

Christian Family Sunday: A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

May 10th is Mother's Day. This is the time we honour and celebrate motherhood. Usually we would take our mothers out for a nice dinner, give them beautiful flowers, and say all the nice things about them. But this year is tricky because of the social distancing rules and the concerns of the pandemic. The BC government has just announced a plan to get back to normal, but I am not sure it is soon enough for us to do what we used to do. But this situation may do us good by ways of upsetting our "routines" and forcing us to think deeper about the nature of this occasion. What other ways can we honour our mothers? Why do we do what we do? What is the spirit of this day? At the end of the day, I hope we re-discover what it means to be in a family.

Our team of people would like to expand the scope by not just celebrating mothers, but the ideas of mothering and Christian family. It is inspired by a post in the United Church website where the author gives this day a name called "Christian Family Sunday," and she destines it as a day to "celebrate relationship that enriches and challenges us to live our faith." It seems good to those of us who plan Sunday's videos. In that post, the author says by focusing on Christian Family Sunday, we are by no means belittling or deny the richness of mothering in many of us, but instead focusing on the nature of what it means to be in family, that is relationship. Of course, you may have a different take on the idea. I acknowledge that these ideas aren't identical: "Mothers," "mothering," and "Christian family" are related but each of these attributes or personhoods deserves a different reflection. I get it! Yet, we give it a try for this year precisely because this year is anything but "usual." Together, let's find ways to honour different ways mothering has occurred in our midst, and by all means go further by affirming the importance of family during this time of pandemic crisis. You may visit the article by clicking or typing this link:

<https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/why-christian-family-sunday>

I decide to share a personal story that I have never told in public before. This story sits marginally to the fringe of mothering, but definitely fits in the scope of Christian family in a wider sense. It fits perfectly for Asian Heritage Month!

Many of you know that I have pursued a doctorate at Columbia in New York City. My dissertation mentor was Dr. Mary Boys. She is a sharp scholar in the field of religious education, and she is a Catholic nun. I would not be kidding when I say she is the defining factor why I got a doctorate! (Joke: I used to be a disciple of Mary!) Personally, Dr. Boys is very approachable; but don't be fooled, with her friendly personality one can feel her vigor in academic preciseness. She cares about her students academically and makes sure they succeed. But she also cares about their livelihood.

At one time near the end of my residence, that is before the dissertation writing stage, I was close to running out of cash. As a mentor to my study, she came to know my situation. Dr. Boys was instrumental, with the help of another staff at the school, in helping me move out of the school's dormitory and finding me a "cheaper" place to stay. That "cheaper" place turned out to be a "better" place. For the next few months, I was renting a room from a senior woman with the last name Williams, who happened to be a former Presbyterian missionary to Taiwan. She lived alone in a condo near the school, and she had a room available. She didn't do rental; she didn't need extra income. The result was she rented that room to me in the most economical way possible! I forgot how much; but living in a home-like environment was way better than in a dormitory. Mrs. Williams loved Taiwan! We often had good chats about many things.

Another good thing my mentor did to me was assigning me the role of a Teaching Assistant. Usually, that shouldn't surprise anyone because often professors hire students to be TAs. What was unusual was Dr. Boys' courses didn't need TAs! It was just her way to give me money. (That is how I got a US Social Security number!) She assigned me to do things like copying that she could do it herself! She even sent me to the Electronic Document Department of Columbia University to touch some fascinating machines and learn some interesting skills!

When that was not enough, she would literally pay for my meals. This is an embarrassing story! It was during Lunar New Year when she gave me a red pocket. It was the customary act for Chinese during that time. I didn't expect one from her! Inside the red pocket had no money; instead, a business card of a Chinese restaurant close to the school where I often went for dinner. At the back of the card was an amount of money written on it. What Dr. Boys had done was she

prepaid my meals. All I need to do was to present that card after a meal, and then left the restaurant free! To be honest, I wasn't ready to receive such kindness. I have been westernized in big ways, but still a Chinese who cares about face. For a couple of weeks, I didn't use it. I thought of returning the card to her and just thank her. At the end, all I needed to do, and I did was to let go of my ego, went to the restaurant, and showed the clerk that card after a meal. After the first time was done with much courage, the rest was history!

Life is an unexpected journey. On this day when we celebrate what it means to be in family, these two lovely women, one is still teaching, and the other one may have entered a better place, come close to my mind. Their lovely acts of kindness and hospitality speaks loudly what Christian Family Sunday is about. Although not related by blood, we are related by the love of the Divine and the call to serve one another.

“Today, dear God, whether I understand it all or not, help me be who you sent me to be. If there's somewhere you want me to go, someone who needs me, some word you want me to speak, shine your light on my path now. With your help, I could be your messenger one more day. Amen.”

- *Morning Prayer* by Rev. Nancy Vernon Kelly, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario