



Dear brothers and sisters,

May, 2017

It is a tradition of the church to hold a special Sunday service on Mother's Day to remember the graciousness of mothers. At the end of the service, children would offer flowers to the mothers. When I see those smiling mothers, I cannot hold back memories of my own mom. Although she passed away thirteen years ago, I still miss her deeply. Bits and pieces of my memories of her and traces of my life with her continue to linger in my mind. I still remember vividly my long and difficult journey to Australia upon hearing the bad news that she was dying.

It was midnight on a Saturday when a phone call from my elder sister came to report the bad news that mom was hospitalized with a serious condition and could die any moment. My wife advised me to go to Australia as soon as possible in order to see her for the last time. She tried to book a ticket for me. The airline agent was very kind and offered me a seat at half fare. However, as a pastor in my church, I was not able to find another person to fill the pulpit. Throughout that Saturday night, my heart was pounding with anxiety on mom's condition. After the Sunday service the next day, I took the earliest flight to Sydney. While waiting at the airport, I couldn't sit still as I worried about mom's condition like an ant on a hot pot. Because the news came suddenly, my wife could not obtain a leave from her job and thus I had to travel alone. The flight from New Jersey to Sydney took more than twenty hours. I agonized over mom's condition throughout the long, lonely journey.

While the plane was coasting in the sky at thirty thousand feet, I helplessly looked out the window, fatigued both physically and mentally. After being in flight for more than ten hours, we flew across the International Date Line. The blue sky now turned cloudy and grew dimmer as the journey continued. The earth below became obscure with mountains and rivers barely discernible. On the horizon, the setting sun looked like a gigantic crimson ball glittering in the sky. The horizon then became obscure with only a faint glow at the corner of the vanished sun. A few minutes later, it was all darkness outside with only lights on the wings of the airplane still flashing in the sky. Lo and behold, the stars now appeared on the horizon, one after the other, more and more until they filled the night sky, testifying to the greatness and wonders of the Creator. The familiar song of my youth came to mind, "Twinkle, twinkle little star." These blinking stars were like thousands of diamonds set on black velvet, exhibiting indescribable beauty. Waking up to reality, I realized that while it was the dark night at my location, it should be bright noon in Australia on the other side of the hemisphere and wondered if my mother was still alive, awake or sleeping. As my elder sister told me before the trip, mom's health had taken a nosedive with organs throughout her body failing and the doctor pronounced her imminent passing. No one could predict if her lifespan would last hours, days or weeks but one thing for sure was that no medical intervention could save her. Although those words from her doctor sounded definitive, I nevertheless had doubts if they were true because in my mind my mother was an extremely strong woman and she sailed safely through numerous turmoils in her life. I refused to accept the facts that mom would no longer recover this time.

The lights in the cabin were dimmed and passengers were mostly asleep. In the dark, I wanted to fall asleep too but my mind could not be reined in, taking me far back into the memory lane with scenes of my mother and the family reappearing vividly. I remembered that at the end of World War II, Japanese surrendered. The French army reclaimed Vietnam as their colony. The Vietcong then rose to seek independence. French expedition force was defeated at Dien Bien Phu and withdrew from Vietnam. Americans then intervened, leading to the division of the country into North and South Vietnam with communist and republican regimes respectively. A million North Vietnamese then flooded into the south. My father had a prosperous soda beverage business in the north but had to give up everything to escape as other refugees did to the south with the family as communists took power. At first, we stayed with a relative's family for a month and that was extended to two months... While father was out job seeking, mother stayed with us six children as we lived in our relative's storage room. It was at first a

happy occasion to see long-separated relatives, but as time dragged on with our poor family sheltered and fed by them, mom had to endure their constant scornful looks and language.

Upon hearing some harsh comments on one occasion, mom angrily gathered us six children and solemnly declared, “Despite our poverty, we need to have guts. We can no longer stay in this place and will move as soon as dad returns. From now on, we will stay inside the room during mealtimes. We will rather die than accepting food given in despise!” My younger siblings bewilderingly looked at me, their six-year-old brother. We did not understand what “guts” means, let alone “food given in despise.” All we knew was that it was not funny to starve. Mom then changed her clothes to go out to look for food to feed us but came back empty-handed. As darkness befell, my younger siblings, especially the littlest, and I could no longer withstand hunger and cried out for food as we lay in bed. Mom, at last after long hesitation, took our hands to walk into the kitchen from the back door.

The cooking lady, still busy in the kitchen, seeing us walk in, quietly talked to my mom, “Mrs. Chan, look how hungry your children are. Ai! Come to the kitchen with your children at the same time everyday and I will leave some foods for them.” She then took two leftover dishes and a bowl of cold rice to feed us. After a day of starvation, we devoured the food. The memory of those two dishes remained fresh to this day, a few pieces of steamed ribs and a small amount of fried egg with pea pods. My siblings consumed all the ribs in no time while I had a few mouthfuls of rice; when I turned to the fried egg, I found only a small piece was left. Being angry, I wanted to beat my siblings. At that moment, mom sternly warned me, “Elder brother, what are you doing? I went through many hardships to take care of you all and was hoping that you would love and take care of your younger siblings when I am gone one day. Now just for a piece of rib, you...” With head bent, I murmured to her, “Mom, I am very hungry!” Mom said quietly, “I am hungry too!” I then found that her bowl was empty; she did not take anything and left all the food to her children. The scene of that empty bowl in front of mom under the dim kitchen light remained vivid in my mind to this day, never to be forgotten.

Mom raised all of us to adulthood while bearing numerous difficulties. In sickness, mom was our doctor; in the time of uncertainty, our supporter; in fear, our comforter. In our minds, mom was a giant who could withstand any storm in life. We were at peace when standing by her. After South Vietnam fell into the hands of communists, our family lived under the iron curtain for four years. Mom always told us to be calm in the midst of waves of political upheaval, purges, and conflicts, encouraging us not to give up for God always provides. Two years later, with the endorsement of her brother in Hong Kong, mom was able to leave Vietnam. While in Hong Kong, mom used every means possible to get all her children out of that country to better place.

It has now been thirteen years since her passing. As “holidays deepen the remembrance of bygone relatives”, as a Chinese saying depicts, it has been difficult for me on Mother’s Day as I miss my mom so much. When I saw children huddle intimately around their mothers at church, I was agitated with envy. An old hymn “Beyond the Sunset” came to my mind. In our short journey through life, there is no unending banquet. Fortunately, there is an eternal home “beyond the sunset” and I shall reunite with my mom one day. This promise of Jesus comforts me. It is written in Ecclesiastes, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” Within our limited life span, it is uncommon for families to be together for long periods of time. Therefore we need to treasure every moment of family gatherings. In particular, we should obey our parents and make them happy while they are with us; don’t you think so? “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” This is the first commandment with a promise.” (Eph 6:1-2) As a Chinese proverb laments, “Whilst the tree wishes to be still, the wind does not cease; whilst the child wishes to care for his parents, they have already left”, we would regret if having not obeyed them while they were still alive.

Serving with you in the Lord,  
**Pastor Calvin Chan**