

To My Church Family

September, 2016

Dear brothers and sisters,

Are you afraid of getting a phone call in the middle of the night? I used to get happy news over the phone but now that I am getting on in years, I keep getting news of family and friends passing. One day the phone rang in the middle of the night. I knew it was probably bad news. I was right! The phone call was from Hawaii. "Grandma" Liu's daughter informed me that her mother passed away two days ago. "Grandma" Liu was ninety-three. Her health had not been good in the last few years. She was hospitalized for kidney failure on Saturday and passed away two days later. "Grandma" Liu's daughter said, "The doctor wanted mom to receive dialysis treatment but she firmly said 'no'. She said she was ready to see her heavenly Father, and at her age she did not want any more pain. So, she passed." I turned to tell my wife the news and before I could say a few words, I broke down. "Grandma" Liu was gone and I would never hear her voice again when I dialed that familiar Hawaiian number.

I first met "Grandma" Liu when I arrived in Hawaii to start my job. That year, I just graduated from Nyack College/Alliance Theological Seminary in New York. I accept an offer from the Honolulu Chinese Church to be their pastor. It had always been my practice to decide whether to accept a pastoral position based on my burden for the church. I would never ask how much they were paying me. After my arrival I found out that the meager salary was not enough to live on. Prices in Hawaii were high and rents were exorbitant. I could only find shelter in a storeroom behind the decrepit church office. That small room was not fit for human habitation. At that time my wife was still in New Jersey trying to sell our house and taking care of our daughter's college application. I could not imagine how the two of us would live after she joined me since I could not even meet my immediate needs. After a few days, a miracle happened. An old lady came to the church office and the secretary introduced me to "Grandma" Liu. She came to church to find me that day to ask me if I would consider moving to her house for \$350 room and board included. I thought I misheard her. The old lady explained that she always considered helping preachers as a blessing from God. Moreover, her daughter got married years ago and her son had a family of his own. Left all alone in her seventies, she did not want her house to be too empty and desolate. And that was how I came to live in her house for a year.

Honolulu is called "Paradise Island" but in actual fact is not like paradise in the least. All prices are inflated and this little island has not much to offer. The scenery is beautiful of course but driving around the island only takes two hours. Honolulu island is surrounded by the ocean and after living there for a while one would have the lonely feeling of being isolated from the world. The weather is hot and humid and the place is overrun by creatures such as snakes, bugs, rats and ants. One of the creepy crawlies is the large cockroach--- the bane of my existence. "Grandma" Liu lived in a rundown wooden house at the end of a path on a little hill. There were lots of trees and large amounts of trash, only surpassed by the clutter inside and outside the house. On the side of the path was a white retaining wall as tall as a man. The wall became a brown black color at dusk, completely covered by large cockroaches called "strawberries" by the locals. It was as horrible as you can imagine. These cockroaches could fly and bite. I had to pass this wall on my way home every evening. Walking on the cement covered by crawling cockroaches, I could not help treading on them. The popping sound was nauseating. At night, I would boil a pan of hot water in the kitchen, turn off the light and wait quietly for five minutes. When the light came back on suddenly, one could see the kitchen sink completely covered with large crawling cockroaches. The whole pan of boiling water was then poured into the sink. Batch after stinking batch was "cooked" seemingly without end. There were also rats rampant everywhere. Winged termites flew all over the house. When I returned home late at night I would hide in the haven of my room. I usually met "Grandma" Liu at the breakfast table and came to know what a hard life she had.

"Grandma" Liu had an unhappy marriage early in life. She was actually doing very well when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. With bombs exploding everywhere her friends advised her to find a husband as soon as possible to be on the safe side. She really entered into a hasty marriage with the owner of a noodles factory introduced by a friend. Unfortunately, her husband turned out to be an alcoholic and died a few years after two children were born. "Grandma" Liu remained a widow, bringing up her two children. After they were grown, each got married and left her alone. Not long afterwards, the noodles factory had to close down because the employees made trouble. "Grandma" Liu stayed in the house and went on with her life. Later, she accepted

Jesus and her perspective on life changed: she put her past troubles out of her mind and concentrated on helping those in need. “Grandma” Liu prepared bouquets for newcomers at church, took part in welcoming college students and made Hong Kong style soup (which took hours) for the students. In Hong Kong, the older generation swears by Hong Kong style soup as extremely nutritious. I remember this soup was mentioned by the late film star Roy Chiao in a heartwarming incident of an old movie. A mother spent hours making soup for her son, but her son did not appreciate her efforts and turned away to pour the soup down a flower pot when his mother was not looking. When Roy saw it he advised the young man not to do that. The young fellow defended himself by saying that after being cooked for hours all the nutrients in the soup were gone and consuming it had no benefit. Roy said. “Young man, when you drink Hong Kong style soup you are not consuming its nutrients, but its love and affection!” “Grandma” Liu took the love and affection of God and put them into nutritious soup she made for college students who were complete strangers to her. Brimming with gratitude, they affectionately called her “grandma”. During those years, evangelistic work among students flourished in the Honolulu church. The unsung heroes behind the very effective ministry were people like “Grandma” Liu.

I will never forget how “Grandma” Liu took care of me like a mother during the time I served in the Honolulu church, whether I was staying with her, or subsequently living in a newer apartment. She did not just take care of me. The other pastors and church members in need also enjoyed her care. I remember once a friend brought her some fresh fan-shaped shark fins from Fiji---an expensive delicacy. She spent two weeks cleaning the fins, hanging them up to dry under the sun and then prepared an authentic shark fin feast to treat many pastors and elders of the church. That was the first time I tasted shark fin that was not shredded but whole. Frankly speaking, I think fresh shark fin has a strong fishy smell which not even the soup-stock could hide. It was not tasty at all. However, just like Hong Kong style soup which took hours to prepare, we were not tasting the shark fin but the old lady’s love and affection which warmed our hearts. Many years later, when my daughter graduated from college, “Grandma” Liu made a special trip to the East coast for the occasion. At my grandchild’s month-old celebration, “Grandma” Liu gave the baby a cherished American gold coin as a traditional “lucky gift”. We will never forget her love and kindness.

I still remember watching a live broadcast of Mother Teresa’s memorial service on television. Over the casket hung a white cloth banner: “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” The Gospels foretell that when the monarch of the heavenly Kingdom returns, He will separate those who really belong to Him and those who are Christians in name only. The criterion will not be anything great in the sight of men; it will be whether a person has lived out his faith: giving a cup of water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless and warmth to someone in distress. I don’t know what Scripture was used in “Grandma” Liu’s memorial service. I only know that in God’s love, she took care of one of Jesus’ little ones. Rest in peace, “Grandma” Liu. See you again in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Your family in Christ,

Pastor Calvin Tran