

"What Is Our Worth?"
Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

My education in history was primarily focused on Western Europe, but I did learn a bit about Juan and Eva Peron in Argentina. It was Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's music that sparked a renewed interest for me.

"*Don't Cry for Me, Argentina*" might be familiar to you, but we should. Eva Peron died at the age of 33 in 1952. Her husband Juan was elected president, and she was elected chairperson of the Society of Beneficence, an organization that supported the down and outers.

Eva was not born into wealth. Rather, she was an illegitimate child born in the boonies, who always dreamed of fame and fortune. At last, she had found her dreams coming true, but the ladies of 'high society' could not stand the facts of her background, and did everything they could to force her from the Society of Beneficence, and they were successful.

Not a problem for Eva; she just created an organization that became the most profoundly effective social service society in the nation's history. She was so loved that they made her a saint shortly before she died, while the 'high society women' continued to hate her.

This is a prompt that humankind doesn't like those we think are 'beneath' us to rise above us. And, if I may be so bold, is this not also what those who are opposed to civil rights are about? It is the human 'pecking order' that gives rise to the sense of entitlement, the concept that we deserve it but you don't.

And then, we read the parable of those who work in the vineyard. This allegory is only found in St. Matthew's gospel and is told in St. Matthew's characteristic form: "*The reign of God is like*"

There is a group of academics called "The Jesus Seminar," who meet to read, study, and examine the Gospels; to clarify which passages Jesus spoke, and those that may have been altered or even made up. Here again is the concept of what is in and what is not.

Jesus shares a simple story of an owner of a vineyard seeking to hire day workers. You may have seen something like this at Home Depot or other home improvement centers. These men wait for someone in a pickup truck to stop and offer them a job, for several hours or the entire day. This was customary in Jesus' day as it is in ours.

In our parable, a landowner hires workers all through the day, some even as late as the final working hour. Same old same old, until it is time to be paid. The last man hired is paid a full day's pay. Perhaps the other workers first thought was something like, "*Hey, if he is paid for a full day's pay, imagine how much MORE I'm going to get!*"

Now, remember, this is hard labor under the hot Mediterranean sun. Can you picture the surprise, and then the anger, of the workers who have worked longer when they learn they too will receive the same pay?

Somehow, we have developed an intuitive notion that life ought to be fair. Job said all of life is unfair and in chapter 30 verses 25-27 (The Message): "What did I do to deserve this? Did I ever hit anyone who was calling for help? Haven't I wept for those who live a hard life, been heartsick of the lot of the poor? But where did it get me? I expected good but evil showed up. I looked for light but darkness fell."

Dr. Larry Crabb, a Christian psychologist, writes "*We are designed for a better world than this. And until a better world comes along we will groan for what we do not have.*" And, please listen to Phillip Yancy: "*We still expect a God of love and power to follow certain rules on earth, why doesn't he?*"

The ones hired last to get paid first and, to everyone's shock, they are given a full day's wage. Thus, their sense of disappointment is entirely understandable when they, who have worked for 12 hours, get the same as those who worked for one. **Except.**

Except for the fact that this is the way it is in God's world. Jesus says, "*The reign of God is like this.*" This is brutally fascinating in its challenge to our culture. Our society is made up of those who believe that "*The Lord helps those who help themselves,*" (Which, by the way, is NOT in the Bible) "*The early bird gets the worm,*" and "*You have to pull yourself up by the bootstrap.*"

I believe this is Jesus' point, boldly telling us how our society functions is not how God serves, and it is about time we notice the difference. And, this is so incredibly important NOW. With this parable, Jesus is saying that everyone is of equal quality and worth. No matter how or when you come into relationship with God and the church, you are welcome. No one will be turned away, ever.

Grace is God's business. In his book, "What's So Amazing About Grace," Phillip Yancey shows us that one of our problems is the nature of God's grace. It is difficult to accept, challenging to believe, and demanding to receive. Grace is outrageous. It shocks us with what it offers sinners.

Grace demonstrates what God does for others that we would never do for them. We are willing to do it for the 'not-so-bad,' but God begins with prostitutes and goes down from there. Grace is the gift whose price is everything to the one who gives, and nothing to the one who receives. Grace is gifted to those who never deserve it, only just recognize it, and scarcely appreciate it.

God's longing is to embrace the world in love, and to have the world return that love. We cannot earn this love; we are not worthy of it, and yet, God hands over this love to us anyway. Alleluia. Amen.