

## **Christians and Samurai Spirit**

Philippians 2:1-11, (Matthew 16:24-25)

Ft. Garry Menn. Fell. (4.30.23) May 24.23

Trinity 5.7.23, Emmanuel MC. MJCF 5.14

<title slide> It's great to be back! Today, I'd like to share about what's happening with ministry in Japan. Some of the content will be similar to what I've been sharing in other churches here in Canada. The title of today's message is, "Christians and Samurai Spirit". It feels a bit strange to be sharing with you about samurai spirit, since many of you likely know even more than me!

<slide 2> Unfortunately, Rie was not able to come on this trip – so I have her photo here. Rie, and I are called to serve in Tokyo as "relationship catalysts." This is a new category of mission worker. We are trying to focus on building church to church relationships. As relationship catalysts, Rie and I are not just representatives of the mission board sent to work in Japan. We represent both Mennonite Church Canada International Witness and the Tokyo Area Fellowship of Mennonite Churches. (And MJCF, for that matter)! We are accountable to both, and in working at an equal church to church relationship we are charting new ground. <slide 3> One way in which we hope to develop this is to host guest exchanges with North America.

<slide 4> Right now, Rie and I are living temporarily at the Yayoidai church guesthouse with our daughter Irene, until renovations at the Tokyo Anabaptist Center are completed. (The guesthouse is connected to the church on the left side – a pretty convenient location for us when we attend the Yayoidai church). A year and a half after moving to Tokyo, we never expected we'd still be waiting to move into the Anabaptist Center but the pandemic and rising prices have complicated things for the Center renovation planning. We'd appreciate your prayers as the church discerns the next steps for moving forward.

In both Canada and Japan we have had challenges over the past number of years. The pandemic has not been easy. Even during the uncertainties of life today, God continues to be at work among us. <slide 5> We've been forced to learn new things. I am glad that we can now continue a connection online with all of you, and others across Canada and anywhere in the world, even though we've moved to Tokyo.

Like our church here, in Japan, churches are very small. But, here and there I see how many of the Christians have a strong spirit, and a strong commitment to the church. <slide 6> I believe that part of the reason for this is the influence of samurai spirit. The samurai spirit reminds me of the invitation of Jesus Christ to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. I'll say a bit more about this, but first I'd like to introduce to you the 5 churches in the Tokyo Area Fellowship of Mennonite Churches (TAFMC).

<slide 7> About 16 people attend the Honancho church worship each week. Pastor Tanase died several years ago, and since then they've been without a pastor. Mr. Oshikiri is the coordinator for the church and people take turns sharing or giving a message each week. <slide 8> (This is the inside of the church). After the worship service there is always a sharing time where each person has a chance to make comments or ask questions related to the message that day. This is followed by a time of prayer. Each week, they open the church for people living on the streets to stop by and pick up some food. <slide 9> The church building is next door to the Anabaptist Center. (The bushes need trimming in this photo)! Because of their location, the Honancho church takes care of the Center which includes the Sakakibara Library, a large collection of Anabaptist/Mennonite resources.<slide 10> Most of the books are in English, with about 1/3 written in Japanese. <slide 11> One of my hopes is that we can get the library resources accessible online. Michio Ohno had poured his life into organizing and managing the library until his health deteriorated to the point that he could no longer make the long trip from their home to the Center. <slide 12> His wife, Kazuko who is now in her 80s continues to attend the church each week, coming 2 hours by public transit as they had both done for almost 40 years. Kazuko regularly accompanies songs on piano. (You can see her here playing piano). Last year Mr. Ohno passed away. He'll be remembered for his work with the library, and for his passion for conflict transformation and working for peace.

<slide 13> The Hitachi house church has about 5 people attending each week. Mr. and Mrs. Kanamaru have opened up their home and have led the Hitachi church for decades. Last year Mr. Kanamaru passed away due to cancer. <slide 14> We try to visit each of the churches once a

month, but since the Hitachi church is over 3 hours away, Rie and I take the train to visit them every other month. On the off month, we've arranged for them to join the Honancho church through Zoom so they can have a way to keep connected. I appreciate that Mrs. Kanamaru is able to join MJCF for our online worship!

<slide 15> At the Minuma church, about 10 people attend each week. (I'm with a couple of members here). Pastor Inamine who is now in his 80's has been leading the congregation for over 40 years. A number of years back, he suffered from a stroke. Yet, he continues to lead the congregation with the help of his wife Hiroko. <slide 16> (She's on the right side of this photo). They are committed to the church and to sharing the Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective of the Christian faith. Although small in number, the church members are quite committed. I remember a seeker who began to regularly attend back in the 1990s. Now, over 25 years later, I visited the church and saw that she still regularly attends. Even though she is still not yet baptised, she definitely shows a commitment and loyalty to that church.

<slide 17> Pastor Tojo and his wife Yuko continue to lead the Yayoidai church with around 13 people attending each week. (The Tojos are on the right side of this photo). They have struggled with various conflicts and challenges over the years. When Mr. Tojo caught Covid, he was hospitalised for a couple of months and nearly died. I was surprised when he actually recovered and was able to continue driving to church and preaching regularly. <slide 18> I believe God has been working in his heart. In times when we've met and prayed together, I've sensed God's Spirit. It's my prayer that he may be able to share more deeply with his congregation, and that there may soon be peace in some of the difficult relationships.

<slide 19> The Misato church is the largest group, with about 25 people attending. Pastor Norihiro and his wife Seiko are the youngest of the church leaders. <slide 20> (Norihiro is at the back left corner, and Seiko is near the middle at the front). On facebook, they regularly post photos of worship services, and recordings of special music done during the worship. <slide 21> The special music often includes children accompanying on violin, or other instruments. <slide 22> I think this is pretty cool. They open up their church on Friday afternoons for people to visit from the community and have tea. They call it the "Hot Time Café". Different people have dropped in for conversation and refreshment.

<slide 23> In Japan, it's good to give an opportunity for people to get out and meet others. Especially with the pandemic, many have been feeling lonely and isolated, and suicides have increased. In fact, in recent news (2021) I heard that Japan's prime minister appointed a Minister of Loneliness, along with the usual appointments of the Minister of Finance, and other ministers. It's good to see the Misato church also working at being relevant to the needs of the community, providing a place for people to come and relax and to connect with friends.

If you were to ask me what I knew about Japan before I first went, I'd say I know about Sony, and Toyota, Yamaha, and Karaoke and I've heard about samurai. <slide 24> (We probably don't quite fit the samurai mood in that photo! Irene, Rena, and Jay are posing as samurai with me, at a special museum in Kyoto). <slide 25> Here's what I learned about samurai. As many of you likely know, long ago, the samurai were elite warriors who protected their masters who were often the wealthy landowners. Land was gained and lost through feuding among various regions in Japan. Samurai were active for hundreds of years, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had disappeared because they were no longer needed. The feuding territories became united into one Japan with one government. Although there are no more samurai, I believe the samurai spirit lives on in many of the Japanese people. It's interesting to note that some of the characteristics of the samurai spirit fit very well with the way of Jesus Christ (aside from the violence that comes with being a warrior).

The samurai were highly disciplined. And, along with training in military skills their training included intense meditation. The word samurai means "one who serves". That reminds me of Matthew 20:28, where Jesus says he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." <slide 26> For the samurai, a disciplined focus and loyalty to their master mattered most above all other skills, above even his own life. In a similar way, Jesus invites us to

be loyal to him, putting our relationship above all else, above even our own lives. In Matthew 16, Jesus says, "... 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'" (16:24-25) <slide 27> In Japanese society you can see how honour and loyalty are strong priorities. Up until recently, many people would not change to a different job once hired. Whether they liked their work or not, the priority was loyalty to the company.

Like the samurai, some Mennonites see themselves as an elite group, above other groups. And yet, little by little I see a greater openness to work together with the other denominations.

<slide 28> I noticed that with such a small number of church members, there is often lots for everyone to do. (Here the Misato church people are coating the benches to keep them from deteriorating. Like our church, none of the Tokyo churches has extra staff beyond the pastor, and some churches don't even have the pastor. Most of the Mennonite pastors in Tokyo do not have health plans or pension benefits, and they may only get honorariums for their service. They all need to have work outside the church in order to earn enough to support their families.

The samurai were known to focus so strongly on their role in protecting their masters, that they often went through any challenges without shifting their focus from their goal. It's been described like walking quickly through pouring rain without an umbrella, unconcerned about getting soaked. Any concern would be a distraction from serving the master. The single-minded focus of the samurai seems to have influenced modern day Japanese society. I'm often amazed at how a group can work together so well and get a lot done.

<slide 29> The passage read today from Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of my many favourites. He says, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others..." and "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...". Paul goes on with a beautiful description of how Jesus humbled himself, came from heaven to be born in human likeness, and how he was obedient to the vision of God, even to the point of dying on a cross. Imagine! We are called to have the same mind as Christ, the one from heaven who emptied himself even to the point of allowing himself to be killed! Are we so focused on following Christ that thoughts about ourselves are small compared to our life in Christ? In Galatians 2 (19-20), Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Like a samurai imagining ways to die in order to overcome any fear, we can imagine ourselves crucified with Christ. The difference from the samurai is that our new life is then empowered by Christ rather than ourselves or a human master. So, what about you? Whether you sense the samurai spirit or not, do you sense the Spirit of God at work in your life?

As I compare churches in Canada and in Japan, I see we all have strengths and challenges. We can be thankful for the blessings we have when we realise some of the more challenging situations that others are facing. We can also be encouraged and learn from the faith, loyalty, and commitment seen in many who take their walk with Christ seriously.

May we all commit to Christ, our Lord, more and more deeply. I'd like to finish with a prayer I came across. It's called "The Prayer of the Christian Samurai". Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I pledge myself wholly to Your service as a loyal Christian. You alone will I serve, with no other master before you. Daily I will live as dead to the world so that I may live only in You. May Your Will always come before my own. Give me the Strength to tirelessly perfect myself and serve all humanity, for each and every person in this world is Your treasure. May I never forget that I have only the present moment to act, and to joyfully press on in times of difficulty. Although everything I have in this life will pass away, so long as I remain focused on You I have nothing to fear, for I can never lose your love. When all that You require of me is done may I rest forever in your embrace as your faithful servant. Amen.