Dear Family and Friends,

January 7, 2017

Our vision is beginning to clarify in Ushpabamba. When we first came here, we both knew that building relationships was our first goal as a requisite to establishing a church. Those relationships are beginning to become a reality. Our main friends consist of two families that we spend time with regularly. Max and his wife, Elsa, technically live in another town, Conchacalla, but it’s so close to Ushpa that we didn't know that it was a different town for a while. They come a few times a week and love studying the Bible with us and praying. Max especially initiates prayer and is excited about having late night prayer meetings (vigils).

Francisco and his wife, Julia, live just up the hill from us. I (Steve) want to tell you about one particular day we spent with Francisco and his wife because it represents what normal life in Ushpa is becoming for us. Friday the 30th dawned a little overcast, but still a very comfortable 60 degrees or so. Temperatures are very hard to guess sometimes. As we prepared breakfast and did some odd jobs around the house, Francisco, Julia, and their two children, Jhon-Anderson and Samanta came by with tools, sacks, and food in hand for a day in their potato fields, which are right next door to our house. They invited us to join them, which I did soon after finishing a job I was engrossed in and had breakfasted. People here rise with the sun, which comes up around 5am, and they’re ready for the day by 6am. Hannah and I get up a little later around 7 or so, which we have to own in order to not feel embarrassed when we are caught eating long after everybody else has been up and started working.

Anyway, the people don’t seem to mind and are very grateful for our help in the fields. We work side by side and are able to talk about life, God, and whatever else comes to mind. I’m a long way from my truck-driving job where I was able to spend the days on the road thinking about Kant's ethics and Hume's skepticism, but these people aren't so far behind. They think too and it's good to have real conversations with plain and healthy country folk. I ask them how to say certain words I hear in Quechua and thus learn little bits at a time as we dig potatoes out of the ground.

Hannah stayed home that day cooking lunch for all of us. When the food was ready, the six of us sat down on our patio where Hannah had set out a table and chairs. As usual, the food was delicious! As the meal came to a close, Francisco started talking about the up's and down's he had had in recent months. Then he looked at me and said, "If you left, I think I would cry. I would miss you very much." In a macho society where men don’t cry, that means something. Hannah and I looked at each other and we knew we were thinking the same thing. "Six months here is nothing!" I told
Francisco and his wife about the original plan to go straight to Santo Tomás when we came from the States and how the church had decided we should stay closer while I went through the ordination process. I told them that the church was our authority and that we had little say in how long we would actually be here in Ushpa. They looked dismal. I then told them that my goal was to not leave until the church here in Ushpa had a local leader who could continue to teach the Bible. I didn't want to leave until the church was established. This town is not only a training ground for me while I get ordained. It is full of hungry people who need the gospel. Fransico’s face lightened and he began talking excitedly about learning to read and then studying the Bible with me. He said that he has felt a desire for years to read so that he could learn the Bible and then teach in the church. His passion moved me.

We are blessed to have these two families with us here. Max’s desire for prayer and Francisco’s desire to learn Scripture tell me very clearly that we have things we can accomplish with the Lord’s help. But we need time! A week later the church session down in Cusco had a meeting where I asked them to please let us stay in Ushpabamba at least a year or until clear goals have been met. Those goals include helping Francisco and his wife learn to read, helping them gain a solid grasp of Scripture, and seeing them established as leaders in the church. Please be praying for us and our church authorities as the months move along. In my conversation with Francisco, I explained that our calling was not to settle down long-term and be pastors of a church. We are church planters and our goal is to raise up the local church with local leaders and then go on to another place that needs to hear about Jesus. Francisco understood that and was happy to hear of the prerequisite goals I have before moving on. It’s not just about getting the church full; this particular church had up to 30 regular attendees at one time. But they all stopped coming as soon as the pastor from Cusco stopped coming to preach. That’s no bueno! If the church ceases to exist as soon as the outside, long-distance teacher stops coming, it was never really established as a church at all. Francisco has expressed a desire to grow spiritually. Please pray that we be given the time it takes to leave him and Max equipped for the ministry here in Ushpabamba.

The World Over--by Hannah
Across land and languages, in valleys or on mountains, in cities or in the country, communities are still made up of grown-ups and children.

Adults sometimes grow tired, running out of words across the cultural barriers, but they can sip hot tea and be united in watching the children play. Soft smiles relax puckered foreheads. The children shriek and giggle as they dash around the room hiding behind curtains, throwing beach balls at each other, and dashing back to the table to sip their own cups of tea.

Here in Ushpabamba, boys play with fire crackers and tussle with the family dogs. Little girls torment the dogs with a little too much affection; they come to their parents with flat rocks and insist they "eat" the sand piled on the "plate." And guess what the Ushpabamba parents do? They go through the motion of eating, smacking their lips, and saying "mmm!"
A little girl gets into the household stash of candy during lunch. The parents scold her to come eat her real food, and she comes, but like lightning crams one last gumdrop into her mouth with a very audible "Oghmm!"

Our little neighbor girl often carries one of several dolls with her, even to the potato fields. Because her dolls are so loved, they are also very dirty. I didn't know she really cared about them until a day she forgot one in our yard (you know how forgotten dolls look; staring at the sky, snarled hair splayed out, arms open as always for a hug), but then her brother came within the hour to retrieve it.

I have seen this same brother, his head bent over a notebook taking great care with the lettering of a page-heading. I hear him sucking on his lips with a little hiss or whispering to himself, just like boys I've seen elsewhere laboring over their fastidious drawings.

And that is a little about children the world over.

Quechua culture in the Chacras (fields)

You see, people may say "in this culture people work really hard from sunup to sundown," "they work like animals..." But think about your American neighbors. Do they all have white picket fences and spend every Sunday watching football? Stereotypes come from somewhere, but they don't apply to everyone.

Since moving to Ushpabamba, we have worked in the fields with three different families. And, big surprise, we've had three different experiences.

The first family had been working for a couple hours already when they came and invited us to join. We helped them plant a field full of little onion starts, and then we went indoors for a cup of oatmeal gruel. Then the men went back to work, harvesting potatoes, while I helped the Mrs. prepare lunch. She is a whizz at peeling potatoes with a knife, rapidly turning the potato in her hand and dropping long curls of potato skin! Then, holding the potato in her palm, she's able to dice it (and later, carrots) with incredible control over the knife. I tried to mimic her, and constantly felt I was about to cut my hand.

After lunch we rested for a while in the sun before we all went to the potato field. These fields can be pretty small, perhaps 1/8 acre, slapped on the side of a mountain. This means you stand below one row, drop your knees against the next row uphill, and you don't have to stoop far to gather the potatoes! The men hoed out the potatoes from their mounds; the women and children sorted and bagged them. It was pleasant work, though a little more grueling for Steve. Then, when the day seemed over, we went and harvested about 100 pounds of giant onions. As the sun lowered in the sky, obscuring the green valleys below, we hurriedly peeled off the ugliest parts of the onion skins. The Mr. expertly twisted a special kind of straw into cords which he used to bind the onions into bunches of 5-7 onions (some being larger than grapefruits). And still the day...
wasn’t over—they slaughtered and dressed a chicken for dinner, so I got to smell a hotly wet chicken for the first time (you dip the dead chicken into boiling water so the feathers can be plucked easily, and a powerful smell of wet animal fills the room).

The second family. They invited us several days in advance to weed a field with them. On the agreed morning, they showed up at our house bright and early with two dressed cuys (guinea pigs) ready to be baked for lunch, leaving them in our kitchen while we went to the field. They brought tea and chicha de jora to the field. Chicha Morada is pretty much the Kool-Aid of Peru: it’s made of boiled purple corn, sugar, and cloves. You can fancy you’re drinking grape Kool-Aid. Chicha de jora is different, and not always so pleasant. It is made of corn juice, slightly fermented, so that it tastes a bit like sweetish sourdough starter. In fact, last summer I used it to start some sourdough! So I was pleasantly surprised by this chicha de jora. It was barely soured, and she had mixed it with chicha morada. It was refreshing, with just a little cider tang.

This family works hard, and also takes good breaks. But I got a sense of anxiety from the husband about his fields and the work being done. His family is not far removed from full-throttle mountain superstition, and I think he sometimes battles fear, perhaps because he knows there is real spiritual activity behind mountain worship.

The third family, a big and humorous family, invited us to harvest habas with them (a wonderful legume, giant green beans that can be used fresh or dry). We had a very entertaining day with them yesterday. We wobbled up the mountain in one of the family buses, parking on a narrow mountain track. We climbed over the hill to their field, where the sister laughed that her brother had forgotten to bring the stove. Brother laughed and said to us that he had remembered the gas tank but forgotten the stove, go figure!

We harvested habas for perhaps half an hour (the older brother constantly joking) and then we took a break to eat watermelon. Then the older brother backed that bus down the mountain to get the stove from their house... of course, we’re referring to a little double-burner unit that some folks use without every buying a conventional stove. (Though they also usually have a clay fireplace stove too, but ovens are rare) The little double-burner unit makes a great camping stove, if you don’t mind hauling along a 25-pound gas tank, too!

So, we went back to harvesting for a while without the older brother, throwing huge plump peapods onto tarps. We’d work a section, then step down a level to the next row, and so on. I started stuffing handfuls of pods into my long shirt so that I wouldn’t have to go back to the tarp as often.

After perhaps an hour, the brother had returned with the stove; the sister disappeared to start cooking lunch, and it began to sprinkle.

I’ve worked in downpours many times before, but the family called me to join them at the summit of the hill; just in time. Just as the real downpour began, we ducked under the little tarps. Like sieves they were! ...and mine smelled like a wet goat. It hailed a little; we laughed and groaned through ten minutes of downpour. Big brother ran down to the bus to get a big sheet of plastic, coming back soaked, of course. But Steve and I were soaked too, in spite of our little tarps. This whole time,
sister was sitting cross-legged by the stove, guarding it with an umbrella. She was boiling a pot of potatoes and hardboiling eggs over the top simultaneously. One was broken; its spilled contents had cooked white. The boiling pot produced brown foam which she kept skimming off with the aluminum lid.

When the rain let up, big brother gathered up everything he could carry and headed for the bus. Steve and I folded up the tarp and waited with sister for the potatoes to soften. We descended to the bus, where the other family bus had joined and parked parallel, there on the narrow mountain track. We all clambered onto the smaller bus, where Mama and her other two sons were waiting with boiled corn, lots of fresh cheese, and pork. She tutted over my wet shirt and had me stuff a shawl inside my shirt and put on a dry sweater. Then we began to eat.

The jokes continued, the family teased each other in rapidfire Quechua. Handfuls of potato peels were tossed at a lid on the worn plywood floor; bones were thrown out the door at our dog Ushie, who carried them away and immediately came begging for more, strange little dog! And we just kept eating potatoes and cheese! Finally--finally--wait, no, there were still capulí fruits to eat (halfway between a cherry and a cranberry?) and cups of KR cola to pass around.

While we ate, the sun had come out, and we rested from our labor of eating in that sunshine. Big brother bellowed something teasing about a burro at a neighbor family half a mile across the valley, who were lugging their harvest uphill to their van, and a burro was helping too. This brother is always showing that he knows everybody, and is on good terms with them, by calling out rude remarks to them, even across a valley.

I'm not sure whether we meant to go back to work again or not, but the rain started again, so we scrambled back onto the buses. Big brother backed that bus a quarter mile down the cliff-hugging track; sister and brother walked behind with...the sheep. The family sheep (which often graze next to our house) had come along for the day, and were now being pushed, pulled, and dragged, down the path. They are like big, smiling, stubborn pillows. When the bus got to the main road, a small luggage compartment was opened and all four smiling sheep were shoved in there together--smiling pillows with mischievously scrambling hooves.

On the main road, of course, our driver would stop and call out something like "¡hola jefe! hey, boss!" or "¡hey, flaquito! hi, skinny dude!" to every passing pedestrian or driver.

The sun shone uncertainly as big brother parked the bus in its usual spot across from our house. "Have the sheep all died?" he asked, as sister and little brother struggled to open the luggage compartment. No, not at all. Smiling, two of them hopped out, while the other two, smiling, resisted getting out. Little brother took up their leashes to stake them in a grassy patch. While he worked at staking one, the other three, in tidy formation, trotted down the curve in the road, looking over their shoulders to see if they were being chased. When they saw they weren't, they paused expectantly, knowing their turn would come and then they could have pleasant times being difficult.

We shook hands with our neighbors. "It's been a pleasure having a very bad day together," said big brother. "Ciao, ciao," we all said.
And so, yes, I could say that everyone I’ve met here does work hard, but in different ways.

**Prayer Requests**

Thank you for taking the time to read our story of life in the Andes. As always, we want to say how blessed we are to have each of you in our lives. Please continue to pray for us as we reach out to this community with the Gospel of our Lord. In spite of the fun we're having getting to know our neighbors, we are not without our struggles. Spiritual warfare is very real and we feel the enemy's resistance. I feel the weight of responsibility to find ways to teach the Bible to people who can't read and I need wisdom. My Uncle Keith calls it "putting the cookies on the bottom shelf." As I try to explain even simple biblical concepts to the people here, I yearn for them to grasp the beauty of the Gospel and to live in its joy.

Please pray as well that in the midst of our activities, we not forget to worship God in everything that we do. It sounds basic, but it is very easy to go through the motions of ministry and forget to really live for God along the way. We covet your prayers that we not lose sight of our real reason for being here: God's glory! Thank you all once again for your support: prayers, encouraging words, and financial support. We are blessed to be surrounded by our long-distance community.

We love you all!

Steve 'n' Hannah Johnson