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Luke 16: 14-15; Luke 6: 6-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, We boldly ask you to help us be better Christians. We pray in the name of the one we follow, Amen.

Moneyball

Michael Lewis is a journalist and author. You may know his work better than his name. He wrote *The Blind Side*, *Liar's Poker*, *The Fifth Risk*, and *Moneyball*, some of which were made into very good movies.

It's *Moneyball* I want to talk about today. *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*.

Set in 2002, Lewis's book is the remarkable story of the Oakland Athletics and their general manager at the time, Billy Beane. For decades, Major League Baseball had been divided between rich teams such as the New York Yankees and poorer teams such as the Oakland A's.

At the opening of the 2002 season, for example, the Yankees had a payroll of \$126 million. The A's had a payroll of about \$40 million. In other

words, the A's were paying less than a third of what the Yankees were paying for talent.

This situation allowed rich teams to raid the poor teams of free agents. As soon as a player broke through to superstar status, he was purchased by a richer team.

Conventional wisdom held that the poor teams couldn't compete against the big-market, richer teams.

Indeed, after the 2001 season, Jason Giambi, the A's first baseman and the American League's Most Valuable Player, signed a \$120 million contract ... with the Yankees.

But something was up. Against all conventional wisdom, the A's didn't fold.

Even after losing Giambi they were successful, winning their division, making the playoffs – and in that 2002 season, tying the Yankees at 103 wins.

That's what Michael Lewis wanted to explore. *How were they winning?*

It turned out that Oakland general manager Billy Beane, who was 40 at the time, was working with an elaborate system of mathematical statistics to determine what kind of players could actually win ballgames. They weren't

necessarily the players with the glamour stats of batting averages and runs batted in.

The statistical system had been developed over 25 years by Bill James, author of the *Baseball Abstract*. His contention was that things like total bases and on-base percentages, even if a batter walks, are a more reliable measure of a player's worth.

Because on-base percentages and total bases weren't as flashy or as closely watched by scouts, the players excelling at them could often be bought quite cheaply. Hence, moneyball.

What it all came down to was that things we love -- pitching speed, stolen bases, flashy fielding -- were overvalued. Getting on base -- not making an out -- was undervalued.

Well, in Michael Lewis's hands, the 2002 season became a book, then a movie starring Brad Pitt. It made a great narrative because the A's started out with 11 losses. Everyone was laughing at them. They were the Bad News Bears of baseball.

But then they turned it around. They won 20 straight games, which put them in rarefied territory. They then went on to tie those rich Yankees with 103 wins, win their division and make the playoffs.

Moneyball – in both book and movie version -- appears to be about baseball.

But if you know Michael Lewis, you might question that appearance. His book and movie, *The Blind Side*, is about a family who takes in a homeless high school boy who ends up playing college and pro football.

Liar's Poker is about Lewis's time on Wall Street, watching people being paid obscene amounts of money, as he puts it, "to do things of dubious social utility."

So when asked what *Moneyball* was about, it's not surprising that Lewis answered, "It's about how people get mis-valued."

It's about how people get mis-valued.

The vehicle for his story was baseball, because baseball statistics are clean. It's easy to see who won and who lost. But at its heart, *Moneyball* is a story about how lots of people get mis-valued.

We know something about that here.

We know how people can get mis-valued if they are poor or homeless. If they are mentally ill or mentally challenged or brain damaged. If they are addicted or disabled or sick. If they are homosexual or if they are undocumented.

But if we are to be the church of the one who taught “Love your neighbor as yourself,” we simply cannot mis-value people.

We cannot *devalue* people.

Back in the Old Testament, God instructed the prophet Samuel to choose a king for Israel from among the sons of Jesse. Jesse paraded all his sons before Samuel, and Samuel thought they all looked promising. But the Lord kept whispering *no, no, not him, not that one*.

Finally, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons. Almost as an afterthought, Jesse said, well, there’s the boy David, out tending sheep.

The boy his father almost didn’t mention, the boy undervalued by Samuel and Jesse, turned out to be the Lord’s choice to be king.

What the Lord told Samuel was this: **“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature.... for the Lord does not see as**

mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (I Samuel 16: 7)

When we arrive at the New Testament, we discover that the gospel writer Luke is the foremost champion of undervalued people. And we hear Jesus echo those Old Testament teachings – which, of course, were his Scriptures.

If you'd like to read along, turn in your Bibles to **Luke 16: 14-15**.

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed (Jesus). So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; *but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.*

What is prized by human beings, what is valued by human beings, is an abomination in the sight of God.

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote that for some reason, we value tall people. While only 14 percent of American men are 6 feet tall and over, 58 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are 6 feet and over.

We Americans have an unstated preference for tall people. We give them the benefit of the doubt when it comes to leadership, intelligence, courage – all sorts of positive traits.

When the Oakland A's front office read that, they decided to invest only with companies run by short, portly people. They figured those folks had earned their way to the top. They weren't there because they were tall.

I love that kind of thinking. I love counterintuitive thinking.

That's why we employ art and music and improvisational drama here.

That's why we have gardens and a reading room.

That's why we invite people to eat with us even if they can afford to go to Tommy's next door and buy their lunch.

That's why our Round Table invites homeless parishioners to help and advise each other.

That's why so much of what we do doesn't directly impact getting someone into a house.

Because not having a house is often just a symptom of much deeper, more profound issues.

The way we have chosen to attack homelessness ... is by valuing people.

A young man once visited us. He said that while his church might have invited undervalued people to worship, they never would have expected those same people to minister back to them.

We expect it. We need it. We depend on it.

We would close down our laundry room tomorrow if Alec and Douglas stopped washing clothes.

We wouldn't know how to start worship if Paul and Richard weren't here to hand out bulletins, or Isaiah didn't light the candles.

We would close the dining hall if Kenny and Alton and Frank and Sippio didn't put those chairs up and down.

By inviting everyone to serve each other, we try to equalize the value system.

Perhaps nowhere is our system of devaluing people more on display than in our history with race. I've talked in here before about attorney Bryan Stevenson's work in getting innocent people freed from Death Row. It is almost impossible to look at that work without recognizing the racial element that has put so many dark-skinned people on Death Row.

Like dominoes, you can see the progression from slavery to lynching to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. We basically designed one system after another to devalue anyone who is not white.

In Montgomery, Alabama, Bryan Stevenson helped found The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. As part of the lynching exhibition there, 6-foot hanging steel monuments represent the 800 counties in which lynchings occurred.

Stevenson encourages each county to then claim its copy of the monument to take home and research. He hopes they will eventually admit and memorialize the lynchings that took place on their soil.

Greenville County had four such lynchings. As you may know, *lynching* is a legal term for someone killed in an act of domestic terrorism. It can refer to an actual hanging, but it doesn't have to.

This Thursday night our county will hold a session on our first lynching victim. His name was George Green, and he was shot in Taylors in 1933.

I'm proud to say that our own Amy Sutherland and Susan Stall are involved in this remembrance project. I'm even prouder to say that Greenvillians have responded in such numbers that Long Branch Baptist Church

can't hold us all. Organizers are trying to see if they can stream it on the Community Remembrance Project Facebook page for those who can't get in.

Certainly, back in 1933, the legal establishment didn't care very much when George Green was shot. He was devalued.

We may not still be lynching people, but we are still devaluing them. We do it all the time, from Wall Street to the streets of Poe Mill. But Scripture promises that our God does not. He sees not the stature, not the appearance, not the skin color, but the heart.

And so our Christian church cannot be a place where some people are overvalued and some are undervalued. It simply cannot.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus interacts with all sorts of undervalued people – lepers and women, prostitutes and tax collectors, demon-possessed men and crippled women. That is intentional.

When we enter the Advent season in three weeks, we will focus on a savior who started life with a poor family in a stable, surrounded by lowly shepherds. It's not just a sweet story. It is an intentional theology that cuts to the heart of how we mis-value people. Luke's manger scene is a first-century *Moneyball*.

In chapter 6, Luke tells another little story that shows a person's value being lost amid highbrow wrangling of overvalued people.

If you'd like to read along, turn in your Bibles to **Luke 6: 6-11**.

⁶ On another sabbath (Jesus) entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered.

⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there.

⁹Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored.

¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus taught.

But in this instance, as in so many, we see religious authorities who don’t care about, don’t value, their neighbor.

Billy Beane is still with Oakland, though he’s been promoted to executive vice president. Last season, the Athletics had the fourth best record in the major leagues -- though their payroll was third from last. This season they finished second in the American League West and made the playoffs.

They’re still playing Moneyball out in Oakland.

Closer to home, Jesus is still playing Moneyball. That is, he’s refusing to devalue any of his brothers and sisters.

Near the end of Luke’s gospel, we are left with a picture of our Savior, hanging on a cross between two thieves, two people of no discernible value. And even there, *even there*, what does he do?

He invites them to join in his resurrection.

Michael Lewis says *Moneyball* is about how people get mis-valued.

We might say the same of our gospel.

Amen.

