

“Belonging in America”
September 27, 2026

Leviticus 19:33-34
Matthew 20:1-16

On recent Sundays, I’ve preached about belonging. First, I looked at how we belong to one another in a congregation. Then last Sunday, I considered the affirmation that we belong to God.

I thought that would be it.

Instead, it looks as though I’ve developed an unexpected sermon series. Because today I want to explore what it means for us to “belong” in America. It might seem that this is a more secular issue, one better looked at in a lecture or an essay than a sermon. But there are many voices being raised—and some of them are religious voices—questioning who belongs here in the United States. This has been going on for some time, of course, but the questioning has increased in recent years. And the voices are getting louder.

Christian “integralists” want to integrate the power of the church and the power of the government in order to return the United States to being the Christian nation they mistakenly think it once was.

Others say there is little, if no, room in America for Muslims or Hindus or any number of religious groups.

Others would draw the line elsewhere, but they do want to draw the line.

In a speech last year, the Vice President drew a line when he said “I think the people whose ancestors fought in the Civil War have...a lot more claim over America” than others. In particular he called out then Democratic mayoral candidate, Zohran Mamdani, whose family fled Uganda when dictator Idi Amin ethnically cleansed the nation's Indian population.

So it is that some now speak of “Heritage Americans:” those who can trace their lineage back to the founding of this nation, or earlier. One chart graded Americans in this way: You get an A grade if you’re “colonial old stock,” meaning your ancestors came here between 1607 and 1789. You get a B if you’re “antebellum stock,” a C if you’re an “Ellis Islander.” You get a D if you or your ancestors arrived after World War II.¹ My guess is that they do not want to include those whose ancestors were here to welcome the people arriving in 1607 or those whose ancestors came here enslaved as “Heritage Americans.”

If I can pause for a moment to speak personally, I have to recognize that I really haven’t considered whether *I* “belong” in America or not. It might be that as a straight, white, male, my belonging is generally not questioned by those in power. And since some records suggest that Lovins arrived in the New World from England in the early 1600’s, well, I guess I get an “A” in being an American. Add to that the family stories of my great-great grandmother being a Cherokee who left the Trail of Tears and found her way to southern Illinois, well, maybe I should be rated “A+.”

But, of course, such evaluations are meaningless—and pernicious.

They arise out of the ongoing struggle in our wonderful and complicated nation that began 250 years ago with the declaration that all are created equal, even while excluding women, enslaving Africans, and pushing Native Americans to the margins of geography and existence. We argue over who can come into this land and what makes one a citizen. We argue about who can vote, who can exercise basic civil rights, and what, if any, religious identity we have as a nation.

For 250 years the better angels of our nature keep calling us to expand who it is that we mean when we say “we the people”—to create an ever-widening circle of whose history, voice, and identity are valued in this land.

David French said that “At the heart of the Heritage American idea is the concept of inherited virtue, the idea that public policy should orient itself toward benefiting people on the basis of their ancestry.” And he points out that “It’s a short trip from inherited virtue to inherited entitlement.”

So, Kelly Brown Douglas, an Episcopal priest who is currently teaching theology at Harvard Divinity School, writes: “We are living through a moment in which competing visions of democracy and Christianity are increasingly visible in our public square. One is driven by grievance—the sense that something once possessed is being taken away. It is a politics that fundamentally operates according to zero-sum logic: equality and justice for those historically excluded are seen as inequitable and unwarranted losses of privilege, whether racial, gendered, or economic. It is a politics that experiences movement toward a just and equitable society as displacement. It turns the question from, “How can we create a society in which everyone belongs?” to, “Who is taking what belongs to us?”

Which brings us around to the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Like all parables, it contains a myriad of meanings. It speaks to us in different ways at different times.

And this morning it speaks to us first of grievance.

Jesus, of course, was not thinking about the United States of America some 2000 years after his time—but we are. And this parable helps us.

Early in the morning, a landowner hires workers for an accepted daily wage. Several times throughout the day he hires further workers, promising to pay them “whatever is right.” At the end of the day, when he pays the workers, those who came last get the same wages as those who came first.

And those who worked all day long grumble, saying: “You have made them equal to us...” You are treating these “Grade D” people as though they were “Grade A,” like us. Yes, those who started working early in the morning were paid what they agreed to—a fair day’s wages. The problem is not their wages, but the new status of the latecomers.

Those early workers are angry because they have been stripped of their privilege as those who have arrived first. It’s not that they were the victims of injustice or wage theft. What they have lost is their sense that they are superior to the latecomers. Their complaint is that they are no longer ahead of others in the line.

They were the first, but now? “You have made them equal to us...”

This is an example of the politics of grievance that has swept over our nation. It seeks not to solve problems but to divide between “us” and “them.” It thrives on blame and fear of the other, on anger and victimhood. It questions belonging and equality. If we must say that all are created equal, certainly it must be that some are more equal than others.

So, Kelly Brown Douglas suggests: “This is where the parable speaks most directly to the politics of our own moment: a politics of grievance that is defined by the loss of privilege. The parable challenges precisely that way of seeing the world. It challenges our political and theological imagination. It challenges us to see that expanding the circle of belonging makes the country larger rather than making our place within it smaller. It challenges us to understand justice not as the reversal of privilege from one group to another, but as the creation of a community in which everyone’s dignity is recognized.”ⁱⁱ

Listen, then, to that parable once more.

The landowner replies to the aggrieved workers: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

“So,” Jesus concludes, “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Jesus is speaking not only of grievance but also of grace.

Now, grace is one of those religious words that is often used but less often understood.

Frederick Buechner says that grace is something we can never *get*. It can only be *given*. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about—any more than we can “deserve” the taste of fresh blueberries or “earn” good looks or bring about our own birth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Justice—getting what we deserve—is important.

But there is also grace—getting what we don’t deserve, those times when the last become the first.

The problem arises because all of us some of the time and some of us all of the time really don’t like it when grace happens to someone else.

We can see belonging in America through the lens of grace. We belong by birth or oath of citizenship—not because of when our ancestors arrived or what they did.

In saying “the last will be first, and the first will be last,” Jesus is not just reversing the order so that a new group of people is privileged over another group. He is inviting us to see a new way of ordering our common life that no longer assigns worth and value according to a certain status. He shows us the real possibility of that new way of equality that our nation promises.

Brown Douglas puts it this way: “The gospel, therefore, offers something very different from a politics of grievance. It asks something more demanding of us. It asks whether we can see the

person who has been standing outside the vineyard all day. It asks whether we can hear them say, “No one hired us.” And it asks whether their being brought into the vineyard diminishes us—or whether it reveals something about the abundance of God’s creation and the justice of God.”

As people of faith, we are called from grievance to grace.

As people who live out that faith in the public square, we can joyfully take part in the great experiment of this nation, taking our place alongside of all who belong—alongside, not ahead or behind.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/20/opinion/heritage-american-citizen-vance.html?searchResultPosition=1>

ⁱⁱ https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/politics-grievance-vineyard?code=U3je1W1mClSkpX3Et04e&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=566f27b37f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_DEEPER_2026-09-23&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-cb6a0e7463-82627791

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 33.