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LETTER TO MY FAMILY

May, 2016

Dear brothers and sisters,

Mother's Day is almost here. May God's blessing be on all mothers! On these special days I think of my late mother and a poem by a famous Tang poet Bai Juyi comes to mind:

The Weeping of a Miserable Crow

A crow lost its mother and cried out in deep sorrow,
Day and night, anchored to its branch, it waited for her return.

All who heard its midnight cries wept in sympathy,
As it bemoaned its lost opportunity to repay its mother's love.

All birds have mothers, why should your grief be so deep?

Does your sorrow come from the tenderness of her love?

There was one Wu Qi, who did not return to mourn his mother.

Such men hardly have the heart even of a bird.

Beloved crow, to us you are comparable to Zeng Shen.

When I was a child and could recite this poem with ease, I was too young to understand the pain of losing one's mother. After I grew up and my mother passed, every time I read this poem tears come to my eyes. Since it is Mother's Day, let me tell you the story of my mother.

My mother and father met in the casino in Macau. My mother's family was poor and she worked in the casino to support her mother and young brother. My father inherited his father's wealth and owned a soft drinks company which supplied the French troops fighting in Indochina. My father was the only male heir in three generations and my grandmother wanted him to marry very early. My father had good looks, youth and lots of money. Unfortunately, he only wanted to have a good time and let the years slip by, until he met my mother in the casino. He was completely bowled over by her beauty and courted her relentlessly. My mother agreed to marry him on condition that she could bring her mother and younger brother with her. My father agreed so my mother moved to Vietnam to marry my father, bringing her mother and brother with her. Marrying into the family was no simple matter. My father came from a large clan and several families lived on the same compound. As far as I can remember there were many dim courtyards and the surrounding tall walls were studded with broken glass topped by electrified barbed wire. My mother gave birth to a son and then to a daughter but both did not survive. Then another daughter was born. Without a son, my mother was having a hard time bearing up under the pressure of the clan. My grandmother wanted a grandson to carry on the family's name. Under such circumstances my birth became a turning point for my mother. Unfortunately, I was a premature baby and my birth weight was only a little more than two pounds. I suffered from many childhood ailments and caused many headaches for my mother.

When I was five, my grandmother asked a blind fortune teller to tell my fortune. He took the particulars of my date of birth, shook his tortoise shell, cast down his copper coins and did his calculations mumbling his mantras. Then with a bleak expression on his face he announced to my parents and grandmother that in my former life I was my father's creditor and had come in this life to demand payment. "When this child exhausted all his father's wealth on medical expenses he would leave." The fortune teller staked his reputation on this prediction and said if this child could live beyond ten years old my father was welcome to bring down his fortune telling business. From that day onwards the fortunes of my mother and myself took a 180 degree turn. In my grandmother's eyes I no longer existed. My desperate mother took me to a little Buddhist temple outside the city in an attempt to reverse my fortune. Someone had the bright idea to send me to the monk in charge of the temple to be his adopted son and my parents agreed. I was supposed to stay in the temple and could not return home until I was ten years old. I was five at that time. Even now I can still recall the night my mother took me to the temple. I gripped my mother's hand and looked around in horror at the

scary murals depicting eighteen levels of hell. I was terrified and cried piteously, begging my mother not to leave me behind. In the end, she could not bear to leave me and brought me home. That night I had a raging fever and the high temperature did not subside for several weeks. In my delirium I kept mumbling that I would not dare to be ill again, begging my mother to let me stay at home. One afternoon, my father lifted the mosquito net of my bed and gently told me they would not send me away, but from then onwards they would call me “little brother” instead of “son”. Later I realized that this was my father’s ploy to trick the demon sent to take me away. If the demon could not find my father’s son, I could live. My childhood was spent under the shadow of such horrors. I had a terrible time and my mother suffered as well.

Not long afterwards my mother got pregnant twice and gave birth to two girls. Her days became even harder. My grandmother looked at her with disfavor and other female relatives made many cutting remarks. My maternal grandmother stayed in her room with her son and would not venture out except for meals. Eventually my brother was born on the fifth day of the fifth month. The fortune teller predicted that he would be wealthy and occupy a high position. Finally, my mother was stripped of her shame. My grandmother doted on my brother and loved to lift his thick palm and kiss it again and again. She believed that a thick fleshy palm indicated further wealth. As for me, I was still very sickly. I kept silent at home, thinking I was a superfluous member of the family. I often had nightmares in which I was led to the little temple. The door was shut and I was left in the dark. From my childhood I felt my mother did not want me and just doted on my brother. As I recall those days, I realized I was too young to understand the pain in my mother’s heart.

In 1954 the country broke into North and South Vietnam. My father gave up all his possessions and retreated to the south with other refugees. My family’s fortunes fell. My grandmother passed and my parents took their six children to stay with relatives. We were given the cold shoulder all the time. I still remember the time we stayed with my aunt. One day, my mother said to us sternly that we would not eat there ever again. During meal time everyone stayed in the room and was not allowed to go out. My mother also said, “We may be poor but we still have our dignity. We would rather die than eat ‘food handed out in contempt’.” Her children had no idea what ‘food handed out in contempt’ meant. They only understood rumbling stomachs and they were hard to bear. My young siblings sat on the floor and started to cry. In the end my mother could not bear it and took us to the back door of the kitchen to look for the cook. The cook took pity on six children weak with hunger and produced leftovers and rice from her cabinets for us. The children squatted on the ground and devoured the food. My mother did not eat but just swallowed her tears. The pain on my mother’s face that evening left an indelible impression on my mind.

After I grew up I understood the sacrifices my mother made for her children. However, I have been an introvert from childhood and did not express to my mother the gratitude I felt. When I left for college my mother took me to the bus station. That was the first time I went far away from home. Mother settled my luggage and found a window seat for me. She put a bag of food into my hands. She reminded time and again to be careful: there was a chill in the air so I need more covers when I go to bed; don’t eat at roadside shops on the way in case the food is not hygienic. She had actually told me all this many times. I did not say a word. The bus was about to depart. Against my objections, mother turned and alighted, saying she wanted to buy several bottles of water for me to drink on the road. My mother was heavy and not in good health. Getting on and off the bus station was not easy for her. She hobbled to buy several cans of soda from hawkers and dragged the heavy bag to the bus. I don’t know where she found the strength to lift the plastic bag to me at my window. As the bus began to move, the sight of my mother growing smaller in the distance suddenly reminded me of an essay called ‘My Father’s Back’ by a famous writer Zhu Ziqing. Tears poured down my cheeks. After I got to the college dorm and settled down, the first thing I did was to write to my mother and told her all the gratitude I bottled up in my heart all those years. Later my sister told me she had never seen my mother so moved as on the day she received my letter. My mother told anyone who would listen, “Calvin wrote me a letter and told me he loved his mother very much!”

Mother’s Day is when we think of our mother’s love. Dear brothers and sisters, when you still have the opportunity to honor your parents, make the most of it. The Bible tells us, “Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.” (Ephesians 6:2-3.)

Serving together with you in the Lord,

Pastor Calvin Tran