

# Testimony

MJCF July 18, 2021

Psalm 25:1-10

In my messages I've often included bits and pieces where I share some personal testimony, and so I've hesitated to also share on these "testimony Sundays." But, I thought that this time I'll share, since I haven't ever given the entire time to just my sharing. Testimonies don't always have to be about how people become Christian. They could be just a reflection on how we've experienced God's leading in the past week, or they could be about a recent struggle. But, since there may be some who haven't heard, I'll begin with sharing how I became a Christian, but then spend most of the time updating you on a few things I've been thinking about more recently.

I grew up in a Christian home and made the decision to follow Jesus Christ at around age six. After that, over the years, I prayed and renewed my decision to be a Christian a few more times, with increasing assurance of being "saved". The main reason I wanted to become a Christian is that I didn't want to go to hell. On a different level, I had thought that I needed to be good in order to get to heaven. Then, I heard the message (or read it a Christian comic book) that you can't get to heaven by being good. It's only through giving your life to Jesus Christ. We are all in need of God's grace made possible through God's Son Jesus and his sacrifice for us on the cross. I remember deciding to "be good from now on..." But, in less than 24 hours I'd forgotten and I was already fighting with my younger brothers, or sulking when asked to help with washing dishes. It's then that I realised that I can't be good on my own, and I'm in need of Jesus in my life. I believe that is a core part of our faith. No one can earn his or her way to heaven. It has to be accepted as a gift. Anyway, I was often fearful of hell, but I finally had confidence once I was baptised at age 15. Now, it wasn't just between God and me. My commitment was expressed in the presence of witnesses, supportive church members.

Since then, I've realised that to follow Jesus is much more a path of deep inner peace and joy. I no longer worry about hell at all, and I do not fear death. And, I do not worry at all if the end of the world comes. I look forward to meeting Jesus. I know deep down, that I am in God's hands. Nothing will happen to me beyond what God can lead me through. God might not stop me from having a horrible experience someday, but I believe that God will help me find a way to continue beyond whatever happens. I admit that I haven't experienced tragedy, war or terrible difficulties. So, it's possible I may change my feeling, and worry more. I do know that I tend to avoid challenges or discomfort, and I often try to have control over as much as possible before stepping into the unknown. I know I often worry about making mistakes. This often causes me to take too long to make decisions.

Connected with this, I've often wondered, "How do we know and follow God's will?" I decided that prayer, Bible reading, and conversations about our faith with other believers all help us to see God's will more clearly. But, it's not always easy to figure out the way forward. At one point, I remember deciding that it's possibly better to fail at something while walking in faith than to not make any mistakes but be walking without faith. My tendency has been to work too hard at avoiding mistakes, sometimes even to the point of avoiding making decisions so that there will be less chance of me making a bad decision. I guess the problem with that is, sometimes by not deciding, we are actually making a decision to keep things as they are. And, sometimes that is a mistake!

After serving as pastor, here at MJCF for seven or eight years, Rie and I felt it was time for a Sabbatical. In order for pastors to keep healthy, it's recommended that they take one year off every seven years, in order for renewal. This is good for both the pastor and the congregation. Of course the length of time away, as well as when it happens is flexible. It's now over 13 years since Rie and I began serving here. It just never seemed to be the right time to go on Sabbatical. Now, we have been sensing God's call to return to Japan. Although we don't yet know exactly when we'd be able to move, we feel God leading us to prepare. A big part of preparing is praying about the future of MJCF. Since our worship has been online for over a year, we now see that we could continue to be involved in our worship services, from Japan. God has blessed us in our online worship. At the same time, we are

praying that more people will be able to attend in person as we combine with online worship. We are also praying about future leadership, and trust that God is leading us. God has led us this far, and I have much hope for the future possibilities.

Talking about trust, I've often only taken new steps and made new decisions once everything has been figured out, or at least after someone has invited me such as years ago when Pastor Yoshiyuki asked us to consider moving from Japan to Canada in order to serve here. Now, I'm trying to trust God and take steps before everything is figured out. Rie once told me she believes that sometimes we may have to let go of something before God gives us a vision of the next step. I believe she's right. As part of letting go, I've completed my work at Emmanuel church in Abbotsford. It has been a blessing to work there as music coordinator for 11 years. It really felt that God not only provided a stable income, God also led me to work with many talented musicians, and see people of all ages using their gifts. I worked together with five other staff members whom were all very easy to get along with. Working with Pastor April Yamasaki was inspirational. She was a great listener and always encouraging. Many pastors do not get an opportunity to hear a message from someone else because they are too busy preaching each week. At Emmanuel, I had the privilege of regularly hearing messages that gave me energy and new inspiration. I was not only organizing music, I was also free to expand and try and learn new things, such as running the sound system. It really felt like a gift from God, but I now sense that God is calling me to take a new step into the unknown. In letting go of the Emmanuel work, I'll have more time to get ready for moving someday, and time to focus on our future vision as a church.

For years, I've been praying to God for clarity of vision. But, the other day, I read something that changed my perspective. It's from a book, "The Sin of Certainty."(p.169)

In 1975 the Jesuit philosopher John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at the Home for the Dying in Calcutta, India, with Mother Teresa. He was searching for an answer to his spiritual struggles. On his very first morning there, he met Mother Teresa.

"And what can I do for you?" she asked.

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

"What do you want me to pray for?" she asked.

He answered with what [he likely] felt was a perfectly reasonable and humble request, in fact the very reason for which he had traveled thousands of miles to India in the first place: "Pray that I have clarity."

"No. I will not do that."

Kavanaugh asked her why.

"Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must get rid of."

"But you always seem to have clarity."

Mother Teresa laughed. "I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

That's a story I needed to hear. Can I trust God even when I don't see clearly the next steps of God's leading? I think I'm learning to give more control over to God. I still have a long way to go, though. But, I notice that the more I try to control things myself, the more fear I have of making mistakes. So, as I let go of control and learn to trust in God more, I believe my fears will be reduced, knowing that I'm putting more and more into God's hands. I pray we'll all continue to trust in God more and more deeply. Amen.