were sitting on the bench and you were walking down the aisle, well then, Barbara waved you over as another member of the family, even if everyone had to scrunch to make room. Dinners and parties at her home included both singles and marrieds. Many years have passed, but I’m still on her Christmas-card list. Whenever I was around Barbara, I didn’t feel like a single person, I felt like a superb person.

It’s important for marrieds to be sensitive to us who don’t each have a “built-in” friend. But as singles, we should remember that reaching out goes both ways. We need to reach out to marrieds and
include them in our lives. Most important, all of us need to see beyond the categories of “married” or “single” to those of “brother” and “sister.”

Someone who “sees beyond” is Perris Jensen. I first met Perris on his ninety-third birthday. He had just cleaned and vacuumed his house in anticipation of our visit. His conversation was stimulating. I discovered his busy life includes writing personalized letters to each of his 150 posterity and many outside speaking engagements. He even makes time to date on a regular basis. During our visit, I admired some lovely watercolors painted by a granddaughter whose works I’d been searching for. A few days later, I received one of her catalogs in the mail along with a detailed, handwritten note from Perris.

Others who are well-known for reaching out to people irrespective of marital status are Kevin and Drew Jones. These brothers have thrown some great parties for their single friends and usually invite their married mother, Marie, and their widowed grandmother, Dolly, who are some of the most interesting conversationalists attending.

Like a freshly tossed salad or a savory stew, life is richer when we include friends of all ages and stages. How much variety are we growing in our garden of friendships? When life seems all lettuce, a rutabaga or an artichoke may be just what we need.

Are we even cultivating our adult friendships? It’s so easy in the clamor of married life to neglect friendships outside the family. It’s so easy in the busyness of single life to write off marrieds as “those people who simply don’t understand.” The longer I’m single, the more my experience teaches me that we share far more similarities than differences. This was true of the dear women I served with in our stake Relief Society presidency. Together we represented three configurations of marital status: married, divorced, and single. Yet as we worked together for three and a half years, sharing laughter and tears, I found I could tell them the deepest longings of my single heart and they always understood. I believe this is possible because in the gospel we learn the same lessons from different textbooks.

This insight first came to me a few years ago. My widowed mother was wondering where to live and what to do; my married sister was wondering if her teenager, whose life had taken a dangerous, downward turn, would ever return to the fold; and I was wondering if my white knight would ever thunder across the horizon. As we sought to support each other, we realized we were all dealing with loss and ambiguity, and we were all learning faith. Same lessons, different textbooks.

What’s great about having single and married friends and family is that often our different situations are precisely what help us lift one another. A few years ago I was on business in Atlanta, excited at seeing the city for the first time but knowing it wouldn’t be as much fun alone. I phoned my friend, Marilyn, who lives in a nearby suburb with her husband and five rambunctious sons. Could she arrange to join me for a night out? “Absolutely,” she said, and what a satisfying visit we had! Marilyn was thrilled to dine at a restaurant where no one spilled his milk. And I was weary of corporate life at the moment and loved hearing her funny stories about raising boys. It was a breath of fresh air for both of us.

Each of us is precious to Heavenly Father, and we should treat one another as pearls of great price.
Therefore, we should refrain from asking questions such as, “What’s wrong with him? Why hasn’t he ever married?” or “How come she’s married and I’m not?” Of course, no satisfactory answers exist for these questions, because they are the wrong ones. The questions we should all ask ourselves are, “What does God expect of me today, and how can I carry it out?”

Let us not allow our marital status to separate us from brotherly and sisterly love; moreover, let us not allow our marital status to separate us from divine love. In Romans 8:35 [Rom. 8:35] we read, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine?” Or singleness? If we are not watchful, we may separate ourselves from Christ. I know how difficult it is for some single Latter-day Saints to face going to the temple, even when invited by other singles. If we decide to stay away from the temple, however, we keep ourselves from temple blessings by separating ourselves from that which can ultimately give us strength. Philippians 4:13 [Philip. 4:13] promises, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” and he can strengthen us as we seek him in his holy house.

Thank God for the principle of eternal marriage and families together forever! For many of us who are single, the principles we’ve learned as the progeny of such marriages, or the prospect ahead that such a marriage can be ours, keeps our faith burning. Everyone benefits from happy marriages and happy children because, to a large degree, they create the world in which we live.

We watch you who are married. We are heartened when we see moments of quiet affection between you. We notice what you say and do for your partners and your children. We say, “We want marriages and families like that!” Thank you when you live your lives in faith-promoting ways. It helps us.

And thank you to those priesthood and Relief Society leaders who call us to meaningful positions of service and leadership in our wards and stakes. When we must wait for marriage, what a blessing it is not to wait to work in the kingdom.

We can learn much from interacting with couples and families and, yes, from sitting through Relief Society and priesthood lessons about marriage and children. This is often tough for those of us not yet married, because it constantly reminds us of unfulfilled expectations. Proverbs 13:12 [Prov. 13:12] says, “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick.” And many who have not yet married or have lost a partner to death or divorce are often heartsick. Frankly, it hurts sometimes to be single. But even the happiest people tell me it hurts sometimes to be married. I think the truth is it simply hurts sometimes to be mortal.

What shall we do for those among us who are hurting or heartsick? We can listen. We can love. We can be disciples of hope and speak words of faith and encouragement. We can fast and pray for each other. We can create situations to help perspective which is strung out snap back into place. Marrieds can do this for singles. And singles can do it for singles. And singles can do it for marrieds.

As we work and play and worship together, let us build rather than belittle. Let us help rather than harass. In Doctrine and Covenants 38:27 [D&C 38:27], the Lord says, “If ye are not one ye are not mine.” Let us be one. Let us be his. Single and married, let us join together as comrades in arms in the fight for families and all that is good, loving each other and, as the hymn says, moving onward as Christian soldiers, “One in hope and doctrine, One in charity” (Hymns, 1985, no. 246).