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**Annie:** Hey friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. It is a special week here on the podcast and we have got a great show in store for you. This week on the show I've passed the microphone over to my good friend Pastor Mike Kelsey. You know Him and love Him.

In addition to being the lead pastor of preaching and culture at McLean Bible Church just outside of Washington, DC and a repeat guest on That Sounds Fun, he's also been a repeat host of the show for the last couple of years. Basically, his heart and his work pastoring and leading in multiethnic environments make him the ideal friend for us to continue to learn from about what it looks like to live out racial reconciliation in an ongoing way.

So I asked Mike if he would host a week of shows again, as he so graciously done before and he graciously agreed. He has crafted these two shows this week, as conversations with friends about the Asian American experience, particularly in regards to racism.

Today, Mike talks with his friend Pastor Mitchel Lee. He's the lead pastor of Grace Community Church, a multi-ethnic church located between Washington, DC and Baltimore. These two amazing pastors are going to dive into Mitchel's experience being an Asian American pastor of a predominantly white megachurch and his journey of racial identity and what dynamics are like between the black and the Asian communities.

I'm telling you all I was blown away when I heard this episode. I know you will be too. So here's the conversation between our host Pastor Mike Kelsey and his dear friend Pastor Mitchel Lee.

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**Mike:** Mitchel Lee, man, it is good to be on here with you, bro. How are you doing, man?

**Mitchel:** Kelsey, man, good. Fall started off well, and it's just fun to be on here with you, man.

**Mike:** Let me introduce you a bit. I know Annie already set you up and gave your real credentials. But the main thing I want people to know is that we're friends and have been friends for a long time in that you and I and two other guys, shout out to Ian and Matt, do a... I don't even know what we call it at this point. But it's a little retreat. It is a little getaway that we do once a year. Want to tell folks about that, man?

**Mitchel:** Yeah. I still remember the first time we did that. I do remember going into that butcher shop and I think you and I think-

**Mike:** It was amazing.

**Mitchel:** ...you and I were the only people of color probably in a 30-mile radius and we were like, "No, y'all go in. Mike and I are gonna go wait in the car." Right?

**Mike:** This was like West Virginia or something. Yeah, yeah.

**Mitchel:** Yes. And we had some good steak though.

**Mike:** There was some good steak.

**Mitchel:** That was amazing. Cut on the same soul. I think as they cut the daily deer harvest, I think, is what they were doing.

**Mike:** I don't know what it was but I've never had steak like that. I know you have because you're a grill connoisseur. But yeah, man. It's been a fun ride, bro. We've been through some different seasons together.

I want to dive into just some questions about your background, personal experience. But for folks who are listening, part of the reason why I'm doing these particular interviews, and this one with Mitchel Lee, is I've had the opportunity... Mitchel and you've listened to some of the episodes. I don't know why Annie keeps inviting me to do this. But I've had the opportunity to almost be a little bit of a tour guide for people just to understand a bit of just the black experience when it comes to race and culture and the intersection of that with faith and the church.

But in my own personal journey, one of the big growth curves for me has been learning more about Asian American culture and the Asian American experience here in the United States and the church. You know, Mitchel, that I pastor at Montgomery County location where my family primarily worships is about 30 plus percent Asian American, mostly Korean and Chinese.

So, man, that has been such a blessing and a gift but it's also pushed me and challenged me. And bro, you've been such a critical voice in my life as I've navigated and grown in these issues. So I want to dive into some of that.

But before I do that, I want to start with the book you wrote, your first book. And I had the opportunity of kind of watching you and praying for you as you were in the

writing process. And it's called *Even If*—and I love the subtitle—*Trusting God When Life Disappoints, Overwhelms, or Just Doesn't Make Sense*.

You could have basically called this book *The Pandemic*. I mean, that just taps what so many of us have walked through over the last couple years. But I wanted to start there because I think it frames so much of your story. And it's based on the story of the three Hebrew boys in Daniel 3. And you pull the principle from that story that forms the basis of your book. And you call it the "even if" declaration. So talk to us about that.

**Mitchel:** Yeah, the "even if" declaration is a declaration that says we worship God for His goodness even if His goodness doesn't show up in our lives the way we think it should or the way we wanted it to. So I really try to pass thoroughly, walk the line of acknowledging pain, hurt, disappointment, broken dreams, dashed expectations. I want to acknowledge those things, but at the same time, we don't want to lose the goodness of God, that God is still at work even in the midst of it.

And the "even if" declaration really came out of my own valley, my own time where I really thought my ministry career was over before it even began. And just feeling like, gosh, all this potential that I was always told I had, all of these hopes and dreams. I felt like the train had left the station and I was stranded on the platform.

You know, it was interesting. I remember doing an interview about that book around last year and the interviewer, who had read the book, noticed, he said, "I see how much the immigrant experience is a part of this book." Obviously, it was a part of my story since I'm the son of immigrants, but how much it was a part of the book. I actually had to take a step back for a second, Mike, because I was like, "Oh, yeah, it really is."

I had strung a bunch of stories together about my parents, about their journey but I realized that this "even if" declaration, this resolve to worship God, and the surrender to worship Him even when life didn't go the way you want it to, I saw that really modeled in my parents and the immigrant generation.

Even if they didn't use the words "even if", that that mentality, that spirit to worship God was there. So it was this confidence in God's goodness and the resolve to worship Him no matter what. And that has really been something that has kept me and many of the "even if" warriors, I call them, the people around me who, you know, walking through cancer, walking through crazy stuff, and they're saying, "No, I'm still gonna worship God. Where else would I go?" Right? With you is the words of life, Jesus."

So that's the birth of the book and that's also kind of how it is a reflection of my own experience as an Asian American.

**Mike:** Bro, for people who are listening, and I know this isn't the core part of the interview, but when you talk about... I mean, you listed some of the things that people might be walking through, cancer or relationship challenges, questions and concerns, and deeply painful experiences. I mean, just all across the spectrum, people have experienced a variety of different forms of pain suffering.

Here's my question for you, man. I think, as I hear you talk about that "even if" declaration, like even if God doesn't do things the way that I think he should right now, I'm going to worship Him, I'm going to trust Him. How do you get your heart there, though? Because I think people can say or nod with their heads and say, "That's true. But how do you actually get your heart to that place when you feel like you're in a pit?"

**Mitchel:** That's a great question. I think there's several ways, one of which is sometimes it's by process of elimination. What I mean by that is in the second part of the book I talk about the counter conditionals that will come up with in our lives. So instead of saying "even if" we'll say "only if." "Only if, God, you do this." Or we will live in the world of regrets and hypotheticals: "If only God had done this." Or the contingency plans: the "what if, God, this happens or that happens."

So some of it is by process of elimination in our hearts as we're reflecting and realizing, Oh, gosh, I'm carrying these conditionals in my heart. Of, "Oh, I've almost locked God in that if He doesn't deliver a spouse to me in my five year plan, then I'm going to question His goodness," or I hold on to that just white knuckling it so hard because I want that thing to happen.

So part of it is a process of elimination—examining what are my counter "ifs", my met the conditionals, the contingencies, the regrets that we might have. So I talk a lot about that. That's the process of elimination.

The moving towards that is a lot of reflection of remembering. We are not a good culture at remembering. We can recall. We're great at recalling, but we're not good at remembering. And I would actually say we're even losing the ability to recall in that, you know, we rely on our social media to tell us, "Hey, remember eight years ago when this happened?" And there's these memory pictures.

And for me the difference between recalling and remembering is recalling might be I recall the time when you and I and Ian and Matt decided to go out in the frozen lake and throw our bodies across to see who could get the farthest-

**Mike:** Wait. Pause. These are things that black dudes don't do by the way. We don't glide across frozen lakes. Just so everybody understands, this is not ice skating, okay? This is literally just us running and-

**Mitchel:** Throwing our bodies horizontal across the frozen lake believing somehow that that ice is thick enough to hold us. And I have the video if anybody needs to see that. I have the video proof that I out through myself, that I beat the honorable Mike Kelsey in that.

But like even what we just did. So I could recall the events of what we did but we just remembered. We laughed about it. We thought about the significance for our friendship. I remember our car conversation going up where...

I mean, that was a significant conversation for me, Mike, when I had the realization, Wait a second, you and I are very similar kind of white majority spaces as pastors. But when you as an African American pastor went into that space, it wasn't quite celebrated by your ethnic community as much as it was like, "Man, why did you sell out? Why do you go into another church like that?"

Whereas when I moved into being the lead pastor of a predominately white church, it was like, "Oh, my gosh, one of ours made it." It was like an evangelical insanity happening. I remember that conversation. I was like, "Wow, what a different experience." So the significance of those events is the remembering.

If you want to develop an "even if" type resolved declaration in the midst of the valley, I think this is why God tells His people over and over again in the scriptures, "Remember, remember, remember, remember. Remember the significance of who I am and what I've done. Don't just recall it but remember how I poured out my love for you, remember how I showed up in those places." So you're almost building a portfolio of God's faithfulness.

And then at the very end of it, and maybe for some people that are listening, they're like, "Man, my life has been filled with so much hardship, I have a limited data set to remember." Well, that's where the testimony of Scripture has to uphold us. Because now we're just increasing the data set and we're going all the way back, I mean, to the cross, for sure but then even beyond the cross to the Old Testament, we're seeing, "Wait, if God was that faithful and He showed His goodness there, He will show His goodness to me now. He will not forget me."

So those are some, you know, process of elimination, yes, but also just developing the discipline of remembering. Especially in our culture today, especially at the pace we're going today, we're not going to remember.

**Mike:** Man, I think you just pastored some people. We weren't even planning on going all the way there, man, but I think just out of the gate, I hope that encourages some people who are really caught in between and struggling and grasping for just something to hold on to. And I think that remembering is so, so key. And I know that's been such a huge part of your story, man.

I want to dive into just your experience. And I know for you, it doesn't just start with you. You are midstream in this river, have a heritage that has been handed down to you from your parents and their parents. And so why don't you tell us a little bit, man, about just your story, your parent's story.

You already mentioned just some of the immigrant story. But even how that interacts with and overlaps with my story is pretty cool, which we didn't even realize until we started becoming friends and talking more.

[00:14:00] <music>

**Sponsors:** Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners, [Thrive Market](#). Y'all, one of my friends goes to two different grocery stores every week to stay within her grocery budget and get everything she wants and needs that her slightly picky kids—those are her words—will actually eat.

Finding high quality, affordable grocery items in one place is almost impossible in today's world. But thanks to Thrive Market I stress less because I get everything I need and so much more in one place. Shopping with Thrive Market means you'll find everything from healthy pantry essentials to sustainable meat and seafood to non-toxic cleaning and beauty products. And it's all delivered right to your door. Y'all we're so lucky to live in the age of deliveries like we do.

When you buy from Thrive Market you can save up to 30% off the best organic groceries. My favorite bone broth, the Kettle & Fire bone broth that Danielle Walker taught me about is my go-to for literally every soup that I make. And don't sleep on the Thrive Market brand for pantry staples like flour and salt. Even more savings there and they are so good.

I absolutely love how easy it is to use their website and their app. Whether you're looking for low-sugar, keto, gluten-free, BIPOC-owned brands, Thrive Market makes it simple to filter by 90 plus values and lifestyles to find what works for you.

Thrive Market saves me so much time looking for clean cleaning supplies for my house. I'm so thankful. With Thrive markets fast and free carbon-neutral shipping, you're also saving a ton of time otherwise spent in grocery lines and parking lots.

Best of all, when you join Thrive Market you're joining a community of 1 million plus members and sponsoring a family in need which I love.

Get convenient, high quality affordable groceries delivered with Thrive Market. Join Thrive Market today and get a free \$60 gift. You guys six-zero. That's [thrivemarket.com/thatoundsfun](https://thrivemarket.com/thatoundsfun) to get a free \$60 gift. That's [thrivemarket.com/thatoundsfun](https://thrivemarket.com/thatoundsfun) thrive.

**Sponsor:** And I want to tell you about another one of our incredible partners, The Chosen. Okay, if you don't know—and believe me you want to—if you don't know, The Chosen is a series based on the Gospels and it's an incredible visual retelling of the stories of Jesus' life. There are already two seasons available and I recommend a binge of those immediately because the wait is over, you guys.

The chosen Season 3 begins in theaters November 18th. Watching Jesus on the big screen? Let's go. The theme of Season 3 is from Matthew 11:28. It says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." This season the most consequential and emotional chapter yet picks up right where Season 2 left off but turns up the heat, you guys.

In Season 3, Jesus delivers the most famous sermon in history, and what follows are the consequences of living out His teaching. The honeymoon is over, you guys. Both followers and enemies of Jesus multiply stirring new troubles, tensions, and tough questions. I imagine some that you and I have wrestled with ourselves. But in the midst of all that upheaval, Jesus brings rest. He gives rest.

Episode 1 and 2 will begin in theaters starting November 18th. And episodes will start releasing for free in The Chosen app before Christmas. For more information, just visit [thechosentickets.com](https://thechosentickets.com). Again, mark your calendars for November 18 and visit [thechosentickets.com](https://thechosentickets.com) for all the info.

And now back to Mike and Mitchel.

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**Mike:** But why don't you tell us a little bit about your parents, man?

**Mitchel:** Yes. My parents immigrated from South Korea in 1974. I was born in 1975. Originally, my parents were going to go to Canada, but they were invited to come to New York City because my dad had a friend there. And then my dad's cousins were down in Maryland. So they ended up coming down here.

So I was born and raised in Maryland. My dad was not a believer when I was born, and I think it was about age five or six—That's usually the kind of the first recollection I have of going to a Korean immigrant church—my parents decided to bring us to church. So I went to a Korean immigrant church and spent 20-plus years there in that church.

Meanwhile, my parents really lived the immigrant tree. They climbed the ladder, so to speak, financially, maybe not so much socially, but financially in the sense of they were, you know, self-employed. My dad did construction and was pretty successful at it. And then left that.

My mom comes from a long line of just culinary wizards. And so they opened a little deli or they bought a deli donut shop. You'll love this. They bought a deli donut shop right next to a police station. I don't want to feed into any stereotypes but bro, we never got a ticket. My mom got pulled over so many times, I remember. I just have so many memories of different police officers going like, "Mrs. Lee."

**Mike:** That's the way to get out is pastrami sandwich.

**Mitchel:** Pastrami sandwiches and chocolate frosted donuts right next to the police station. So they did that for 20 plus, 30 years. Eventually sold that, went on to Bethesda. And then where it intersects with you is they own this deli right across from the high school that you went to.

**Mike:** Where I used-

**Mitchel:** That is crazy.

**Mike:** And here's the crazy thing, bro. I used to skip school all the time and we used to go to that deli and we used to go to the deli over there. We didn't even realize that, man, when we first became friends. And the reason why that's so significant is funny, but there is a long history of not even just general like Asian American business but Korean American business in the African American community.

So that was just an interesting connection and part of why I wanted to talk to you in this episode, because some of the history between Asian Americans and African Americans in our country and even some of the current issues, it hasn't always been nice and cordial. There's been tension in the history of our ethnic community. So why don't you talk about that a little bit?

**Mitchel:** I mean, we saw the real expressions of that during the LA riots in the 80s, when the Rodney King stuff went down. But as I've been trying to study and understand the Asian American experience more, and I am not a historian by any means, I'm a



pastor trying to help a multi-ethnic congregation made up of Asian Americans, whites, and blacks in one congregation to understand each other and know each other. I remember part of the history that was really fascinating to me and a bit saddening to me was to understand how this idea of the model minority fits in.

I mean, even what I shared just a few minutes ago about the different reception we got from our home communities... not reception, but the different expressions or communications we got from our home communities, I think says something. And it has to do with, I think how black communities have related to white communities and Asian American communities have related to white communities. And what's the commonality there? It's the white communities.

If we look in the history, you go back to... I mean, you can go way earlier than this, but some of the significant moments, you know, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, where basically for... you know, how familiar is this sounding? Well, we don't want them taking our jobs. We don't want them coming in and impacting us or bringing their stuff.

I mean, the act of Congress to ban all Chinese immigrants from entering the country is peculiar that if you fast forward, so then, you know, Chinese are seen as the enemy. And then a little bit later, we get into the 1940s, where now World War II breaks out and Japan is the enemy and the Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed in 1943. But that is shortly after the executive order of 9066, which is Japanese internment.

So what I want you to see is Chinese Exclusion Act. Chinese were considered the enemy. But then when Japan became the enemy, Chinese were considered friends. Like, "Oh, no, no, no, come in. Come in." Now, Japanese, including Japanese Americans were interned—the only example I can remember in history where a government has imprisoned their own citizens.

But then you get later on when Mao Zedong comes into power and the fear of communism. So interesting that Chinese become again the enemy, and then Japanese are now on the inside. And what do we see in just that movement is we see the constant perpetual foreigner. Asian Americans are always... you're always granted provisional status and it's all dependent upon how you relate to white folks, white communities.

Now, why am I talking about perpetual foreigner? Because that's actually what leads into this myth of a model minority, that Asian Americans, as long as they are in good standing with the white communities, they are accepted. And the minute that they're not, they are rejected or put in the other.

The reason that becomes really, really problematic is when we get into the civil rights era... And again, this is a way generalized. I mean, I'm just doing broad brushstrokes here. But when we get to the civil rights era, it's so interesting we begin to see the model minority used as a sort of argument against the civil rights movement. Right?

So look at all these... You know, back in the 1960s, even in the media, look at the negroes. The Negroes want all of these things. They want reparations. They want all of these concessions. But look, look, look at the look at these Asian Americans. They're doing just great without all that sort of stuff. And it's almost using that as a reasoning of saying, "Look, maybe no, it's not something in the system. The black communities, they're just not hard working. They're just not intelligent. They're not..."

And what's happening is that these two committees are positioned against each other. You know, to the black community, "Look, if you could just be like the Asian Americans and work hard, then you would get ahead." I mean, what a skewed explanation.

And then Asian Americans, it's like, "Oh, yeah, you're right. The black community, they are lazy. They are dope." Now you've got the chessboard for an increasingly stressful, hostile tension that's growing underneath. Throw on top of that Asian Americans are given these opportunities to make business. And where do they plant those businesses? In black communities.

And I remember, gosh, it was probably about 10 years ago, I was down in Kenwood right where 295 comes into DC. And I remember walking into a store... I'll use air quotes. A convenience store. It looked more like an aquarium. You walk in and all the stuff is behind Plexiglas. And the project was that we were supposed to go and find out how much a gallon of milk was.

So we go in, and it's a Korean owner. And, bro, the weird, awkward tension, like, Here I am as Korean American looking at a Korean owner. First of all, the Korean owner is like, "What the heck are you doing here?"

**Mike:** Because for those that don't know, you know, that's not necessarily or hasn't years ago, for sure that you see perpetual foreigners walking around that neighborhood?

**Mitchel:** Yeah, dude, I mean, I walk in, gallon of milk, \$8. \$8 for a gallon of milk. But I was in this weird space because I didn't know... Wait, am I supposed to be angry at the injustice that a gallon of milk cost \$8? I think it was in the Washington Post around that time. Somebody put out an article like in DC you've got to be rich to be poor. And it was \$8. The injustice of that.

But then seeing that it was a Korean owner who was marking it up like that, bro, that was a weird space for me to look face to face into that tension and that hostility between these two communities.

**Mike:** Man, that explains so much. I mean, you know, my dad is a pastor in the heart of the city in DC. My family is from DC. My dad pastors in the same ward of the city that he grew up in. So this is northeast DC, Ward 5 Trinidad neighborhood. And our church is on Florida Avenue is in the middle of the block. And on both ends of the block, it was a liquor store on one end, and then we called it a corner store, you know, on the other end. And both of those were owned by Koreans.

And I just remember growing up walking down the street, there was always this tense relationship with the employees there, with the business owners. For sure there was the Plexiglas that was there. Man, it's so interesting hearing your experience kinda on the other side of that.

So I'm curious for you... So fast forward to 2020 and George Floyd is murdered and that murder triggers this avalanche of racial unrest. And it hasn't stopped. What was it like for you? Because you explain that moment walking into that store, seeing that injustice, and then having this weird relationship with that injustice—the way you're processing it. What was it like for you as a Korean American and then a Korean American pastor of a predominantly white mega-church? What was it like for you in the midst of that powder keg that exploded in 2020?

**Mitchel:** That's a great question. Part of my answer even goes earlier than that. And listeners might think, "Oh, 2016, here comes." No, no, even earlier than that. In terms of my journey, starting in 2004, Mike, the Lord in His goodness and kindness, but also really perplexing to me, had me leave the Korean church and enter into a non-Korean space.

At that time, 2004 it was all white. I mean, my wife and I were the ethnic diversity of our church. And I did not want to talk about race. I did not want to be the race guy. Maybe I had in my mind that it was kind of caricaturized as an angry Asian male. I don't want to be the Angry Asian guy.

I just didn't want to talk about it. And even though my relationships in terms of a multi-ethnicity, cross-ethnicity were growing and getting so diverse, and I was learning about other people's experiences, I still was a little bit removed from it.

The reason I go back that far is because when Barack Obama became president, I look back now and I say, Man, I missed that moment to really celebrate with...

Even at that time, just my African American pastor colleagues who I was in relationship with was I like, I missed the opportunity to really celebrate that.

Why? Why did I miss that? Well, because I, again, this is part of using the model minority to my own advantage is... I kind of liken it to... Like imagine, you know, somebody invites me over their house for Thanksgiving dinner. And it's a family of black and white folks—it's just an imaginary family—and they start fighting at the Thanksgiving table. They're just going at it. And they're talking about past history and I'm just sitting there like, "What the heck is going on? I'm just a guest here."

A strange thing. They're fighting and I'm thinking to myself, "Y'all need to just figure this thing out. What is going on?" But while I'm thinking that, Mike, I'm eating the food. I'm eating that dinner. I'm eating at the dinner table. With my mouth full, I'm like, "Oh, y'all need to figure this out. But I'm just gonna... Hey, can you pass the mashed potatoes there and the cranberry sauce," whether it's canned or real ways, whichever ways.

**Mike:** It needs to be canned. But that's a whole nother podcast.

**Mitchel:** I know. I know. I snooped that in there, right? So you know, I'm sitting there eating. I'm benefiting actually. I'm benefitting. So when 2020 came and this groundswell of lament and then a groundswell of reaction and resistance to the lament, bro, I found myself so disoriented in the middle of that. And I realized at that place, you know what? I can't play the perpetual foreigner card. I can't play the model minority card. What does the Lord really desire here? What does He want to show us?

That was a deep impactful time for me as a pastor because it ripped our church apart. And you know, you have that experience. It ripped our church apart. People that I thought were further along we're not. And I found myself really... Just probably everybody listening is like, "What do I do here? What am I supposed to do?"

And as an Asian American, I thought, very foolishly, Mike, I thought, "Okay, since I'm at the table, and here's these blacks and whites fighting, let me try to insert myself and say, 'Can we be a bridge builder?'" It was interesting how the perpetual foreigner card was used against me. So people were like, "Oh, no, you're just a simulated You're just as simulated. You're not saying enough, Mitchel. You're just assimilated. You're just living out the model minority." Right?

Or if I was trying to call out our white folks on things and to understand and to move towards, they'll say, "Who are you? You're just woke. We're going to throw you in the other box, too. So you're no longer... we're taking away your provisional status. As a model minority, you're going over there."

But then there was also times where as an Asian American you're invisible in the sense of... I remember, there's one time... Mike, it was a very passionate white gal who was telling me that I just did not understand the plight of people of color in America.

**Mike:** Wow. Wow.

**Mitchel:** I was like, "Wait a second. Are you telling me that?" Like, What did she see? Who does she see me as? What does she, Oh, there it is. There it is. There's the invisibility of being an Asian American that... there's so many of my Asian American colleagues have talked about that invisibility. I got to experience that front row.

**Mike:** Bro, this is so helpful, because so in my own journey, and man, part of why I wanted to do this is I've pushed a lot of people and hopefully try to gently and sometimes not so gently guide people to understand the black experience. But I just want people to know that I am a person also who is in process when it comes to these issues.

So even as I speak up about African American issues, and particularly how that intersects with life in the church as followers of Jesus, well, I'm in the midst of all that because there are areas where I'm ignorant, there's areas where I have blind spots, there are areas where I'm taking active steps to grow.

So in my own journey, especially as a pastor, first of all, I remember this was several years ago. So this is even before like the Atlanta shooting. This is just me wanting to get to know and learn more and figure out what I... you know, you don't know what you don't know. And so just trying to figure out why don't I know, and what do I need to read on.

So I remember approaching an older Chinese man in our congregation. He's an OG, well respected in our congregation. He also grew up and was a leader kind of in the Chinese American church, but he's a part of our church now. And I remember hitting him up and just saying, "Hey, I'd love to invite Asian Americans in our church family to meet with me. I just want to ask them some questions."

And it was just questions like, what would you want your pastor to know about the Asian American experience in America? Or what would you want us to know about your experience in our church? And I remember him saying to me, "If you want to do that, I'd be willing to help you pull that together." He said, "But just a heads up, a lot of us wouldn't necessarily want to be singled out in that way."

And honestly, I did not understand it, partly man because if you say, open forum, black people, we want to invite you to talk about race and share your experience. Listen, bro, we're sending group text messages. I think it's part of our heritage, civil rights movement, and advocacy and all that. We're just eager, man, to talk about those issues. So that kind of knocked me back a little bit, man. So I leaned into that and have been able to learn more about why. Does that surprise you, I guess is my question, that he would respond that way?

**Mitchel:** No, it doesn't surprise me. Because while black community, Asian American community, one of the things that we have in common is a collectivist mentality. Like we're in this together. It parts ways in terms of how that collectivist mentality is expressed when you start talking about hard things, potentially shameful things.

So here's an example. Mike, do you remember growing up... Can you remember instances where you were shared stories from the previous generation about racism, racist experiences, even instructions that weren't handed down to you about what kind of racism to expect?

**Mike:** 100%.

**Mitchel:** Do you remember ever having this kind of conversation?

**Mike:** Like you said, the typical conversations about how to move and operate as a black man, absolutely. That was a huge part of my upbringing.

**Mitchel:** So that's one of the beautiful things about... I mean, I hate that those conversations have to actually happen, but that the fact that they did happen to demonstrate a sort of collective memory that gets passed out. Asian communities we don't have that when it comes to hardships that people have experienced, partly because of the honor-shame that's involved.

We just don't have a lot of those collective stories that our parents tell us, "Hey, be ready when this thing happens." No. We were told, "Look, you study hard and you achieve and you'll be able to break every barrier that you face." We don't have those collective stories and experiences to draw on.

One of the things like I'm incredibly grateful to be living in our time now is because those collective stories are starting to come out now. They're starting to be shared. But there's very few collective stories of past anti-Asian racism, right? So older relatives, friends, apparently, they don't pass on the significant information.

So just imagine that. If that's the case, as any pastor, whether it was me or you or white pastor takes in Asian American segment of his congregation, says, "Come

here, and I want you to talk about the hardships of your experience," you're going to get a mute. Not because they're not there but because the cultural shame value, but then also we're just not used to collectively sharing those sorts of things.

It's a very awkward space to be in. Which actually, for Asian Americans contributes a little bit to the confusion when we do experience racism. Because it's, wait a second, was that racist or did I do something wrong? Did I not care?

I think I told you about this one time. I went to go pick up dinner for my family. I went to a Chinese restaurant, and I was just grabbing takeout. And there was a little altercation and so police had to come. And it was right by my car. I wasn't involved in but it was right by my car.

And they're standing there talking to the police officers helping them navigate this, and I've got my stuff in my hand and I have to get through them. So I say, "Oh, excuse me, officer, I have to get to my car." And he goes, "Oh, yeah, no worries. No worries. I'm working too."

**Mike:** Wow.

**Mitchel:** Then I get to my car and I'm driving away and I'm like, "Wait a second did..."

**Mike:** Delivery guy.

**Mitchel:** "Wait, did he just think that I was the Chinese food delivery guy? Is that what he just..." Right? Did he just think that? Wait a second. But then here's where I went. Oh, well, yeah, you know, I kind of was dressed a little-

**Mike:** Wow.

**Mitchel:** I was just dressed real casual. I started to internalize that for myself.

**Mike:** See, that's the difference. I would have been on Instagram live. I'd have been like, "Racism."

**Mitchel:** Right, right. Now, I mean, I've got great soul. I'm like, "He's in a tense situation. He's not sure." And you know, for the way that I talked with the owner of the store, I would probably pick that up about myself too. I get it, no problem. But then I shared with my wife and Sarah's like, "But do you think he would have said that if you were white or if you're black, if you were..." So it could have been stereotyped, whatever.

But the point of the illustration is that because we don't have a collective memory of this and a shared means of storytelling to share about these collectively is very difficult. And it leads to individual confusion. Was it racist? Or was it not? Did I do something? It leads to a lot of internal confusion. And that's where Asian Americans oftentimes find themselves in this whole conversation.

I'm really grateful for the next generation of Asian Americans that—you know, what do you call them? Gen Z or millennials—who they don't struggle with that as much. I'm so grateful for that because there's such a needed presence in the church and in our society. But that feeling of being in between, the in-betweenness is still very much there.

[00:40:36] <music>

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting one more time to tell you about another amazing partner, [Cabinets To Go](#). Do people walk into your kitchen and the first word out of their mouth is "wow"? I think I've told y'all this before but my kitchen sometimes serves as more of a hallway than a destination where I spend a lot of time you know.

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We're talking over 200,000 cabinets available and ready to ship you guys. Well, I don't think before and after photos are particularly helpful relating to our bodies and weight and stuff. With home renovations and especially with Cabinets To Go, before and after are the most fun. I think I'm having as much fun dreaming about my kitchen as I did when I was dreaming up my porch during 2020.

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And remember the show notes are your one-stop shop for links to our partners, to transcripts of our shows, and to sign up for the AFD Week in Review, our weekly email newsletter.

[00:42:22] <music>

**Sponsor:** So I've been podcasting since 2014. And let me tell you, things are definitely changing and have definitely changed and grown in the podcast world from the technology to the variety of options to the number of people listening to podcast. It's part of the reason we grew from the That Sounds Fun podcast to the That Sounds Fun Network.

All that growth, experience, and learning leads us to refine the tools we use for bringing you all of these great shows. And one that we absolutely cannot live without is Anchor.

You've probably heard me say it before, but Anchor is seriously the easiest way to make a podcast. It's free, as in it cost you zero doll-hairs, but it has simple-to-use creation tools that allow you to record and edit your podcast right from your phone or computer.

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We hear from people all the time who have great ideas and are looking for how to get their podcast started. Well, Anchor is what we use across the That Sounds Fun Network. And we are just huge fans of how easy they make it to create great-sounding, far-reaching podcast episodes.

Just download the free Anchor app or go to [anchor.fm](https://anchor.fm) to get started. Again, that's anchor.fm or you can download the free Anchor app today.

And now back to finish up this conversation between Mike and Mitchel.

[00:43:52] <music>

**Mike:** Everybody listening right now is listening to me learning real-time. And it's just so helpful, man. As you're talking, I'm thinking of experiences that I've had. And even the example I gave you talking to the older gentleman in our congregation, my

ignorance was peeking in that situation because I just assumed, oh yeah, he'd be so thankful that I'll be willing to have that conversation and he will invite everybody.

To be honest with you. I was a little frustrated too, if I'm honest. Because I'm thinking, Man, here I am. I'm giving my time, giving an opportunity and for that to kind of... I mean he didn't reject it, but it was kind of a low-key rejection. You know, like uhh. But understanding the cultural context behind his response, that is such an essential... Part of it was for survival, and part of it was just identity formation. That is such a huge part of the African American experience—passing down that collective memory.

**Mitchel:** And even if some of the men in my family wouldn't necessarily talk about some of the painful parts of their past, my grandmother would tell us. My grandfather never told me, and he's passed away many years ago now, but he never told me this. But my grandmother was the one that told me that when he was a teenager he personally witnessed a lynching. He never talked about it ever, you know, talked about it. But still some way somehow that collective memory gets passed down.

So, as you have... because there's been a surge, and you mentioned this, it seems like there's been a surge and Asian American voices that are speaking up and speaking out and advocating on behalf of Asian Americans. So even going back to, you know, the older guy that I was talking to, I wonder, is some of that generational? Like when you talk about how Asian Americans don't necessarily pass down that collective memory, is there a generational difference in the ways you see Asian Americans engaging in these issues?

**Mitchel:** I think so. Because also, there's a current in here. And again, I'm not a sociologist, nor a cultural anthropologist, so I'm sure there's people who could voice this much better. But whether it's a good thing or not, there is an assimilation that's happening.

When my parents came over, they were far more Korean than I am. And I am far more Korean than my kids are by culture. And as the kind of Western or maybe individualist, that sort of Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age affects each generation, we're going to see more voices because they're going to be speaking out because that's a really beautiful thing about the kind of Americanization of Asian Americans. That's a really beautiful thing.

At the same time, sometimes I scratch my head, like what age am I living in? I mean, you got BTS being Entertainer of the Year. You got like... oh, gosh, what's the Korean movie that won Best Picture? Oh, gosh, the one where they're living in the basement? What is that? Oh, my gosh, I can't remember the name.

But anyway, you're seeing it all over media. You're seeing K-Pop, K-dramas. I go on Netflix and I'm seeing all these Korean dramas. And then I'm looking at my kids, the books they're bringing home from their school that they're reading, all these Asian American authors. I'm like, Bro, I'd never have seen that before. I'm like, what age am I living in? It's really a beautiful thing too.

So I'm seeing just the kind of empowerment of these voices. I'm really grateful for that. I'm really grateful for that, that we're not just in between and we're not just on the wall, we're not just kind of in the background.

I'm excited to see the impact that that will have on the church too. Because I think Asian American culture, you know, one of the pillars of this thing is honor-shame, right? That's a really out of Asian culture, too. And I've given some thought about...

You know, largely in the conversation of race in our churches, we do it based on the parameters of guilt and innocence. And we talk about racism in terms of guilt and innocence. And that's what makes people get really frozen is because they're like, "Well, I didn't do it. I'm innocent. I'm not a racist."

What would happen to the conversation if we began to talk about it in terms of honor-shame, where it's not a matter of...? I can talk to someone and say, my brother experienced this sort of shaming of him based on the color of his skin. And then I'm sharing that with somebody else. Would it make them more prone to say, "Oh, gosh, well, how do we give honor to him?" Versus receiving that kind of information through guilt and innocence lens of saying, "Well, I'm innocent of it. I didn't do anything."

I just think there could be some really important steps. Maybe we could change the conversation a bit by shaping it with an honor-shame parameter.

Another way to read it is, if you read the scriptures, if you read it only through guilt and innocence, like forensic justification, Christ died on the cross atonement, if you read it through just guilt and innocence, you miss a huge part of this beautiful picture of the gospel that is from honor and shame.

And if you don't believe and just start reading the Psalms, look at the writings of Paul through an honor-shame lens. I mean, the book of Romans, right where it's like he's the lifter of our head, he removes our shame, he takes the shame of the cross that we might have honor as adopted children. This is just running through it. And I think Asian Americans can really help embody that in church life.

**Mike:** Man, I put out on Instagram... So you talk about church life I put out on Instagram, "Hey, I'm doing these interviews, what questions would you want me to ask?" So I

want to ask you a couple of just rapid fire questions that I got because all of them related to Asian American experience in the church. Asian American Christians who are in the church.

What are some of the obstacles or challenges that you have faced as an Asian American leader in the church? And how did you overcome them?

**Mitchel:** Man, some of the obstacle challenges I've faced. So I sit in the lead pastor chair at my church, but it's amazing how I still have very much a minority complex.

**Mike:** How so?

**Mitchel:** You know, it's almost akin... Since we're in baseball season, I can use that as an illustration. I feel like a minor-league pitcher being called up to the major leagues. Man, is my stuff going to work here? Is my curveball gonna be good enough? Is my fastball fast enough?

I think actually a lot of Asian American leaders in the church, they—and in a multi-ethnic church, that's white majority—they wonder, Oh, well, you know, this is how we did it in the Korean church. But then there's almost this built in like the Korean church is less than, the Asian immigrant church is somehow less than this, you know, white majority church that the building's really nice, and all of the things seem to be all in order.

And it's easy to discount your own contribution and the beauty of your own church culture ethnically, and to just leave that all at the door. So that was a big challenge. I don't know if I've completely overcome that but I've begun to find new expressions of Korean culture. But then also Korean church culture that I'm like, "Oh, my church actually needs this."

**Mike:** Is there an example? Give me one thing that you would say you might desire to import that from the Korean church experience into your current church setting, but you're like, "Ah, I don't know if that will be compatible with the environment that I'm in now?"

**Mitchel:** Oh, well, I can tell you things that I brought in. I'm not as concerned as much as the compatibility anymore because I'm like, "We're a multi ethnic church. You live with it." I say, like, you know, what does it mean to be a multi-ethnic church? It's the commitment that everybody's going to be uncomfortable at some point.

So you know, one is the concepts... There's been actually recently a lot of things written about it, which I'm glad but it's the concept of Nunchi in Korea. Nunchi. Literally is this kind of idea of like I'm eye-matching. It's the ability to read the

room. Today's business theory, we call that as emotional intelligence or relational intelligence.

Bro, that was a Korean cultural thing way, way before somebody put a term on that. And it's the idea to like, okay, when I'm in a room I'm reading. And how are people doing in here? Especially if I'm not in the first chair. What does the first chairperson want from me? So there's a very like a, you know, if you've got a Nunchi, you're able to read the room and manage the anxiousness that can happen in a room.

Now the underside of that—there's an underside to everything—the underside is that you never really show up. You just kind of say and do the things that you think are going to be approved of, and you're just living out of your false self.

But man, there's times where I'll take some of my staff and say, "Man, you know what you need? I mean, some are white staff, you know what you need? You need Nunchi.

**Mike:** You need to create some Nunchis. We need some sweatshirts.

**Mitchel:** Oh, dude, yes. Yes. Oh my gosh, totally. Because, man, if some of my staff had that, it would make them 100% more effective in meetings and collaboration. Because they're not just coming in with their individualistic like, "I'm just gonna throw and say what I'm going to say." They're reading the room. Man, I wish that more people had some of that Nunchi.

**Mike:** So is that like this awareness of how the whole is being affected?

**Mitchel:** How the whole is being affected, how the leader is being affected, what is appropriate, what's the compromise? Again, there's an underbelly to that, that if you think about it, yeah, it could be like you're fake the whole time. But this idea of, yeah, the collective, the community, that's important.

**Mike:** That's great, man. Almost last question. What are some mistakes you've made or that you see other pastors make? Because we may have some pastors listening. What are some mistakes you made or that you see other pastors make in trying to lead through these issues?

**Mitchel:** Our mutual friend, Bryan Loritts, you know, always says: don't let people's immaturity hijack you. So some of the biggest mistakes I've made is I lose myself in the complexity, the high emotion, the anxiousness of this. Like my values, my convictions, who I am, it's so easy to lose that sense and just get angry at a person or frustrated. Like, why aren't they further along? Or how could they not see what I see?

I remember, a calling as a shepherd or as a leader, this is not in any sort of condescending way, but we are to bring people to full maturity, which implies that people are not at full maturity. And whose burden is that on in terms of like, as the leader, I have to be able to hold that space for somebody in maturity versus allowing somebody's unhealth or their immaturity to somehow compromise my own sense of who I am and my conviction. So that's a mistake.

Trying to go too fast. Gosh, let's adjust this thing, let's nail this thing head on, and let's deal with, I don't know, let's deal with 400 years of our racist history in a four-week series and invite some people of color to come and talk about it. Like, way, way, way, way, way, way too fast. We got to go slower. We've got to go slower.

I know some people who are much more passionate would say, Yeah, that's the excuse that's been through most of the history. And it's really interesting. If you look at the civil rights movement, there were actually two currents within the civil rights movement.

One was the sort of nonviolent resistance. And then there are other words, like, No, we gotta go, and we got to take it by force. But actually a third scene kind of came in there, which was this, "well, let's just wait for education and everything will kind of get better." You know, that's what MLK railed against in his letters from a Birmingham Jail.

I'm definitely not advocating for that third. I don't think I'm advocating for the second either, nor the first. I'm saying we just got to go slow and be deliberate. This stuff takes time. And yeah, we want to have the patience and compassion of God as we speak about hard things. I went too fast at times. And that was a big mistake.

**Mike:** That's huge, man. Me too, man. I think balancing that passion, that devotion, the fierce urgency of now with what Scripture causes to, particularly as pastors, to careful instruction with great patience, as Paul put it, that's so difficult, man. So I appreciate you sharing that. Yeah, man, opening up your life and your story and sharing in some vulnerable and personal ways.

I want to wrap us up. The podcast is called That Sounds Fun. So I got to ask you, man, what do you do for fun these days? What sounds fun to you?

**Mitchel:** Oh, man, you know, at the beginning of August I just went on a 45-mile backcountry hike with my son as sort of a rite of passage for him to go into high school. We went, spent five days, four nights in the backcountry wilderness of Wyoming, climbed to 10,800 feet, caught an 18-inch golden trout, and sufficient life lifetime. But you know, what's better than catching the fish of a lifetime? Is

Watching your son catch the fish of a lifetime right after you, man. So do that for fun. I love getting outdoors.

One of my claims to fame is that I was one of the first guys to take Mike Kelsey out onto a river with waders on.

**Mike:** First time. It's the first time ever.

**Mitchel:** We need to do that again. We'll do that again hopefully next September because I got an idea for us to have some fun and some adventure next September. I'm going on sabbatical next year, next summer and I got a grant for the four of us to go into a little post-sabbatical. You guys are supposed to help me debrief and process, but you know, there's gonna be a lot of meat and fishing involved. So we're gonna do some of that.

**Mike:** Listen, I'm on it, bro. Let's do it, man.

**Mitchel:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**Mike:** Mitchel, thanks so much, man. Thank you for writing the book *Even If*. It's just been a personal encouragement to me even though we talked about so many of the concepts before it was in print. But man thank you for being a friend in this journey and for the ways that you've allowed me to just learn from you and learn so much from you even today, man. So appreciate you being on.

**Mitchel:** Thanks, man. Bro, if it wasn't for our friendship, I don't know if I would have survived this pandemic. What did we call them at the time? Bourbon and bonfires or something? Like if we didn't have that time... I'm not sure if we're allowed to say that.

**Mike:** I just watched.

**Mitchel:** But if we didn't have that, man. It's been great, bro. Thanks.

[00:59:50] <music>

**Outro:** Oh, you guys, aren't they brilliant? I mean, I just learned. Here is the dream of these episodes: is I learned so much I would have never learned when I listened to the two of them compare, contrast, and express their experiences. It is beautiful and such a gift. My gosh, such a gift. I'm so thankful for Mike Kelsey, and today for Mitchel Lee. They're two of my new favorite pastors. Well y'all know Mike's been a longtime favorite pastor but Mitchel is going up there.

Y'all be sure to grab a copy of Mitchel's book *Even If*. Follow Mike and Mitchel on social media, tell them thanks for being on the show.

If you need anything else from me, you know, I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me, that's how you can find me.

And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you. I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is telling you about tomorrow. You guys, we have got a ridiculously fun episode dropping tomorrow.

I cannot wait for you to hear this. Do I cry from joy? Yes, yes, yes. You have to listen to find out. But yes, I did. I cannot hide when joy drops out of my eyeballs. Y'all have to listen tomorrow to find out why. So make sure you're subscribed. Don't miss our special Friday episode of That Sounds Fun. See y'all tomorrow.