

**Remembering Egypt**  
Rev. Dr. Benton J. Trawick  
Grace Presbyterian Church  
July 21, 2019

**Deuteronomy 5: 12-15**  
**Deuteronomy 15: 4-15**

What is the value—of a human being? It's an interesting question, I suppose, one that can be answered in many ways. But more than merely an interesting question, or an intriguing philosophical discussion, it is a vital, fundamental question that establishes the very basis of how we treat one another, how we live together as people of faith, as citizens of a nation, as the human inhabitants of God's good earth. It is also a question that a full, in-depth contemplation of sabbath helps us to answer in a faithful way. So, let's spend a little time with that question: **What is** the value of a human being?

One answer to the question, it turns out, is not a whole awful lot. I've seen a similar article before, but this week I looked up a blog post on [datagenetics.com](http://datagenetics.com).

I think it dates to April of 2011, so the market values are a little off, but the post documents that if we were to take a human being and put them into a SPAM—a Superb Person Atomizing Machine (this is hypothetical, by the way, if it weren't it would be truly ghastly)—if we were to take a person and put them into a machine that reduced them to the elemental atoms that make up the human body: Cesium, Calcium, Cobalt, and Chromium, Strontium, Bromine, Chlorine, Fluorine, everything from Aluminum to Zinc—and if we weighed those elemental particles out and sold them, the value of a human being would be about \$160, varying somewhat according to our weight.<sup>1</sup> I'm probably worth about twenty or thirty dollars more right now but I'm trying to be worth less.

But of course, we recognize instinctively that this method of answering the question, "What is the value of a human being?" is both simplistic and cruel—it reduces the value of a human being simply to what can be extracted from us, as if we were nothing more than a chemical casserole of elements and compounds.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.datagenetics.com/blog/april12011/](http://www.datagenetics.com/blog/april12011/)

Another way of answering the question, “What is the value of a human being?” is “It depends. What do they do with their lives or what do they make of themselves?” There was an old item from a publication of Ripley’s Believe It or Not that pictured a plain bar of iron worth (at the time) \$5. The same bar of iron if made into horseshoes, would be worth \$50. If it were made into needles, the article stated, it would be worth \$5,000. If it were made into balance springs for fine Swiss watches, or intricate machinery, it would be worth \$500,000.<sup>2</sup> Now we can quibble over the pricing, but the principle here is that the value of a thing is measured by its utility and by its specialization. A horseshoe is useful but not very special. But an intricate balance spring? Well, it’s more highly specialized, so it’s worth more. Simple economics, I suppose.

And we do something of this sort with people, in a way, when we value people by the work they perform. Think of how much our culture values hotel housekeepers or migrant farm workers—they are valued like horseshoes, useful, but not specialized—but we place a higher value on people who can do specialized things—a neurosurgeon is assigned a greater “value,” or an elite athlete, or a brilliant inventor is economically “worth more,” and therefore paid more.

But I want us to see that this way of assigning value to people is really no different than the Superb Person Atomizing Machine—it values people based upon what can be extracted from them—what work, what use, what specific product or output. And so, it also, in the end, is dehumanizing. If all of your value is reduced to what you are “good for” or “useful for,” well then, you live in a world where some people are highly desirable and other people are seen as expendable or useless.

And when you become expendable or useless, you are able to be cast aside. I remember, from an elementary school lesson on American Folk heroes, the story of John Henry. Perhaps it is legend, perhaps the story is based in some truth, but the story is this: John Henry was a steel-driving man, a worker tasked with hammering a steel drill into rock, so that the explosive charges could be set to blast railroad tunnels out of rock. And of all the steel-driving men, John Henry was the biggest and the strongest and

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in James S. Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1988), 232.

the fastest, and the hardest working. One day, an agent from a steam drill company brought a new-fangled steam drill out to the worksite, to show how much more practical and efficient it was than human labor—so John Henry undertook to outwork the steam drill, a classic contest of man versus machine. They labored all day and part of the next in two separate tunnels—and John Henry worked tirelessly, while the steam drill overheated from time to time and had to cool down. John Henry drove that tunnel straight through the rock—and he beat the steam drill. But he overdid it, so in the words of the folk song, “He worked so hard that he broke his poor heart, and he laid down his hammer and he died.” I remember thinking of the story and the song as stirring and heroic—but now, I see them as horrific.

John Henry—the biggest the strongest, the fastest and the best of the steel drivers has his very value brought into question when a machine can do the same work that he does. In an effort to prove his continued worth, he has to work harder, longer, faster, more—and he eventually works himself to death. But had he lived—eventually, inevitably, John Henry would have been replaced, because his economic value to the railroad company would have been supplanted by a machine.

As soon as the company could extract more from the machine than from John Henry...well, he would be expendable. If John Henry got old...expendable. If John Henry got injured on the job...expendable. If, by some unexplained miracle, John Henry were to become pregnant.... expendable. And expendable people get kicked to the curb. Do you see how dehumanizing it is when we value people merely according to their utility? By what we can extract from them?

It leads, especially for those at the margins, to a place of despair, a sort of economic hopelessness that leads to an existential hopelessness. If a person can be considered no longer useful—well, then they become useless...don't they? And useless is valueless.

Put another way, when we value people according only to their usefulness, we commodify them, that is we turn them into something that can be bought and sold. And that—the buying and selling of people...is slavery.

So here we come to sabbath—as an economic reality, and a justice essential. Our first scripture lesson, the sabbath commandment from Deuteronomy, says: “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the

Lord your God commanded you. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work: you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox, or your donkey, or your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male or female slave can rest as well as you.”

Now—do you see what has been done there? It is of vital importance to our very humanity! On the sabbath—everyone is valued equally! Everyone is given rest...commanded to rest. Everyone is given time off. The CEO rests. The line worker rests. Their value is equal and God-given, not humanly determined or assigned, not based upon extractable utility. They are restored as human BEINGS, liberated from being seen as human DOINGS.

“Remember Egypt,” God says. “Never forget. Remember that you were a slave, you were commodified, you were bought and sold, your value was only measured in how many bricks you could produce, there was never a day off, if you were tired, you worked, if you stopped working you were beaten, it was dehumanizing, I liberated you from that, it is no more.

The sabbath is not merely a day off—it is a casting off of a whole way of valuing (and devaluing humanity). “Remember that you are not a commodity,” God is saying. “And of equal importance, remember that no one ELSE is a commodity either.”

Now there is one aspect of this sabbath commandment that is troubling, at face level—it says remember that you once were slaves in Egypt and I liberated you. So, keep the sabbath. And give your male and female slaves a sabbath. Do you see the catch there? You are no longer slaves...but you own slaves?

Well, let's explore that. In the ancient economy, which was chiefly agricultural, slavery, or bondsmanship/bondswomanship often began as a pragmatic arrangement. In other words, slaves were not necessarily enslaved by force initially...but a poor person, who had no land, no food, no shelter, no means of support, could place themselves in service of another as a means of receiving food, shelter, support. If we remember our Biblical history, that's how the Hebrew people came to be in Egypt in the first place. Driven by famine, they went to Egypt in search of food, sustenance, a better life. They could sell themselves into service, for a time, get their

physical needs met, and over time, work off their debt. But the system became cruel and dehumanizing because people were kept perpetually in a state of dependence, could be bought and sold without their say so, were given no freedom or upward mobility, so that their usefulness could be extracted perpetually and increasingly, forcibly.

In God's commandments in Deuteronomy, the sabbath is tied to the sabbatical...that is, one day each week is set aside as a day of liberty or liberation—freedom from work, a day of rest and restoration.

And then one year out of seven was to be set aside for the liberation from debts—if a person has worked for six years, you will in the seventh year set that person free, and you will do so with the tools to continue in that freedom. You shall not send them out empty-handed, but provide liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your wine press, give to them the full bounty that God has given you. Why? Again—remember where you came from. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord redeemed you. Give to them the freedom, the bounty, the provision that I have given to you.

Put another way, remember that you have been given much...and of those to whom much has been given much will be required.

Now—we can rightly call that economic system barbaric and archaic, and some might call the sabbath and sabbatical commandments outdated...but we need to recognize that we have simply come up with more modernized ways of devaluing and preying upon the poor. We don't have slavery...but can we remember the plight of the mineworker or the factory worker in more recent years? Think of mine workers who were paid to work in the mines...at an unlivable wage. They were allowed to purchase life necessities from the company store—food, clothing, essentials. They could live in company housing. But they were never paid enough to get free of their debt. Remember the old Tennessee Ernie Ford song? “You load sixteen tons, and what do you get—another day older and deeper in debt. Saint Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go—I owe my soul to the company store.” Thus assuring that the company will be able to continue to extract labor, and resources, until nothing is left. The workers work themselves to death, the mine owners extract the profits, like the strip mining of human beings.

So how is the sabbath a corrective to all of these things? Well, if on one day out of seven we recall in a disciplined way that we are all valued equally by God based upon who we are not what we do or produce or what is extracted from us—well then, that one day impacts the other six. We live the other six days as people who have been reminded of our own value and our neighbors' value. We are reminded to treat our neighbor justly, kindly, generously, to pay them fairly. To treat our neighbor as a human being of God-imparted value.

And remember that the neighbor we are to be mindful of includes the alien in our midst. Our present treatment of the aliens in our midst and at our borders is inadequate, inhumane, unbiblical, and unconscionable. The language we too often condone in speaking of the aliens in our midst and at or borders is unholy.

The notion of forced mass deportations is cruel, and the proposed concept of zero refugee admissions to the United States in the year 2020—zero...ZERO? hardly displays a holy hospitality toward those most desperately at risk.

We as a nation of course cannot open our borders to all comers. No nation can. We must find balance, we must sometimes say no. But to treat those who come as less valuable—as undesirable or undeserving—as less human? Well, from a faith perspective, that is a casting aside of our identity and our calling as the people of God.

What is the value of a human being? The sabbath is a day for contemplating and recalling that. It is a day for saying no to slavery. No to injustice. No to dehumanization. No to commodification. And yes to rest. Yes to intrinsic God-given value. It is a day to cherish life—all life. And it is a day to remember the Egypt—and never go back.