First Congregational UCC
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
September 20, 2026
Amazing, Irritating Grace; Matthew 20:1-16

Did you know that the speed limit is 25 on East South River, and that our parking lot is a perfect spot for police officers to camp out waiting for people to drive by going faster than that? I learned this last year, when I'd been at Angels Diner for lunch and realized that my next meeting was way further away than I realized.

I was just about to pass the church when I saw the blue and red lights fire up. *Oh dear… I am going to be a lot later than ten minutes*. While the officer ran my license and registration – and I feel like I need to confirm I did not play the pastor card! – I texted Zaina in the church office to ask her to make a call to let them know I'd be delayed. *Look out the window to see why*.

The officer returned with a warning slip. I was stunned. "I deserved a ticket!" I exclaimed without thinking. The police officer was not expecting me to fight him on the warning. He laughed and walked away. To be clear, I didn't want a ticket. But I really did deserve one.

We tend to believe that people should get what they deserve, and boy if our parable doesn't remind us of this little fact of human nature.

The writer and researcher Brene Brown has retold the parable of the vineyard workers a few times over the years. She is a little loosey-goosey with the details but that's not where the weight of this story lies. She recounts how some of the workers started early in the morning, with a labor contract in place. And how more and more workers joined the early birds in the field throughout the day, with vague promises that they'd be paid properly too. And how those exhausted, 12-hour shift workers were beside

themselves with anticipation when they saw the manager handing out full paychecks to the latecomers. They were going to make bank for their long day if the fools who worked for less than an hour made off with a day's wage. Our translation of the parable says that the workers grumbled, but in Brene Brown's version of the parable the workers cuss like sailors.

She goes on to offer her own strong reaction to the parable, which she calls downright unamerican: "The first time I heard that parable, I was like, this is total BEEEP. And here's what I hope. I hope if you got there at three o'clock and you got paid $100 when you actually only were there, like a third of the time I was there…

I hope your cart breaks down on the way home and it costs *exactly* how much you got overpaid to fix it."[1]

To be clear, Brene Brown – a researcher and writer on topics like shame and vulnerability – is kidding. Mostly. She's playfully acknowledging how intensely we tend to believe people should get what they deserve. If they work hard and do everything right, gold stars and a round of applause. And money, definitely money. And if they don't work hard – no matter the reason – then they certainly don't deserve any handouts.

Unfortunately, this way of being in the world doesn't always end well. A hyper-focus on who deserves what can leave people at times anxious and prideful, full of resentment and prone to comparison. Pretty soon, you have an epidemic of people who are convinced they're never quite good enough or they're better than everybody else – sometimes at the same time. And you have people who would rather their neighbors not have enough if that's what it takes to keep things fair.

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[1] From Unlocking Us with Brené Brown: Brené and Ashley on Living BIG, Part 2 of 2, Jan 4, 2023 https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bren%C3%A9-and-ashley-on-living-big-part-2-of-2/id1494350511?i=1000645343103&r=146

But even though this parable does an excellent job of depicting human nature, that isn't its primary purpose. Jesus tells the parable to give us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven – to reveal something about the nature of God.

If it isn't clear, the landowner in this story is our God-character. At daybreak this landowner seems like any other landowner. But then things get weird. Jesus doesn't say there was so much work to do the landowner needed more people. Jesus doesn't say that people were banging on the gates of the vineyard, looking for work. No, the landowner keeps seeking people out and inviting them in. All day long, right up until closing time. And then, that senseless generosity. It's a scandal. But then grace always is. God's grace is not just amazing in this story. God's grace is irritating.

We tend to believe that people should get what they deserve, and the thing about grace is that there's nothing we can do to deserve it.

A favorite preacher of mine famously said that "A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*… Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth."[2]

Here's the good news, friends: God adores you. Full stop. You are loved and forgiven, completely. So is everyone else. Some people are late to the party – maybe they got pulled over on the way. But not one of us can earn our place in the Kingdom of Heaven. It's not about good people and bad people, getting what they deserve. There's just God's beloved children, sinners doing the best they can, loving fiercely, failing a lot, hurting one another and themselves, trying harder, learning lessons, forgetting and trying again. And

[2] https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/?offset=1525777200636

there's just God, seeking us out and standing by, ready to pour out more grace. It's amazing, even if it breaks all of our rules about people getting what they deserve.

But breaking rules and shattering assumptions and turning expectations upside down is what the gospel is all about. After all: "The last will be first and the first will be last." As one preacher reminds us, "That is the message and ministry of Jesus. His life, death and resurrection didn't establish a realm where the most deserving get all of the power and glory but instead creates a [kingdom] where all people share in the power and glory of God together, forever. And the first to receive that power and glory will be the ones who the world believes are the least deserving: the ones who are pushed out and left alone on the margins of society, those who are last."[3]

This sounds like better news for the last than the first, if you have a lot of gold stars, if you grew up shouting "last one there is a rotten egg," if you have power and privilege in the realm of this world. But this is good news for everyone, and for eternity. The last will be first, and there is enough amazing grace for all. Thanks be to God.

[3] https://georgiapreach.wordpress.com/2023/09/24/first-and-last/