

Reflecting Redemption

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 95

HumanProgress (HP) is a website that challenges “the conventional wisdom about the state of humanity and the planet Earth.” In a recent article, “How humanity won the war on famine,” HP reported that famines are disappearing worldwide. The article claims that food security increased significantly over the last 50 years: “The global average population-weighted food supply per person rose from 2,225 calories in 1961 to 2,882 calories in 2013.” Assuming the news is accurate, this is both good news and great progress.

The trouble is we still know that there are hungry people, and some of them live in our own community. In fact, a United Nations report from 2018 said the number of hungry people in the world is growing, reaching 821 million in 2017 or one in nine individuals.

It is probable that both claims are true: famines are declining, and a significant number of people still go hungry. The HP article qualified its claim, stating that the increase in food availability applies *outside of war zones* (at the time of the article, there were 51 conflicts). It is also likely that this progress does not apply to locations where governments cause shortages (i.e., Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba). The HP story noted that the problem stems not from a lack of arable land or from adequate food supplies, nor from weather-related issues; it is a combination of distribution, acquisition, corruption, effort, and conflict. In other words, hunger today is caused not by things nature does but by things people do.

The fact that human beings still go hungry each day reminds us of how little progress humankind is making against such things as self-centeredness, greed, intolerance and other negative aspects of our character. As individuals, some do better at this than others, but 51 conflicts worldwide are not a testimony to loving one’s neighbor as one’s self!

As we read through the Bible, it’s easy to see how closely the flaws and shortcomings of our Biblical ancestors resemble our own flaws and shortcomings. I think it likely that if our spiritual parents could see us now, they would not be surprised to discover how little improvement humankind is making in terms of character. The prophet Jeremiah declared, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” (17:9). Jeremiah did not qualify his statement by saying, “The heart of *my generation* is devious,” as if he expected future generations to progress beyond that description. No, he let the statement stand as an indictment of what it means to be human.

In Psalm 95, God expresses disgust with our Hebrew ancestors who, despite God’s providential help getting them out of Egypt and a life of slavery, still did not honor and obey God. It is a heartsick God who says, “I loathed that generation” (v. 10). This is not the kind of God we are used to. “God is love,” we chant, citing 1 John 4:8. We sing, “Our God is an awesome God.” We don’t sing, “Our God is a loathing God...”

God warns the psalmist’s audience not to harden their hearts as their predecessors did (v. 8); but, of course, they eventually did. Old Testament folk complained about corrupt leaders, unfair systems, injustice, predatory lending, unscrupulous merchants, partisan politics, human rights abuses, and a whole host of other troubling matters. Now, three millennia later, we have the same basic complaints. How can your heart not be hardened when nothing ever changes? Humankind can boast of great strides forward in technology and other fields, but we remain essentially the same people we were thousands of years ago in terms of attitudes and the difficulties of living together with other humans on this planet.

What’s wrong with us? One nonreligious answer is that people are basically stupid. I do not mean to suggest that there are smart people and stupid people, but simply to say that *all of us* are infected with a certain level of stupidity. To say it differently, stupidity is a universal human trait, and you just can’t fix stupid!

Don’t be put off by the word “stupidity.” One of its definitions is: “Behavior that shows a lack of good sense or judgment.” That applies to all of us at some point, right? To be stupid is not to be ignorant. Stupid is not the opposite of smart. The definition tells us that we can be both smart and stupid, and very often we are. Clearly! Human stupidity is our enduring legacy. We refuse to evolve. We resist change. While we may be very smart in some ways, we can be very stupid in other ways. Our smarts can even increase the problems our stupidities cause by coming up with ways to justify the stupid things we do.

Blogger David Cain illustrates this paradox: “The same person can design an award-winning public building and still be defeated by a parking meter with perfectly clear instructions on the side. A hobby chess player can visualize a tree of possible moves five or six deep but cannot anticipate running out of toilet paper until the moment he does. I somehow created my own dream job, but I’ve had winter tires on my vehicle for at least 48 consecutive months, and I cannot seem to make a doctor’s appointment.”

Want more examples? Consider how some of your daily choices and activities go directly against what you know to be good for you. You know that fast food is not healthy, but you still find yourself at the McDonald's drive thru. You know exercise will likely raise your energy level and extend your lifespan, but you sit at a desk or in front of the television all day and don't exercise regularly. You know that when you chew with your mouth open, leave hair in the sink, throw your dirty socks on the floor or leave the toilet seat in the wrong position, you will send your spouse over the edge. Yet, you still do those things! You may even promise your spouse, that you will change, and yet (surprise!) you don't. We are very slow to learn from our mistakes and sometimes never do.

In his blog, Cain referred to the Russian novelist-historian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who wrote: "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart." Cain used the quotation as a springboard for his argument that the line between smart and stupid passes through each human mind. Regrettably, Cain posted only the first part of Solzhenitsyn's quote. The second part asserts: "...even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an uprooted small corner of evil."

The complete quotation comes closer to what the Bible says is wrong with us and why, as a human race, we are not progressing much in our attitudes. It is not just that our intellect is pulled down by our stupidity, but that goodness shares the stage with evil. Theology calls this the *bondage of the will*. Theologian Serene Jones explains this in a way that pulls the smart-stupid and goodness-evil strands together: "When the social reality of sin seeps deep into our being, it profoundly affects our will. It takes over our desires, and we start actively wanting to sin. As a consumer in a capitalist system, for instance, I want to buy products that are unhealthy for me (I even convince myself that I need them). My will is, as it were, imprisoned — not disabled, because I am still 'choosing,' but locked into a prison house from which it cannot escape."

All of this is what makes God's grace and salvation through Christ such good news. We are incapable of earning God's love, but grace means God loves us anyway. God redeems us not because of any necessity, but because God chooses to do so. That does not mean we will stop being stupid and sinful, but it does mean that when we stand in the light of salvation through Jesus Christ, our stupidities and sins are not the last word about us. Redemption is.

As Christians, we know and live in God's redemption light, and we are called to reflect that light upon the world. Corrie ten Boom, whose family hid Jews from the Nazis and who ended up in a concentration camp herself, says: "We must mirror God's love in the midst of a world full of hatred. We are the mirrors of God's love, so we may show Jesus by our lives." She saw the very worst that humankind could be and do; yet she still chose to mirror the Love of God to the world. This is like what the Gospel writer John said: "The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5).

Our minds may be stupid, and our hearts may be underdeveloped, but they can still sing songs of praise to God who is the rock of our salvation. We can live in an evil world, surrounded by evil people with a tendency to do evil ourselves, but we can still choose to do good. We are the people of God's hand, the sheep of God's pasture, and we may yet learn to follow his ways and listen to his voice and receive God's redemptive grace. Through the grace of God, demonstrated by Christ's death and resurrection, and the ongoing indwelling of God's Spirit, we can sing to the Lord, make joyful noises to the rock of our salvation, and come into God's presence with thanksgiving. Let us thank God for God's grace and seek to live lives that reflect God's redemption to the world.

Prayer: Merciful God, You call us to follow; to turn away from our own selfish interests, and to take up our cross and follow after You, even if the path is difficult to see, or is heading in a direction we would never have chosen for ourselves. Forgive us for being so quick to question and so hesitant to follow. Help us to see with the eyes of faith, rather than from our own human point of view. Teach us to follow without fear, knowing that You are always with us, leading the way. Amen.

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