

New Year's Message for 2023
Mennonite Japanese Church, Vancouver

Strengthening the inner being, rooted in God's love

Happy New Year, everyone! It has been three full years since the start of the Covid19 disaster, and I thank God that we have persevered and made it this far. We at MJCF have seen a great change with the arrival of Pastor Gerald and Mrs. Rie to Japan in November 2021. Immediately after that we celebrated New Year's Day 2022. At that time, it was my turn to deliver the New Year's message, which was the story of the five loaves and two fish from the Gospel of John chapter 6. It was lonely at that time because only Miwako san, Yuko san and Sanae san were in the church hall. When I saw this lonely scene through the ZOOM, I thought to myself, "I remember that somewhere in the Bible," and immediately remembered the miracle of 'Five loaves of bread and two fish'. I looked up to Jesus and realized that the miracle of feeding over 5,000 people could be exactly what our church is all about. I think all of us prayed that this would happen. In December 2022, about 35 people attended Sanae's Christmas dinner for children's evangelism. I saw a picture of this scene and pictured Jesus blessing the 'five loaves and two fish'. I realized and thanked God that He had heard what we had prayed for in the New Year and now we see that it was a great blessing.

So I was praying about what message is really needed for our church in this year 2023. The thought that was given to me as I prayed was 'growth'. Last year I was praying for 'survival or keeping' rather than 'growth', but God has blessed us a lot and raised up our church. This year, we are God's children, so we want God to raise us up again and be His great joy.

Ephesians 3:16-17, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you are being rooted and established in love."

This Word describes the joint work of the Father, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, and **all** of us. God the Father leads and blesses us according to His abundant glory. He strengthens our inner being by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes us rejoice in our faith and allows Jesus Christ to dwell in our hearts. Through this joint work we become rooted in love and stand in love. In these short words we find the key to our spiritual growth. The Bible says we have an 'inner being'.

I am healthy physically, but there are times when my heart melts like a candle and I lose my strength, such as when I receive a fraudulent email or apply for a scholarship on my computer for my kids. How weak I am and how my feelings and willpower were not solidified, especially in the last year. I had many moments like that. How about you? We may not have

the courage to face what we think we are not good at. Every time we do, we want to be stronger. When we first believed in Jesus Christ, we had "faith. This faith was as small as what the Bible calls "mustard seed". But God was pleased with this faith, and from that day on, the Holy Spirit has been making that seed of faith grow. We should be growing more now than when we first believed.

What is the ultimate purpose of God the Father's nurturing us? It is not a large donation or service. God wants us to be rooted in love and to stand in love. So, what is this love? Love is God's love. The goal of our life of faith is to know more of God's love. And by being rooted and standing firm in that love, no matter what trials come our way, we must have an unwavering attitude of love and trust in God. Satan uses various ways to make us doubt that "God doesn't care about you," and eventually leads us away from God.

The other day, an American friend of mine who used to run a travel agency came to Japan for the first time in three years. He told me that he had been living a hard life after his company's business fell under the influence of Covid 19. Besides, his mother had a sudden stroke and his mother-in-law was very old and started to live with him, so he had to take care of them. We are all faced with various trials and tribulations every day, aren't we? The problem of family members is an especially big burden for us.

When these trials come, it is easy for us to doubt God's love. But even at this time we need to remember God's love. We may doubt God's love because we prayed and things did not go as we expected, but we should always return to the starting point where we are already loved. It is that love of the cross, that Jesus Christ died in our place. We were destined to die for our sins, but Jesus Christ died in our place and gave eternal life to those who believe in Him. There is no comparison to this great love. It is not right to complain that we are not loved when we have received this love.

When a small child complains in front of his mother that he didn't get an Ultraman figure at the department store, he says, "You don't buy it because you don't like me! I hate you, mom!" The mom will cry in her heart and she will think. 'I was so full of pain because I gave birth to you three years ago. At that time, I was willing to die in pain for you. How could I not love you?' If our faith is like this child, we need to grow up. Grown Christians are not easily made afraid. They do not doubt God's love. They do not lose their faith when their prayers are not answered. The "inner being of us" should grow daily by the Holy Spirit. This growth will lead to a deeper understanding of God the Father's love.

This is the testimony of a pastor with cerebral palsy. He was born with a high fever and soon afterwards he developed cerebral palsy. He attended church from when he was little, but he always wondered why he was born with disability. When he was in college, one of his friends invited him to a Christian healing service. With high expectations, he asked the pastor in

charge of the healing service to pray for him, but he was not healed of his disability. However, the pastor who prayed for him gave him 2nd Corinthians chapter 12 as an example. The Apostle Paul was such a spiritually excellent apostle that he even experienced going to the third heaven, Paradise. However, he confessed that he had a thorn in his flesh. This thorn must have been painful. He prayed to God three times to make this pain go away. But God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) And God did not heal his thorn.

What do you do when you pray and God does not solve your problem? I was in despair and deep depression after my application for permanent residence was denied and I could no longer live with my mother in Canada. For this reason, I had been doubting God's love for more than 10 years. But what about the Apostle Paul? 'Therefore!' He switched quickly; it didn't take too long. 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (ver 9).' He was determined. God has not answered his request. But God has a plan to use his problems, his thorns, to show His glory. "Therefore! I don't complain about minor inconveniences. Instead, I am proud of my problem!" Wow! The Apostle Paul's confession really shows a mature Christian. Going back to the testimony of the pastor of the paralyzed child, he was not healed of his paralysis at that time, but through Paul's testimony in the Bible, he confessed that his inner being was healed at that time. He is still pastoring and leading many people to Jesus Christ, even though he is now elderly and still suffers from his disability.

Both the apostle Paul and the pastor with cerebral palsy have their inner being firmly rooted in God's love. Now it is our turn. What is the thorn in our side? What is it that makes us doubt God's love? For me, it was my violent father. For about 40 years I prayed that God would do something about this thorn in my side. However, my father's behavior did not change and he ended up divorcing my mother, leaving my family deeply scarred. 'God! Why did you do it? Why doesn't God solve this thorn in my side despite my earnest life of faith and earnest prayers?' I cried out in my heart every day. I am sure that you are also suffering from thorns like Paul. You may be suffering from a chronic illness that can't be healed, or you may tend to anger easily, or you may have family problems. You pray, asking if God could not just solve these problems, right? But God uses these problems and our weaknesses, and we all are thankful that God has a plan.

I also feel that I was taught something important spiritually about my father, who was a thorn in my life. As you have all prayed for me, last year I was reunited with my father for the first time in 18 years, and through his presence as a thorn in my life, I was able to learn about God's forgiving love. I know that not only I, but everyone who prayed for me was happy to learn that forgiveness is God's desire. Forgiveness was not easy. At this time, God gave me a

realization. I had always thought before that God would love people like me who used kind words, had a somewhat self-sacrificing nature, and were polite and within the bounds of common sense. And when I saw people who did not meet these standards, I was comfortable with the idea that God did not love them. However, in the process of forgiving my father this time, amazingly enough, I began to understand God's love a little better. God clearly said to me, "Yoko, I love you, but I also love your father." It was not a physical voice, but it was a voice from my heart as I was praying. I knew that it was clear that it was not my thoughts because I could not love him. But I was surprised that God loves my father. I asked, "Why does God love a person like my father, who is clearly hated by others, clearly hurtful to his family, and still verbally abusive and self-centered?" The answer was, "I died on the cross for your father. I love your father that much." He said, "He is my son, my precious son." I was amazed at this love of God! I was so overwhelmed. My complaints were not valid at all for the fact that my father also received this noble love of the cross. I realized how serious was the sin of the elder brother who failed to understand the father who deeply loved the prodigal son who ran away from home and came back in Luke 15. I realized that brother was me, and through the presence of my father, who had been a thorn in my side for whole my life, I was able to learn, if only a little, about the deep love of God the Father.

I am now still new to the pastoral ministry, and I am learning more and more every day. I am always asked to what extent I love and forgive others like God our Father. This year I pray to know God's love more than ever before. I want to be taught about God's love for me as well as His love for my neighbors. This year, as always, happy things will happen. And sad things may also happen. But as before, the happy things will pass and the sad things will pass. Therefore, I pray that we will not be too happy and arrogant, that we will not be too sad and depressed, and that we will all be strengthened in our inner being and deeply rooted in God's love. I pray that this year 2023 will be a year to be more firmly rooted in this love of God the Father.

Let's pray together.

Our loving Heavenly Father! We thank you for being pleased with our little faith and for nurturing our faith until now. We also thank you that Jesus Christ lives in us by the Holy Spirit. We ask you to guide us through this trial so that we may be strengthened and more and more rooted in God's love, and not be defeated by the many problems we face daily. We thank you and pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.