

**August 13, 2017:**

## **Life Lessons From Mission: Life is Hard, Life is Good**



If you were here last week in worship, you got to hear reflections from this year's ASP mission team. They all did a great job sharing the highlights from the trip, and a bit about what it meant to them. On the drive home from Kentucky last month, I got to share a car with Charlie Foster and we got talking about the various things we've learned from mission trips, this year and in years past. We joked that it would take more than a single service to do them justice... they could be sermon series of their own – lessons learned on the worksite applied to real life and faith. What started out as a simple car conversation morphed into this month's worship series, "Life Lessons from Mission" where we'll delve into some of the stories and lessons learned from mission trips of the past.

This week's theme – "Life is Hard, Life is Good" came from various conversations and reflections from our work site this summer. One of our youth, particularly in the first few days of the trip seemed to be having a hard time. On the morning we left, she overslept and woke in a mad scramble to get to the church, forgetting several important items for the trip, you know... pillow, blanket, towel, etc. Even after picking them up at the store later that day, the ordeal had thrown her off kilter. During those first few days of mission, we repeatedly heard her say, "Life is Hard" as if her entire focus was on how things kept going wrong for her, almost as if life was out to get her. After hearing this phrase one too many times, I responded, "yeah, life is hard, but it's also good! It's a matter of what you focus on that determines how you respond to life's challenges." The conversation continued from there, and soon, our worksite picked up the mantra, "Life is hard, but life is good!"

I'm sure most of us have seen the "Life is Good" t-shirts and hats... the logo that promotes optimism and blue skies thinking. While that is a great way to stay happy, always thinking, "Life is good, life is good, life is good!" - life is a challenge sometimes! It doesn't always feel good – sometimes it's hard, painful, and heartbreaking! And that's just real... Too many of us know the hard realities of life to pretend any different: the battles against cancer and various other diseases, the struggle of poverty, the pain of loss and mourning, the weight of depression, the devastation war leaves on the soul, the injustice of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and a multitude of other everyday challenges we face. To say only, "Life is Good" is like covering over the bad and pretending it doesn't exist.

It would be like me not even mentioning what happened in Charlottesville yesterday. How the racist underbelly of our country was exposed as white nationalist and other right-wing groups gathered for a "Unite the Right" rally, spewing hatred and white supremacy. Imagine how false it would seem if I came to worship this morning wearing a "Life is Good" t-shirt... Life is not only good... sometimes life is hard and ugly and full of heartbreak.

At the same time, if we were to flip that and spend our days only saying, "Life is Hard!" that's not the complete truth either. Even on the hardest of days, we can find the good. People who come around us with love and support right when we need it the most, the gentle nudge of the Spirit that opens us to a new opportunity or a change of perspective, the love of God that reminds us that no matter how bad things get, God's love remains. Good in the midst of bad looks like anti-racism protestors assembling in peaceful resistance to the expression of racism and hate. Even when life is hard, it doesn't negate the truth that life is ALSO good.

Halfway through our work week in Appalachia, Cara- who began the week focusing only on the bad was able to open her mind to other perspectives. Wednesday, was a particularly hot day working outside underpinning the trailer and by the afternoon, the sun had shifted so the back yard was in direct sunlight. We had been making good progress on the framing for the soffit and the next step was to dig out a 2 inch trench all the way around the base of the trailer... of course the back was first --- so while the members of our team were working on other tasks around the work site, Cara took it upon herself to work on the trench. Needless to say, this was hot, sweaty work – hard work – and as Cara told us later, she kept going when all she wanted to do was quit and collapse in the shade by giving herself a pep talk. Each time she drove the shovel down, she alternated between the two phrases of our motto... “Life is hard... but life is good” “Life is good... but life is hard.” On and on she went, resting when needed, until the remainder of the trench in the back of the trailer was completed.

The attitude we have when facing the challenges of life – whether big or small – impacts how our spirits will fair when the going gets tough. In the car that same day, Kathy Hackler shared a conversation she had via text message with a good friend who’d just undergone bone marrow transplant the day prior. Before her battle with leukemia, her friend Terri had worked on road construction teams – so she knew something about working through the heat of the day. When Kathy texted “I don’t know how you work out in the hot sun all day!” Terri replied, “Sounds like you’re having a great time!” To which Kathy responded back, “Great time – roasting!” And received the reply, “Sounds like fun. Wish I as there.” As we drove back to the ASP center, each of us soaked through with sweat, exhausted from a long, hot day of work, we gave thanks for our health and the ability to participate in the mission trip at all. The work we were doing was hard, and not always super fun, but still it was good! We were using what we had and giving what we could to help make the lives of others better.

When I read deeper into the scripture chosen to go with our theme today, I read Paul’s words of encouragement and trust in God, even amid chaos and struggle. He acknowledges that the Corinthians’ lives are not easy, but that in the midst of the pain, God is there with them and will bring good out of the situation. And not only will they make it through this hard time, but the experience will prepare them to help others in the future. Paul is saying, “Yes, I know that life is hard right now, that you are living amid persecution... That it is not easy to remain faithful and hopeful, but hear this. God will use you, will use this situation to bring good. It might take time, much more time than we would like, but God WILL use this for good.”

As important as it is for us to hold together the truths of “Life is Hard, and Life is Good,” we need to remember that it is about more than just US and our own experiences and emotions; it is about how our lives impact the world around us. How we are called to walk with those in need... to be the good in the lives of others. In our own nation, people are being persecuted for the color of their skin rather than the content of their character or their system of beliefs, and we have to choose how we will respond. I celebrate the peaceful activists who would not be silent in the face of hate. And for those of us watching these events unfold, simply condemning the violence and hate of today is not enough. It’s not enough for us to sit back with a defeatist attitude and say, “Life is hard.” We need to stand up and be the good, to be the force that God uses to bring good from the bad.

It is up to us to do more than just look upon the violence and hate on display in Virginia with disapproval. There is serious work to do in our nation from addressing the growing hate and hate crimes in the United States to dealing with persistent systemic injustices in our criminal justice system. Condemnation is expected. Anger is understood. But only action, work, sacrifice and struggle will yield progress. The focus should not just be about what “they” did in Charlottesville, but what we will do where we are to advance our nation toward greater justice.

I agree with Martin Luther King that only light can drive out darkness and believe that love can indeed conquer hate. But love is not passive. Love doesn't just sit back and hope that things will change. Love demands us confronting our own ignorance or complicity in injustice or our own biases and humbly working to change ourselves and our community. Love is courageous and relentless and it is indeed what our nation needs now. May we all rise to show the world that even when life is hard, life is good when we work together toward love and justice. May it be so.