

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Having a Plan”

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Reverend Art Ritter

#### **James 3:13**

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.*

#### **James 4: 3, 7-8**

*<sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*

*<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

#### **Mark 9:30-37**

*30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*

*33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’*

When I was a teenager, my family decided to take a weeklong camping trip through Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. I’m not sure anyone really wanted to go on this trip but me. My father hated being away from home for more than one night. My mother hated camping altogether. My brother had a great paying summer job that he didn’t want to leave. And my sister had a boyfriend that she wanted to take with us. But because this trip held the possibility of being our last family vacation, everyone

agreed to go. Because of my enthusiasm, I was placed in charge of planning the trip. I asked each person in the family to submit two things they wanted to see or do on the trip and developed an itinerary. I broke up the labors of the day; driving and cooking and putting up and taking down the tent and created a work schedule. I typed out a personal list for each family member, letting them know where we would be and what we would be doing each hour of our wonderful trip.

My planning was a disaster. How was I to know that the campground I chose to use on the first night of our trip would be full? How could I have guessed that my brother did not want to visit the world's largest milk bottle or even the first roadside picnic table? How could I have projected that my sister would not want to experience bats swooping near her hair on the underground tour of the iron mine? How could I have anticipated rain throughout the bulk of our travel? How could I have been blamed for my mother treating us like Girl Scouts every time we put up or took down the tent, my sister always looking for a pay phone, my father being homesick, and my brother complaining about everyone else's driving? No one seemed to like my plans. Perhaps I shouldn't have had things planned so precisely. My plans got in the way of reality. In fact to this day, everyone in my family blames my plans for the disaster that was our last vacation together.

I heard a story this week of a young woman expecting a baby next spring. Her work supervisor wanted to know what day the baby was supposed to arrive, in order to prepare plans for work coverage. But then the supervisor went one step further. He wanted to know the date when complications from the arrival might begin that would require the expectant mother to take time off work. He wanted to plan for those contingencies also.

William Willimon writes of bringing in a consultant to work with his church in developing some long range planning. The consultant, who happened to be a businessman, said, "In business, long-range planning is dead." This came a quite a shock to the minister and to the congregation. They believed a lack of planning implied a lack of vision and a lack of organization. The businessman continued, "We did not even know that the Berlin Wall was coming down. Nobody planned for that! Things are moving too fast. The future is too unpredictable. The trouble is if a business goes through all of the effort to come up with a long-range plan, people come to love the plan more than they love the results. They just keep following and sticking with the plan, despite the results."

From time to time, people will say that they believe that God has a plan for their lives. I accept this as a statement of one's faith in God hand in the actions of their life. In most cases people will use the statement when they reflect upon a difficult decision they have to make or have decided to make. They like to think that their decision is made on the basis of God's plan for them. God has a plan for our education. God has a plan for our work. God has a plan for our life partner. In whatever comes our way, God's plan is being worked out.

I took the liberty of googling "God's plan" this week. It appears that God is busy organizing a lot of things. God has a plan for our salvation, for a successful church, for running a family, for meeting a spouse, for keeping a marriage alive, and for providing each and every one of financial freedom. I even recalled many years ago when a woman ended a relationship with me with these words, "I don't think it is in God's plan

for us to be together.” She said it so sincerely at the time, I couldn’t argue, although I wasn’t particularly happy with God for such a plan.

Perhaps we talk about God’s plan when we are simply puzzled by the great mysteries of life. We find consolation in believing that there is some larger purpose that is fulfilled when our plans and schemes get frustrated. In the chaos that is our world today, we are comforted to think that God really does have a plan. This kind of thinking allows God a little space in our lives. We must admit that it is good to occasionally humble ourselves and admit that God is sovereign. It implies that life comes from God and that life is about more than just yourself.

But sometimes the belief that God has a plan can be a detriment to our faith. It might make us fearful, wanting to be very careful about each and every step of life, not moving forward until we are totally certain that we are doing what God wants us to do. We can’t make a decision until we have checked the plan to see if it fits or not. Or believing in God’s plan might make us feel something akin to puppets. God is up there, pulling the strings that keep us moving in accordance to the script that has been written for our life. There is very little that we can do to change the outcome. Our fate is determined. And finally, talk of God’s plan can stifle God. If the drama that is human life is already written, then where is there room for God to act and to interact and where is there room for God’s people to make a difference in the building of the Kingdom?

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus’ disciples appear to understand what God’s plan is for them. They are planning on following Jesus to success and greatness. They were comparing salaries and education, worship attendance and size of budgets. They were talking about measureable outcomes. That is the way they understood life as it was supposed to be according to the plan. Then Jesus brings forward a child and teaches them that discipleship is looking at things in a new, fresh, and perhaps unplanned way. Children are more spontaneous about all things, including faith. Jesus taught that faith is not so much about following a plan that you perceive to be from God but being in a relationship with God, trusting and learning, sharing and growing. Things that appear to be of no consequence in your plan have great importance in vision of the Lord.

The epistle lesson from James speaks of the two paths that we might follow in life. One path is that of human wisdom, of accomplishment and achievement that leads to envy, selfishness, and conflict. The other path is that of heavenly wisdom, that which is humble, merciful, and kind. One path seeks to build success by following a predetermined personal plan, step by step. The other path seeks to find God’s way in the midst of living with others.

I was reading a blog this week by Michael Hyatt, a Christian businessman. Hyatt advocates the creation of a “Life Plan,” so that we can all intentionally live our lives with purpose each and every minute. Hyatt argues that the best way to construct a “life plan” is to visualize our own funeral and what we would like to have people say about us. In the blog however there was some constructive criticism given by someone named Andy Stanley. Stanley wasn’t as excited about making life plans as he was about living with a life vision. “Plans often change but the vision should remain the same....You should be stubborn in maintaining your vision but flexible in adjusting the plan.” Stanley quoted Dwight Eisenhower who once said, “In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless but planning is indispensable.”

William Willimon writes that “It is not so important for us to love God’s plan. The important thing is for us to love God. Loving this God means that we love a God who is alive, active, and infinitely resourceful ultimately in getting what God wants. God didn’t give us a plan, God gave us Jesus Christ.”

Cyclist Lance Armstrong’s autobiography is entitled “It’s Not About the Bike.” The not-so-subtle message is that in any race it is not the equipment that provides victory, but the rider or the racer, and the determination and trust and faith of that rider. It could be that in living the life of faith, it is not about the plan of God. It is about the relationship with God that encourages us to be a part of what it is that God seeks in every single word and deed.

Perhaps what Jesus was teaching and what the letter of James suggests is that there is more to God’s idea of plan than our limited human ideas. God’s plan is not a book of step by step instructions or a series of hoops through which faithful disciples must jump. God desires something more for us than the right partner or the correct vocation. God’s desire is for us to be in relationship with God today, tomorrow, and forever. God’s wants us to change eternity through what we do in this very hour. Discipleship then is not so much determining the certainty of the plan as it is in recognizing God’s hand in the planning.