

“What Profit Is It?” / Matthew 16:24-28, Genesis 37:3-4, 12-28 / 10 August 3014

“What profit is it if we kill our brother? Maybe there's more profit in selling him. I mean, yes, we want to be rid of him, but could he be worth more to us alive than dead. Sell him to the Gypsies! He's got a strong enough back; he'll make a good slave. It's about time the spoiled little dreamer got put to work, anyway. What profit is it if we kill him? Maybe we can turn a profit on him. After all, have mercy, he's our own flesh and blood.” It's a question at least as old as the Book of Genesis: What are you worth to me? Oh, the price tags we put on people! I don't know if I'm just becoming more sensitive to it or if we, as a society, are really becoming so driven by greed that we assess people more and more according to how much we think they might be worth. Well, what is a person worth? What's your life worth, or mine? Kim Jong Un: what's he worth?

Think of those uncomfortable moments when the question of human worth grabs us by the ears and won't let us look away. There are faces on the street, there are places in our city, where we furtively run our left hand down the inside of our car door just to make sure that it's locked. Who are they, the people we hurry past, the people whose ramshackle homes cause us to look away? Who are the teenagers in their groups of three and four who saunter past and stare? The past fifteen years, the same weathered little man has been washing car windshields at the Sunoco station opposite the old Peabody High School in East Liberty. I know because I've seen him there since I was a student in the walled seminary right next door, and I saw him there just last month. I admit that I've always tried to get in and out of that place before he noticed me and squirted Windex on my windshield, in the hopes of exacting his price. I think of all the things that have changed in my life over the past fifteen years, but he's probably there right now. All of us have rolled up our car windows as we've approached the merge lane on the Fort Pitt Bridge, headed back out toward the suburbs, where the guy with the cardboard sign stands. A veteran perhaps, homeless, wounded in body or mind, maybe both. Is it our fault if we avert our eyes, pretend not to see him, focus instead on the car in front of us?

You would think, after living half a decade in the third world, I could deal kindly and gracefully with beggars. In poorer countries, they come at you in hordes, maimed and missing limbs, some piteously thin with a look of dangerous desperation, in their hungry eyes. You go into survival mode when confronted by them. No eye contact, that's the cardinal rule. Pick up your pace and walk with a determined gait. You would think I'd know the trick of navigating around the underprivileged in a responsible and compassionate way. But if there's a trick to it, I never learned it. When I go downtown, I end up giving all my pocket change to the first person who asks, and then I want to apologize to the next one. I want to explain, “I'm not uncaring. Really, I'm not. It's just that I don't carry much cash, see? I mostly use a debit card. Besides, I paid at the other end of the bridge.” Of course, the beggar doesn't want my explanations. He or she doesn't care that I gave my pocket change to another person in the same circumstances. Perhaps the beggar knows that I wasn't really giving money to a person; I was paying off my conscience, in all truth, telling it to shut up. Somewhere deep inside myself, in a place I rarely go, I'm aware that I have a share in the big, unwieldy system that makes beggars of some and ministers of others...and homemakers, and attorneys, and dentists, and janitors. Even if I could believe—and I don't entirely—that I bear no blame in his plight, I would still feel unworthy of the sweet deal I've been given. Somehow in this big, crazy world, I got to be me, and he got to be him. And maybe he made some

mistakes that brought him to this place in life, or maybe not, but what does blame matter when a person stands in such dire need? Oh, deep inside myself I'm aware that I can never really be whole and well on my own, that my lot is all tangled up with desperate people standing on street corners, with vacant eyes, wearing winter coats in August. What's a human life worth?

Years ago when I was engaged to a woman in New Orleans but living in New York—in the days before people met on the Internet or chatted on Skype—she and I used to fly back and forth to visit each other every month. Happily, that relationship went off the rails in a ball of fire just before we sent out the invitations. The first time my fiancée came to see me in New York, we drove the thirty miles down the Hudson River into the city, because she had never been there. As a devout Catholic, she wanted to see Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and so I took her to Midtown to show her the church. As we were making our way up the crowded steps to the main entrance, I noticed that the people in front of me were veering a little bit to the right, as if to avoid a broken step or a puddle of something unpleasant. Then I saw that it was a beggar that they were sidestepping, as haggard and unsightly a man as any I'd ever seen. Now, I just told you that I feel like apologizing to every beggar I see, and so I foolishly said to this fellow, “Sorry, I don't have any change.” He responded quickly in a hoarse, gravelly voice, a voice that clearly wasn't often used: “Oh, you don't have any change? Then here! Here's some change!” He reached into the little plastic container that he'd been holding out to passersby. He grabbed a handful of change, and he threw it at me.

It was a shock to be spattered with a shower of nickels and dimes, but most of what I saw flying toward me was copper pennies. And the angry message he sent me has stayed with me for many years. “Am I worth nothing but change? Aren't I worth a fiver? Aren't I worth a twenty? What am I worth to you?” What is a human life worth? And that's the question, isn't it?

There is so much conflict between brothers in these ancient Hebrew texts! Today's reading from Genesis is no different. All the brothers hate Joseph, the youngest, their father's favorite, with his dreams of grandeur and his colorful coat, a gift from their father who never gave presents to any child but Joseph. When they see him far from home, way out in the furthest reaches of the pastureland, they say, “There's the dreamer kicking around in his fancy coat, while we're living out here in the fields like hired hands, keeping father's sheep. Hey, father can't protect him now. We ought to kill the little brat.” Oh, how they hate him for being the sole object of their father's love! And in time their exaggerated talk about killing starts to get angrier and more serious. “Who would know?” they yell. Nobody says it, but everyone thinks it: “If Joseph's gone, then maybe father will notice *me*.” Reuben argues to save his life. In the end, Judah, the eldest, suggests cynically, “Maybe we can free ourselves of this little runt and turn a profit on him, too. What profit is there in killing him? None. But if we sell him, then we profit doubly.” They sold Joseph the dreamer into slavery, Joseph the favorite child, Joseph the golden boy. What did the Ishmaelites pay for him? What's a human life worth?

Now, I do understand that there are fields where profit is very much the bottom line, and the question of human worth is a curiosity for the ethics committee to ponder at its biannual meeting. There are enormously rich companies where you can faithfully put in twenty-five years, advancing the prestige and enriching the coffers of the corporation, only to be pushed into early retirement, cheated of half your benefits, and replaced by a

far less expensive employee who is less than half your age. There are unspeakably rich organizations that take money-saving shortcuts at the expense of the larger public, like big box stores who work their employees just under full-time, forcing them to seek from the state benefits that would be have to be provided by the employer if employees were allowed to work an additional five hours per week. There are industries that cut corners on environmental regulations, or pay the politicians to keep those regulations weak, thus endangering anyone who relies on water, air, or soil for life. How much money is saved? How much money is earned, and what is it used for? What profit is all of it, the back room deals, the pork barrel politics, the PR campaigns and misleading TV ads? Can money be made or saved by throwing a few hapless folks under the bus, usually people who don't have enough political power to fight back? What profit can we make by selling them off to the Ishmaelites? Profit! The profitable thing is not always the good thing. And the good thing is often quite costly. What would the world be if instead of asking, "What profit is it?" we asked, "What good is it?" Is it good to save ourselves money at the expense of others? Is it good to treat people as means to our ends? Is it good...or is it profitable? What are people worth?

It's not that we don't know what people are worth; it's just that we forget. Corporations, governments, voluntary organizations, churches, and even individuals—kind individuals, caring individuals: even we forget what people are worth. You and I, we forget that all human life is sacred. We forget that we cannot create nor even fully comprehend life—much less the person before us. We forget that each person, every last one, is endowed by his or her Creator with human dignity, intrinsically worthy of our respect. We forget, or perhaps we never even knew, that each person ever born is a unique expression of the very life of God, being lived out in our world of race, and clan, and social class, and poverty, and riches. Yes, we forget that people do not exist for what they appear to be worth. The way of the world creeps in to say, with Judah of old, "Yes, but what's this person's market value?" We know, deep in our oftentimes guilty hearts that even the least accomplished person, even the least respected, has great intrinsic value. We know in our heart of hearts that the people we hate really are indeed truly people, worthy of our love, or at least our civility. But we don't always act from our heart of hearts. We act from our gut of guts. We act out of our deeply held assumption that accomplishments equal worth, and accomplishments can be measured in two ways: money or power. Either one is acceptable currency in order to purchase our respect. But at the heart of things, deep down, we are better than that! The people we try not to see are better, but we who try not to see them, we too are better than our own worst thinking about others. We know better. We can do better. We must do better, for when we fail to see and embrace the humanity of the other, we begin to lose our own.

Aren't bodies and hearts sold into bondage all around us, and daily? Complain about them all you want, but someone is profiting from the presence of the so-called "illegal," who is willing to pluck chickens for cheap, and the woman who trades her own dignity for fast cash by appearing on shameful websites. Wherever you see human misery, you'll usually find profiteers: loan sharks, slum lords, drug dealers. Like Joseph's brothers, most of us could never bear the sight of outright violence toward our own flesh and blood. And yet, without blinking, we see them sold into slavery.

The Netflix series *House of Cards* is about a cutthroat politician in Washington, DC, and his ambitious wife. The wife is a complex and troubled character beautifully

played by Robin Wright. Like her husband, she's ruthless in her pursuit of power, but she often feels deep remorse for her own behaviors. In one scene she steps out of her swank office and walks past the same homeless man as usual. She's feeling guilty about firing most of her staff, to replace them with less scrupulous, more compliant underlings. To soothe her conscience, she hands the homeless man a twenty-dollar bill. Upon returning from her lunch break, the man hands the twenty back to her, perfectly folded up into an origami swan. Annoyed that a homeless person could possess a skill that she lacked, and puzzled that he doesn't want her money, she spends the rest of the episode poring over library books, trying—unsuccessfully—to teach herself origami. She doesn't know how her money can fail to purchase a clean conscience. Ah, we're so deeply touched and confused by the question of human worth! Perhaps we don't really know what a person is worth! When we see the homeless, the poor, the broken, we do not know what they have seen. We do not know what they know—things that we do not know! We don't know where they've been, who they are behind their off-putting appearances. We don't know what they're worth.

In our gospel reading, from the Book of Matthew, Jesus asks, “What does it profit them to gain the whole world but lose their own life?”—in Greek, their “psyche,” their spirit, or mind, or self. The psyche, in Greek, is the whole inner self, the self that most deeply matters. Jesus is saying that we can lose our truest and best selves in pursuing the profitable at the expense of the good. At times, when I hear the public discourse around questions of immigration, and refugees, and foreign policy, and capital punishment, and civil rights, I could almost believe that we are in the process of losing ourselves. And the great sadness that settles over our hearts these days, in a silent moment. Perhaps it, too, is due in part to our putting the profitable above the good in our personal lives. What is human life worth? What's your life worth, or mine? Instead of asking if a thing is profitable, ask whether it is good. Then may God give us the courage always to seek the good, even at the expense of the profitable. Amen.