

“A Life of Grace”

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 20:1-16
September 13, 2026

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Writing about the angry workers in this story, Brandon Scott says, “The essential complaint is that the master has destroyed the order of the world.”

In a Roman world built on hierarchies one’s worth depended upon one’s social location in the hierarchy. You knew what you were entitled to by where you ranked. That’s what it meant to be fair.

And this story Jesus told, explodes all those ideas. The master isn’t fair at all. He doesn’t treat people based upon merit or the amount of work they did. He has the audacity to treat all the workers the same and to compensate them equally. In this tale, one’s worth is not established by one’s labor or one’s place in the hierarchy.

Instead, this is a story about generosity and grace. How grace is abundant and can be shared with everyone.

In his commentary on Matthew, scholar Mark Allan Powell informs us that Jesus told this story to the apostles as they were on their way to Jerusalem where he is to be arrested and killed. Jesus doesn’t seem to be engaging in public ministry as much at this point in the story. Instead, he is providing private instruction to the disciples. Those disciples still don’t seem to fully understand what Jesus is about, so he’s trying, yet again, to explain it to them.

Powell writes, “The final focus of this instruction is on the inhibiting effect of possessions and on the tendency for God’s reign to foster a curious reversal that makes the last to be first and the first to be last.” Simply put, Jesus wants to turn the social order upside down and establish a new and better way of being human together.

The disciples had been discussing rewards and who gets what in the kingdom, when Jesus tells them this story that explodes our standard human ideas of merit, desert, entitlement, and fairness. And, in so doing, Jesus calls out a true weakness of the human condition—our envy and small-mindedness.

Here’s how Powell interprets the implications of the parable:

It offers a memorable and extraordinary exposition of a smallness endemic to the human condition, an egotistical absorption that prevents people from rejoicing in the good fortune of others. Even those who have received everything they hoped for can be disgruntled if others are equally blessed. What is it in human nature that makes us so mean? We don’t just want our lives to be good; we want them to be *better* than the lives of other people. The parable . . . exposes the folly of envy.

Yikes!

I’m afraid Powell is accurate in his perception of human nature. Jesus isn’t just trying to upend an exploitative Roman social and economic system. Jesus is exposing a real problem that plagues humanity—we too often fail at generosity and grace. Maybe that is the deep source of so many of our problems?

According to Powell, a rich tradition existed of Jewish stories concerning people who are paid unexpected wages. All of those stories make moral points about generosity. Often a diligent worker receives more than expected.

While Jesus’ story stands in that tradition, that’s not the story Jesus told. What makes Jesus’ story new and unique is that he focuses not upon merit, but upon *need*. You see, the master doesn’t provide some excessively generous wage. He gives a day’s wage to the workers, which is a subsistence wage.

So, when the master gives all the workers a day's wage, he isn't giving them what they've earned, he's giving them what they *need*. Powell writes, "the people who want to work but cannot get hired still need a day's wage to feed their families."

The parable invites us to imagine a world in which everyone has what they need. Not what is earned. Not what is fair. But where needs are met so that all people might have a chance to truly live.

This would be the first true step to a world structured upon grace. The world of ancient Rome had not achieved that. And, neither have we. We are still learning the moral lessons of Jesus' parables. We humans still have much growing up to do.

Friday, humanity marked the 25th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. I assume that if you are old enough, then in recent days you spent time remembering and reflecting.

September 11, 2001 was a beautiful morning in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where I was living at the time. Clear blue skies, mild temps, the sun shining. Early that morning I drove to the Farmer's Market in the town square. On my drive the top news story was the assassination of one of America's allies in the mujahadin. A harbinger, though we did not realize it at the time.

I was in a great mood as I arrived at work that morning at Rolling Hills Baptist Church. I was the associate pastor in charge of the youth ministry, only three months into my first full-time call. That spring I had completed my PhD in philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. I was 27 years old.

At one point in the morning, I left my office and wandered down to the secretary's office. I was surprised to see that she had the little black-and-white television behind her desk turned on. That was unusual. She seemed to me to be watching some action-adventure movie. I asked her "What are you watching?" And she looked up, "You don't know."

All of us had that moment when the naivete of the world before the attacks ended and the realization began to dawn that we were entering a new era. Now, in retrospect, the late nineties and the turn of the millennium seem like a golden age, though we did not realize it at the time.

Soon, I left the office and returned home, to better watch the news transpire. And to try to check-in with friends living in New York. They were, of course, impossible to reach. Though I'd later hear their stories, including one friend who had to evacuate the subway car he was riding to work and spent most of the rest of the day trying to walk back to Brooklyn with millions of other people.

That afternoon and evening I returned to work. As the youth minister, I felt the obligation to check in on all the teenagers in the church to see how they were handling the situation. Businesses and normal activities had shut down, everyone unsure of what was happening. The teens were disoriented, anxious, afraid. Just like everyone else. I didn't have much in the way of answers for them.

This year is my 30th year of ordained ministry, and when I reflect upon my career to date, it feels like I've been operating in response to crisis pretty much the entire time. 9/11 three months into full-time ministry. Then our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Indian Ocean tsunami. Hurricane Katrina. The Great Recession. The intense polarization of American politics. The rise of gun violence. The reckoning with racial injustice in the wake of so many murders of Black men and women. The Covid-19 pandemic. Wars in Ukraine, Syria, Gaza, and more. All while the changing climate became increasingly more ominous. And then, this last year, our experiences during Operation Metro Surge. A generation of ministry with one major crisis after another.

This anniversary finds us both remembering those days and reflecting on all that has happened since.

While reflecting this week, I turned to an essay by Wendell Berry that he wrote the year after the attacks, entitled "A Citizen's Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America." And, goodness, was that a sobering read.

Wendell Berry died on August 31st, and there has been much written in remembrance of him and his body of work. He was my favorite poet. Even in my short time as your Senior Pastor, I've quoted a handful of my favorite Wendell Berry poems.

Berry's poetry is beloved, resonating deeply with my spirituality, bringing me comfort and consolation. His essays, however, are a different matter. Berry's essays provoke, convict, and needle me. They often attend to a topic in a way I hadn't quite thought of before. Sometimes he comes across as a contrary old cuss, refusing to understand the contemporary world. Yet, in his essays I find wisdom that I must wrestle with. Often really wrestle.

So, this week, I wanted to read something of what he had said in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and our national responses to it.

Well, he thought we were responding out of fear and ignorance and not with our best selves. And that the steps we were taking were going to endanger our freedom and our democracy.

He didn't see much that was new in our response to the attacks. He thought they had just exposed some of the flaws of our nature that had been existing problems. Our reliance upon war and violence, our rush for the technocratic solution, our refusal to engage in genuine public dialogue with self-criticism and self-correction. Themes he'd been emphasizing for decades at that point.

He reminded us that as we rushed to call other people evil, we were hypocritically forgetting the evils we are guilty of. Of deepest concern to him—the ways we care for land and people. Which, for him, are deeply intertwined. He thought the gravest danger we faced after the attacks was the same one we had faced before—"the estrangement of our people from one another and from the land."

So, how should we have responded? He recommended civility. "To be civil," Berry wrote, "is to conduct oneself as a responsible citizen, honoring the lives and the rights of others."

He also recommended patriotism, and defined it this way—Patriotic "citizens must love their land with a knowing, intelligent, sustaining, and protective love. They must not, for any price, destroy its beauty, its health, or its productivity. And they must not allow their patriotism to be degraded to a mere loyalty to symbols."

"Charity, civility, . . . true patriotism, and lawfulness" were what he recommended.

He also suggested a national security response, but his idea of what secures the nation was very different than what the nation chose to do. True national security, Wendell Berry wrote, would start with "practical measures to conserve and to use frugally the nation's resources." Husbandry, thrift, stewardship, neighborliness. These were the virtues and practices that would actually secure the nation.

True national security, he wrote, would develop plans for healthy soils, forests, and watersheds. Would cultivate human communities. Would encourage the domestic economy. Would prioritize agriculture. Because, as he wrote, "All our military strength, all our police, all our technologies and strategies of suspicion and surveillance cannot make us secure if we lose our ability to farm, or if we squander our forests, or if we exhaust or poison our water sources." He called all of this "common sense." But found it lacking in the national debate.

Then he closed the essay with a word for Christians, reminding us that the Gospel is a "summons to peace." We were supposed to move beyond anger and fear to forgiveness, mercy, love, and compassion. These are the tools of justice and of peace, according to our faith.

To read Berry's essay now, after a quarter century, is to realize all that we got wrong in that time. To imagine an alternative history, where we prioritized compassion, thrift, community, and conservation. To dream of the better place we might now be.

To read Berry is to also be reminded that the message of Jesus Christ turns the world upside down. Jesus calls us to dream different dreams. To imagine alternatives to the status quo. To risk doing things differently than they've always been done. To overcome the weaknesses of the human condition and embody the image of God that we all possess. To repent of our sins and experience the fullness and the abundance of God's grace.

This autumn, we'll be reading the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Parables are tricky things, often containing layers and opening up possibilities far beyond the initial, simple reading. What can we learn from these ancient stories Jesus told to apply to our concerns today?

I believe we'll learn about the life of grace that Jesus calls us to. A life that equips us with what we need to face the uncertainties and anxieties of the world, to find our meaning and purpose and sense of

belonging. Grace that equips us for lives of resonance and flourishing, in which we radiate with the glory of God.

Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grapes, sharp sweet
of summer's end. In time's maze
over the fall fields, we name names
that went west from here, names
that rest on graves. We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale, in the seed's marrow.
Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.