

## “WHAT COUNTS?”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 24, 2016

Text: Luke 4:14-21

Someone asked me a very good question recently, to which I gave a poor answer. I'd like to have another go at it.

After seeing some of the pictures I have shown recently from my years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea, this person asked, “Do you think humanity is making progress? Are things *getting better?*”

That was a great question about the world, not just about New Guinea. But seeing the contrast between their lives and ours brought the question up.

Looking at photos from the remote highlands of New Guinea in the 1970's of people who were poor in so many ways by our standards, who lacked so many things we consider important or necessary, who had so few choices and opportunities, you might jump to a quick conclusion that things are immeasurably better now. Humanity has come a long way, we might say. And then you look again and see that many of the people in the photos are happy, they live outdoors close to nature, they own invaluable real estate and every day enjoy incredible views, you might wonder whether all the “advances” in civilization, you might doubt that things have improved at all. What have we lost, and what have we gained, as this world makes its way into the future, one day at a time?

How do you measure progress? What counts as progress? The people of Kopiago did not have steel axes or pottery or metal. They produced almost no art. They had no written language. They did not have penicillin or radios or vehicles. The wheel played no part in their culture that I ever saw. Does progress mean having more of these?

The Dunas were not perfect people. In pre-contact days they were very warlike people. Suicide was common. Women suffered many abuses. But they were extremely kind and helpful to us, which they didn't learn from a book. They were funny and beautiful and sad and ingenious, everything that people are everywhere. They did not need to learn about the discipline of simplicity; they had very simple lives, which we might envy.

So, where's the progress? Democracy? A court system?

Is humanity anywhere making progress? Let me try to answer that, taking off from today's Gospel reading.

Jesus said at Nazareth that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him because he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. Sounds like progress to me!

However, if we look around for the lasting measurable or countable **results** of God's Jesus project, we might conclude that his success was negligible. For every step forward, it seems the world has taken two backwards. There are still so many refugees, people living in captivity or with all sorts of serious medical problems. *Did Jesus fail* at what the Lord appointed him to bring? And have his disciples failed? Are we disappointments to God because we haven't brought heaven to earth? We've had a couple thousand years to do it. Is the Kingdom of God a bust?

Our First Reading tells of a time when the people of Israel collectively realized they had totally failed to fulfill God's law for them. They wept over how badly things had gone wrong. Yet Ezra told them, at their nadir, "Do not grieve; for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Have we done any better than they had? Do we live according to the law of love, which fulfills God's law? Are we making progress in that direction? Do you think you are?

I am sad for this world, because the same problems Jesus saw around him: captivity, blindness, poverty, ignorance, spite, cruelty, self-righteousness—are still here in abundance. Should we give up? Is there any hope of progress? Should we accept that things will never get better?

Once again: is humanity making progress?

This time, I want to say: That's the wrong question. The right question is whether the kingdom of God is **coming**. That is what we yearn for in the Lord's Prayer: that God's name be hallowed, God's will be done, and God's kingdom come. That is what constitutes progress in Christian terms. And that happens whenever and wherever you and I, relying on God, love one another. "The only thing that counts," according to Paul in Galatians 5, "is faith working through love." "The only thing that counts is faith working through love." Notice three things about that declaration.

First, it is a great leveler. Nobody is ahead of anybody else, nobody is better than anyone else, nobody is more perfect than anyone else, nobody has a disadvantage. The praise of Jesus, remember, fell on people like foreigners, thieves, tax collectors, and prostitutes. Nobody is ahead of anyone else. Everyone in any circumstance has the possibility of trusting in God, and acting out of that confidence. Trust or faith is not a skill. A teeny amount of faith is all God expects from his disciples.

Secondly, no works are greater than other works because of some visible character. You do not need to do miracles to be acting in love. You don't need to memorize a list of special tasks. It can be something as common as giving someone a cup of cold water to drink, Jesus said.

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, if there are people involved, you have the opportunity of being kind and patient, not insisting on your own way, seeking their betterment. There is absolutely no limit to what you can do, even when you have few resources.

Thirdly, it says does not say that a result is what counts, but what is going on. Faith *working* through love counts. God is not suspending judgment on us or on the world until we reach some goal of forward progress. God has judged us, we have been found wanting, he has forgiven us, and he has given us his Spirit to do what Jesus did: Work with what is right in front of you.

Jesus didn't say he had come to eradicate trouble, but to be constantly addressing it and making salvation happen for the people in his path. He did. He "succeeded," if you have to use that word. And we do, too, when we by the same Spirit use the gifts outlined in our Second Reading and everything else God has supplied us with—word and sacrament, the body of Christ, to put our faith to work by loving one another.

Faith active in love. That is *all that counts*.

This is *more* than the slogan of Hard Rock Café, "Love all, serve all." To say that it is *faith* active in love is to say that we do our loving out of thanksgiving to God, who has not only give us everything we have and are, but also claims us all in spite of our problematic histories and our limited capacities, having given his Son to die for our lack of success to date.. Faith in God gives us courage and strength as well as a motive to love others. "We love because he first loved us."

This may not be a very satisfying answer to the question of whether humanity is making progress. But it is the truest one I can give. God is making progress, and we are making progress, when our faith is active in love.

Amen.

