

August 20, 2017:

Life Lessons From Mission: You Never Know What You're Gonna Get



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Last week, we kicked off a sermon series called "Life Lessons from Mission" where we'll be reflecting on some of the lessons learned on the worksite applied to everyday life and faith. Our series opened by delving into the phrases, "Life is Hard" and "Life is Good" and the recognition that both are true and we need to hold both together. When we hit a time of struggle, it's helpful to remember the blessings always surrounding us. When the sun is shining brightly, take time to look around and see who might need a helping hand. And always, remember that God is with us through it

Today, our theme feels a little like Forest Gump and his box of chocolates... "You never know what you're going to get." The first day of our mission trip, after arriving at the host site for the Appalachian Service Project, the leaders from each work team are taken to the homes to meet the families and shown (very briefly) the scope of the work they'll be expected to complete during the week. Tasks are outlined and plans are made for how to accomplish the job in the time allotted. Come Monday morning, the rubber starts to hit the road as projects are begun and reality sets in. You see, on Sunday night, a flooring project might seem pretty basic... that is until Monday comes and you begin lifting the existing sub-floor, only to discover 3 more layers of rotting flooring beneath. Or you discover that a wall you've been tasked with drywalling has a rotten log at the base – a serious problem that needs to be remedied before the wall can be sealed off.

The scope of the work suddenly changes and the team leader has a choice to make... should we move forward with the original plan or allow it to change? We could pretend we didn't see those other layers of flooring... or say, "Hey, someone else just covered over them once before... yes, that's what caused the floor to rot out in the first place, but, at least it'll be fixed for a little while!" Being willing to change plans, to be flexible, is not always easy! After all, what are plans for but to guide us in the future. So we know where we are going, how we're getting there, and how long it'll take us.

Our scripture from James talks a bit about this plan making, and more particularly, where we allow God IN as we live our plans out. In the 4th chapter of James, verses 13-15, we hear, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'" How can the person James is referring to be truly sure things will work out just as they were planned? What happens if a family tragedy strikes overnight, will they still leave tomorrow? And what if the road they were to travel on was blocked indefinitely with no option for a detour? And while it's well and good to plan to spend a year in this new place, it's always possible that something might cut into their plans? The plan even assumes a profit will be made, but what if the business goes belly up and they lose everything they have? Plans, as good and healthy as they are, present challenges – particularly when life doesn't go according to plan.

"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears and then vanishes." A mist is unpredictable, uncertain and uncontrollable. And as much as we hate to admit it, so are our lives. No one knows exactly what is going to happen tomorrow, let alone next year. We hope and dream, and yes, plan, but despite all that, we still cannot be sure. Does this mean then that we shouldn't plan? That we should just throw our hands up and say, Que sera sera! Whatever will be will be!

Why bother planning at all if we can't control the outcome? ---- No. That's not what I'm saying and I don't believe that's what James is saying either. "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'" Prefacing plans (whether in your head or in your words) with "If the Lord wishes," does two things... it plants a seed of flexibility and it invites God into the planning process. A simple "God willing" helps us remember to plan with God's desires in mind, and to remember that we are not god.

At the same time, I have to admit that I struggle with that phrase "God willing" and how people use it. We can't pretend to know God's will, or even the way God works in our lives and the greater world. When we talk about God's will we start to make assumptions about God's desires and actions. For example, when I was in high school and a friend died in a car accident, and I remember someone saying, "It was God's will." Really? That phrase irks me as much now as it did then... that means my God, the one I know as a God of love, WANTED her to die, WANTED her family to mourn the loss of their teenage daughter, WANTED each of her friends to know the painful realities of life and death. That is something I don't believe. I don't believe that God MAKES or WANTS tragedies to happen. I believe that God has blessed us with free will and that sometimes our poor choices have impacts in our lives and the lives of others around us. And those things not impacted by our actions, like earthquakes and other natural disasters, I don't have an answer for all the whys, but rather than blaming God for these tragedies, I believe God is right beside us, mourning with us at the loss and destruction of life and creation.

For me, the phrase, "God willing" should mean more than "it'll happen if God lets it happen"... rather, it means that our planning and dreaming should line up with God's desires, or what we believe them to be - that we live out the love of God in our actions and even in our planning. As the phrase, "what would Jesus do?" challenges us to contemplate Jesus's desires and choices, saying "God willing" should open a space to reflect on whether God would really want our plans to come to fruition.

What does that look like in reality? On our mission trip, it looked like Mark Hackler persuading the ASP staff to give them the tools necessary to jack up the house enough to remove the rotten log at the base of the exterior wall of the log cabin. Did this make their job more challenging - infinitely so! But they couldn't proceed with their original plans in good conscience, knowing they were simply covering over a problem rather than fixing it. The same was true for Jim and Greg's work site, removing each layer of rotten flooring, including the original particle board which caused the rotting floors in the first place was not part of the original plan, but plans were adapted to do the job right. In their case, if they had said on Sunday night, "God willing, we'll complete laying the new laminate floor by Friday," their inability to complete the original task would have meant more than "well, God must not have wanted us to finish the project", but instead, "God would want us to do our best, to the best of our abilities - so we took the time to do it right and well, which meant it didn't get 100% completed."

Saying "God willing" as we plan means we invite God in, not only in the planning process, but also how our plans are lived out, and perhaps especially how we are flexible when things don't go the way we had hoped or expected. You know, we NEVER know exactly what to expect, and life IS like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get. But when we plan with God in mind and heart, and live into our plans with a spirit of flexibility, trusting that God can use our gifts and talents to do good in the lives of others, that's when our most faithful work happens. In this space, whether we see our plans through to fruition, or they shift and adapt as they need, we know that God is in it with us. So, no matter what plans you are currently creating or living out, don't forget to invite God in... into the planning, into the execution, and always be flexible so that God can continue to bring out the best in you and in your plans. Amen.