

Faith in the World

John 17:6-11, 14-18

Believe it or not, you and I live in a world that is, by many measures, getting better day by day, year by year, and generation by generation. Some may scoff at this remark, especially when it's too easy to cite signs of decline: a growing gap between the rich and the poor, the destruction of our ecosystem and environment through climate change, disintegration of the two-parent home, mass shootings like the recent one in Santa Barbara, or the horrific bloodshed of war in places like Syria or Afghanistan. All of those are reasons to question anyone's optimism in the 21st century.

Yet, I read a couple of articles recently making the case that if you compare our present day with what is known about human history, there is significant evidence we are living among the best of times. Let me offer a few statistical comparisons. According to the U.N. World Population data, the average length of life globally is greater than it has ever been, currently at 71.0 years (slightly lower for males and higher for women), with Monaco at the top with an average of 86.5 years and Sierra Leone at 47.5 years, clearly reflective of the differences in affluence and the stresses associated with their respective social environments. Yet, if longevity in Sierra Leone seems dreadful to us, consider that it is slightly above what the entire world's life expectancy was in the early 1950s. A century earlier, the average life globally lasted only about 40 years, which drops even more the further one goes back into history.

Why the remarkable increase in longevity? The short answer is, fewer people are dying as children and more are living longer. This is

due in large part to the successful effort globally to fight disease and life-threatening conditions. Improvements are noticeable in infant mortality rates, public health conditions and hygiene, daily sustainable nutrition, widespread economic and social development, even though much more could still be done to upgrade the overall quality of life. For most populations around the planet, their prospects for life have never been better than the present!

Coupled with this, global poverty rates are dropping in recent decades. According to the World Bank in 2013, “...21 percent of people in the developing world lived at or below \$1.25 a day. That’s down from 43 percent in 1990 and 52 percent in 1981.”¹ In other words, in the last 20-30 years, the poverty rate by percentage has been cut in half, much of that due to economic development and better living conditions presently in places like China, India, Brazil, and other Asian and Latin American countries. However, the decrease isn’t nearly as evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty rates have remained fairly constant.

Another fascinating contribution to life expectancy are the fewer number of deaths from international and civil wars. This may surprise us, given how aware we are of violence around the world. But again, compared to the past, there are fewer wartime casualties, due mainly to better medical intervention and trauma care on the battlefields. Yet, many argue it’s also because going to war has become increasingly costly and less successful in achieving long term objectives, as our nation’s experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown. Saber-rattling and mass casualty attacks have given way to a

¹ “Poverty Overview”, The World Bank, April 7, 2014.

more widespread use of economic and political sanctions and “strategic” or targeted killing.

The difference is quite astonishing. The number of casualties in World War II (over 60 million) and World War I (roughly 37 million), whereas the deadliest wars of the past fifty years pale in comparison (Second Congo War – app. 5 million; two wars in Afghanistan – roughly 3 million; Vietnam war – approximately 3 million). That’s ten times fewer deaths accounted for in periods of war just in the past fifty years!²

All of these things and more enhance the quality and longevity of the average human life on this planet. Civilization has evolved and advanced to where it appears the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse no longer control our collective destiny as they once did. With the potential we have today to further improve the quantity and quality of life on this planet, there’s reason for people to have hope for the future and faith in the world.

Of course, such optimism doesn’t take everything into account, including a problem that, until recently, no one considered seriously, i.e., overpopulation. This, along with the effects of climate change, will be an alarming issue for the next generation, as we already face scarcity and a greater competition for access to natural resources (land, clean water, etc.) as well as severe urban congestion and stress, where most of the world’s population live. The equation is fairly straight-forward: if you protect and extend life for everyone, it will stress, if not forever alter, the delicate balance that sustains human

² Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, made this case in his 2011 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Viking Press.

life on this planet! This looming crisis of overpopulation will be difficult to solve, especially if attempts to decrease the population come down to the proverbial “Sophie’s Choice”: whose life is worth saving and whose is not? For fixing this problem by calculating the relative worth of humans leads us to a very dark place that has already haunted history.

This is why people of faith, like you and I, must be an active part of this global debate! On a number of fronts, we have to advocate for the very lives that are likely to become expendable when the competition for human survival is greatest, especially when relative value already gets assigned to people based on race, gender, age, social location, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, and most significantly, on productivity and usefulness. Though we may not typically characterize it in this way, there are an alarming number of Scrooges out there who would not be afraid to make the choice to deprive the most vulnerable people of help in order to “decrease the surplus population.”

It’s obvious, not everyone is equal in strength, or abilities, or influence, or status; nor will they have the same means and access to what will help them to survive and prosper. When crises rise over supply and demand, it will be those in weaker positions who will suffer disproportionately and effectively become more “expendable” than others. They are the “least of these,” to use biblical terms. Under our current global conditions, too many of them are vulnerable children, too many are exploited women and girls, too many are neglected or abused elderly, too many are those in the developing world, too many are along the margins of society (mentally ill,

incarcerated, migrant people) who, though they may live in a world that is progressing well into the future, it is leaving them behind because they have not the means to keep up—be it education, personal health, independence, or resources to fairly compete. Tough choices are being made even now in government budgets, educational systems, and human services planning. Far too many are “expendable” because the resources aren’t there to help them, or because they are voiceless victims of someone’s profiteering or punitive beliefs.

It seems to me, of all that the Gospel of Jesus Christ inspires in us, the one thing that rises to the top in these times is the need to remember “the least of these” and stand up for them and work to protect and help them. I realize the scale of this assignment seems far beyond what any of us personally feel capable of but, fortunately, we’re a part of a global movement of spiritual and conscientious people who take on this mission of valuing human life in all of its conditions and will do this good and merciful work. It’s not only people of faith who take this to heart, to be sure—there are many nonprofit and humanitarian agencies contributing their part to this cause. Fundamentally, though, this has to be a mission of faith, as it has been from the beginning, because you have to believe in the value and potential of human life against all odds, even when it’s not evident in the people who are being helped. We need the eyes of Christ to see and embrace their value.

Let me state this concretely. When I look at the list of ministries supported by the American Baptist Churches and the Alliance of Baptists, virtually every single one serves the most

vulnerable populations. We have Luran Bethel and her colleagues who are on the leading edge of addressing human trafficking, especially in the international sex trade. We have Katherine and Wayne Niles, who work on development and medical aid in the Republic of Congo, ten years removed from the bloodiest wars in the world over the last half century. We have Kihomi Ngwemi and Nzunga Mabudiga, who work among the poor in Haiti, still recovering from the earthquake a few years ago. We have Tiffany Triplett Henkel and her staff at the Rauschenbusch Metro Ministries working with homeless and addicted people in the “Hell’s Kitchen” neighborhoods of Manhattan. We have our friends at the Seminario Intercultural Mayense in Chiapas, helping Mayan communities survive great injustices and violence directed against them. We have representatives in the U.S. and around the world working with refugees, with garment workers, with street children, with the incarcerated and those leaving prison, with chronically homeless and the newly homeless, through disaster-relief teams which go into communities ravaged by hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. Much of their work is underwritten by contributions to the One Great Hour of Sharing.

Missions didn’t always work this way. In generations past, the model of Christian missions was mainly sending people out to proselytize—to bring the Gospel message to nonbelievers, to teach them about the faith and seek their religious conversion. The focus has been on eternal salvation and “saving souls.” However, in the last few decades, Christian missions have become less of a competition

between religions and more of a humanitarian movement to aid people in distress. In many ways, it's long overdue.

I'm reminded of how this passage in John's Gospel speaks of Jesus' disciples as being "not of this world" but being called to serve others in this world. It is, in effect, the Great Commission as it was conveyed in John's Gospel. That doesn't mean we're to be "other-worldly", focusing our efforts only on a salvation after death. Rather, to put it in terms relevant to our present circumstances, "to not be of this world" means our values are not rooted in those characteristic of a world of harsh competition, with the hoarding of resources, or the exploitation of weaker people, or the destruction of the environment, or measuring the relative value of people based on what they produce. Instead, our values come from the divine desire for cooperation, sharing resources, personal sacrifice, and care for one's neighbor and especially the most vulnerable—all of which reflects the providence and generosity of God! This is what makes sense as real hope that people of faith bring to vulnerable lives.

We bring our faith in the world because we want to increase the length and quality of life for those who, otherwise, are the least likely to have it. This is why Jesus has called us to work with faith in this world as his servants—as people of faith and hope, improving the lives of people everyday—not with our eyes fixed on the "by-and-by," but on the "here and now!" We are to have faith in this world to give us insight and to inspire us to protect the most vulnerable and to give us the courage and the collective means to do this important work. Without faith, we would have no real reason to do this other than the goodness of our own heart. Often times, that's just not enough to go

the distance. Without faith, we can easily lose heart and give up, long before those in need are helped.

I have to believe that God must have a great deal of faith in the world to rely on human beings to improve their lot. I also have to believe that it's been faith—faith in God and faith in others and faith in science and faith in progress—that have inspired this redemptive hope that life could get better in time. Instead of capitulating to the severe politics of the survival of the fittest, God inspires people of faith to temper the cruelty, callousness, and injustice that competition breeds with values that are far better than that type of world.

We are not of that kind of world, but of the one that Christ envisioned and promised—a world where all of life is valued and protected and we are drawn to the best angels within us through a spirit that God inspires. It's a faith operating in this world that has helped challenge and change the worst of human behavior and solve its problems and worked to redeem the evils that plagued our common history in order to make the living conditions better than they have ever been.

This amazing improvement through progress didn't happen by chance; I have to believe it's been the grand design from the beginning. We are meant to be more and more like God, in our capabilities, in our sensibilities, in our creative genius, and in our moral character and care for others. We are to have faith in the world just as God has always had faith in the world.

Our Great Commission is this: keep on doing this good work of saving life wherever you can for as long as you have the strength, the

breath, and the spirit to live. By doing so, we will help bring salvation to this life and to the next.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
1 June 2014