

Christ's way of Vulnerability

MJCF

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Philippians 2:1-11, (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, John 1:14)

In past messages, I've mentioned how I try hard to keep things under control. I often struggle to make decisions because I spend too much time trying to figure out all the possibilities before deciding. I don't want to make any mistakes, and I want to be prepared for all the possible outcomes so nothing takes me by surprise. But, Jesus didn't try to control everything in his life. Instead, he walked in obedience to God. We are called to follow the example of Jesus, and trust God to lead us through whatever happens.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the four weeks of preparation before we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, at Christmas. Last week, we read from the book of Philippians for the call to worship. Today, I'd like to focus a bit more on those verses, because they are such an important passage. They summarize the significance of what God did through God's Son, Jesus. Many Christians understand that this passage emphasizes the importance of what Jesus has done, but I believe it also goes much deeper than that. It also gives us an idea of how we are called to live our lives. Jesus was with God when the world was created, but then he came from heaven, and took on the form of a person. He didn't put on a terrifying display of divine power. Instead he quietly cared for the people around him. Often he did miracles, but these were all for the purpose of teaching people about God, and showing them God's love.

To look to the interests of others rather than our own, and to humble our selves can be a huge challenge for us, but think of how Jesus Christ served others, and how he humbled himself. He followed God's way of love, even to the point of being killed, hung on a cross! He's the Son of God! The power of God Almighty was in him, yet he let go of that in order to come to earth, born to a poor family as a vulnerable baby. He let go of his own power in order to follow God's will in sharing God's love and God's message. He not only shared God's message, he also lived it. In humbling himself, he gave us a model of vulnerability and radical trust in God.

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 4, we read how Jesus resisted the devil's temptations. The devil offered him quick ways to satisfy his hunger, and gain fame and power to influence people. And, although these goals weren't bad in themselves, the devil tempted Jesus to jump to these goals by ways that were against God's ways. They were good goals, but it was very important to pay attention to the way to get there. If Jesus would have satisfied his hunger with quick miracles, if he would have scared people into following him through amazing miracles, the end result will be quite different than it is now. Jesus satisfied his hunger by focusing on the nourishment of mainly God's word, along with the physical nourishment of food. He showed God's love, even to the point of allowing himself to be killed. In fact, that's how Jesus became Lord of all. Instead of using his power to forcefully achieve his goals, he let himself become vulnerable, trusting in God's power. It's the power of love. The journey is just as important, if not more important than the destination. In our lives, we need to think not just about succeeding in our goals. We need to give a lot of attention to how we are living, walking with God on the way there.

From verse three the Apostle Paul says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." I felt quite challenged by this part since much of the time I am focused on personal things that I need to do, rather than on spending energy looking for opportunities to reach out and care for others. Life can be overwhelming enough to just think of solving the problems right in front of us. It's then easy to forget that God calls us to give attention and care to the people around us.

I've been learning a little about vulnerability. When things are out of control, I feel vulnerable. But, it is at those times that we can see God at work. Like the Apostle Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 12:9

and 10, "...I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me...whenever I am weak, then I am strong." It's a paradox. When we are weak, vulnerable, and have lost control, we have a chance to be strong in the power of God.

It was tough for me to make the decision to move to Japan. We had prayed about the possibility of moving back to Japan for a few years, but the timing never seemed right. Finally, I realized that God may not show me the next steps until I start letting go of some things. I've been trying to let go of control, and trust more in God. That's really hard for me. Usually, I want to have everything figured out for the next step before making a decision. A few months ago, Rie and I sensed God leading us to move soon. One thing that made it easier to move was the fact that we are now able to continue connecting online from Japan. The first big step was for me to quit my position as music coordinator at Emmanuel church. It had been a great experience to work there, and had been a good source of income. It gave me stability as I served in my main position as pastor at MJCF. I felt vulnerable after resigning my position. I no longer had that stable source of income.

Selling our townhouse was our next big step. After years of prayer, suddenly things were moving much more quickly. After selling our house, we no longer had the stability of a place to live. After we arranged for friends to take our van, we no longer had the freedom to drive around. We then had to live in a hotel for a few days. Our vehicle was gone, and our house was sold. I felt quite vulnerable, knowing that I was stepping into the unknown. There would still be things that needed to be clarified regarding where we'd live in Japan, how exactly we'd be working with the Tokyo churches, and how we'd find income to support ourselves. Yet, along with this vulnerability, I had a deeper sense of God's presence and leading. We had so many problems along the way, things out of our control, yet God helped us through each one, leading us to Tokyo. I am in awe at God's leading.

As we prepared to move, I was surprised to find out how complicated it had become for foreigners to get into Japan because of the pandemic. Normally, I would only need to go to the airport and get my passport stamped. This time, I needed to submit all sorts of things to the embassy in Vancouver, including photos, and documents from Japan. With help from Rie's family, and my son, Jay in Tokyo, I was able to get the documents together and hand them in at the embassy. I then received the visa permit on a Friday, just in time, because we were leaving for our travels already on Monday morning! With the help of family in Japan, God had led us through this hurdle.

Another challenge was to find a place where someone could care for our two cats until we would be able to move them to Japan. Initially, we had not realized that they would not be allowed into Japan until 6 months after receiving rabies shots. Because of this, we needed to find someone to care for the cats until I would return and pick them up in March. As we prepared to move, I posted some things for sale, online. I was surprised to be contacted by an old friend who noticed that we were selling a violin. She was interested. When she came to pick it up, we visited for a while, and shared about our challenge finding a good temporary place where our cats could stay. She said she has a friend who loves cats, and takes care of other people's cats in her large house. She would check with her friend if she'd add our two cats. As she was about to leave, I offered to open the violin case and show it to her more closely, but she didn't even seem that interested in taking a close look. It almost felt like she was there not so much because of the violin, but because God had led her there to help us find a good place for our cats! We are thankful for the many people who prayed about this.

When we sold our house, we had arranged for the Mennonite Central Committee to come and pick up a lot of our furniture that we wanted to donate to them. But, when they arrived, they said they couldn't take our bed, or our large sofa. Suddenly, we needed help from our neighbours. On short notice, Masako said she could receive our bed. One neighbour let us store our bed in her garage until we could deliver it to a friend's place. And our other neighbour took the sofa and another piece of furniture to be set out for pick up by the city. We were stressed and felt vulnerable with these problems, but God connected us with neighbours who could help.

Just before leaving for Japan, we spent a bit of time to travel to Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Niagara, and Hamilton, in order to visit friends and family. Our most vulnerable and stressful situation was finding out that our credit card had been cancelled, without warning. We found this out in the middle of our trip. This made it very difficult to pay for hotels and a car rental. We had to totally rely on the help of various uncles and aunts to pay the deposits for us. It feels like God is continuing to teach us to rely on others and work together, rather than do things all on our own. God has also been resolving each our problems along the way, step by step.

During our preparations to move, things sometimes felt rushed. We'd often thought that it would be great to have had an extra week or two to get ready before leaving on our travels. But later, we heard about the flooding and landslides near Surrey and Abbotsford. If we'd delayed our trip, we could have been stuck in Surrey, or even stuck between landslides on the highway. Not only that, but just recently, we heard that Japan is completely closing the borders to any foreigners. So, had we delayed, we may not have been able to get into Japan at all! Somehow God led us through each challenge and got us here just on time! It gave us confidence that God has prepared some kind of important work for us. We feel humbled by this.

When have you felt vulnerable? Did you experience God's presence, leading your through the challenges? To walk with faith and trust is to be vulnerable. It is to walk as Jesus walked, not with force and control, but with humility, gentleness, trust, and love. May we not fear becoming vulnerable. It is the way Jesus walked. It's the way of faith. And, it's the way we we'll be able to see God at work. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, who showed us your great power, through his willingness to become vulnerable. Through Christ, we see how you call us not to push and use our power to influence people, but instead to empower others by love and acts of humility. Grant us the courage to put our trust in you rather than in our own power. We pray for all those who are now vulnerable and stressed out because of the effects of the flooding in BC. We pray for those who feel vulnerable because of other challenges in their lives. Thank-you that it is through our weak, vulnerable experiences that we can see your power at work all around us. Open our eyes to your reality, we pray, through Christ our Lord, Amen.