This may not come as a surprise to many people in the congregation who have gotten to know me over the past few months, but my favourite movie of all time is the cult classic 1987 American fantasy adventure comedy film *The Princess Bride.* It is a movie that I have seen so many times that I could literally quote the entire movie from memory from beginning to end at one point. I have also seen the movie so many times that I have come to describe the way that I write and approach writing sermons as coming from the “Iñigo Montoya School of Preaching.” For those who are not familiar with the film or the reference, the character of Iñigo Montoya is a highly emotional Spaniard seeking to avenge the death of his father who has ended up as a henchman to the Sicilian criminal Vizzini—one of the antagonists of the film. Early on in the movie, after Vizzini uses the word “inconceivable” as the response to basically anything and everything that goes on, Iñigo replies with the iconic quote: “You keep using that word! I don’t think it means what you think it means.”

The reality is that for all of the thousands of dollars that we ministers spend on seminary education, for all the career assessments, chaplain residencies, internships, and other flaming hoops that we make ourselves jump through in the quest for “ministerial formation,” I am here to tell you that at the end of the day there is no exact science to being a minister. My apologies to those gathered here if that statement seems somewhat controversial—or if it seems too much like exposing the wizard behind the curtain—but at the end of the day, it is the truth. The majority of what we do as ministers is a lot of trial and error to find our own style and our own voice. Not what we are told that we are supposed to be—or who other people and society think that we are supposed to be—but who we are. I am also here to tell you that, despite the fact that many people hold up ministers on a pedestal and as much as we may present ourselves as such, no minister is perfect—despite what they may tell you. At the end of the day, we are humans that are doing our best to lead our flock of fellow humans.

While living and going to seminary in north Texas, I encountered many people who were willing to share stories about their relationship to religion and church. Texas—especially the northern and central parts of Texas—are commonly considered to be part of the “Bible Belt,” a region of the southern US where socially conservative Protestant Christianity plays a strong role in society and politics and church attendance on both Sunday morning and Wednesday evening is a way of life and part of growing up. It is also an area that I have come to describe a having a “toxic religiosity”—where you are told what to believe and expected to adhere to those beliefs without any room for question or interpretation. I encountered many UUs who had grown up in such religious environments. Their experiences had caused such trauma that by the time they found a UU church and started attending, that any words that were deemed to be part of the vocabulary of the Christianity that they were escaping were seen as trigger words: God, church, prayer, worship, blessing, miracle. And, especially, the word “grace,” which is a common buzzword around this time of year.

I am a linguist by training, so my first approach with any word is to immediately go to the dictionary and look up the definition to see what the word actually means. That definition, according to Merriam Webster, is “unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification.” The Oxford English Dictionary echoes the same sentiment, defining grace in theological terms as “the free and unmerited favour of God.” I would like now, by a show of hands, to know if any of you have used the word “unmerited” recently in polite conversation. It is clearly not a word that we are used to hearing.

For something to be unmerited, it means that there is nothing that one must specifically do in order to achieve whatever that something is.  Essentially, a person does not have to be a certain kind of individual or have to meet a certain level of performance in order to receive grace or assistance from the Divine. Broken down further into layperson’s terms, grace is something that is given by God to every single person. Furthermore, considering that is unmerited, it is also something that we can never lose or have taken away from us.

If we believe this to be true, then why is grace something that we are taught to still be asking for? Why is it something that we are still crossing our fingers hoping to receive? And, why are we still acting like we are having to be perfect in order to be receiving of grace? Is grace what we are truly asking for? Or is it something else?

I have had Elea Kemler’s “The Church Where Everything Goes Wrong” in my back pocket for a while now, but have had yet to find an appropriate service or occasion in which to use it. It is a reading that is not for every congregation. It requires a congregation that is willing to laugh at itself and to be okay with admitting to itself and the world that it does not always do everything perfectly. This last part is not an easy one for most churches—or most people, for that matter. Many churches feel the need to do everything in their power to project the perception that they are perfect and never set a foot wrong. They have an overwhelming desire to present this entire experience that we call church as something that comes easily and does not ever make mistakes. There is a fear that if anyone were to come into our sanctuaries and see the reality of how things are that they will be so put off that they will never want to come back again. There is a fear that the Divine is watching us somewhere with a clipboard and a red pen, and if there is anything done incorrectly or out of place, that they will be scribbling some sort of note on their cosmic scorecard that will cause them to look upon us unfavourably.

Who has ever asked or expected us to be perfect, friends? Where have we gotten this idea into our heads? I challenge any of you to find any passage in any holy book or sacred text that clearly says “you must be perfect.” I am here to tell you that if the Divine is in fact watching from somewhere, they have already found out a long time ago that we as humans are far from being perfect or doing things perfectly. There is no fooling anyone at this point. But here’s the thing about that: we are still here. That is the thing about grace being the “unmerited favour of God”; we do not have to do anything to achieve it and we especially do not have to do anything with the perception of perfection. Just as the Divine will be there for us when we are doing amazing things, the Divine is there for us on those hard, frustrating, soul-crushing days when we feel like everything that we are doing or have done has blown up in our faces. You know those days that I am talking about, friends. Those days when you throw up your hands and find yourself saying the words to yourself “why do I even try?” Sometimes, we find ourselves screaming those exact words to heavens. Those days where we just want to give up and crawl back into bed—or curl up on the couch with a blanket, mainline a pint or seven of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, and binge watch true crime shows. Don’t look at me like that; we have all been there and done it.

What *is* important, which Kemler mentions in the reading, is the efforts that we engage in to let those people who matter to use know how much we care for them. It is the love that guides our actions that has more of an impact than whether or not we do things perfectly. It is in the way that we continue to try and commit ourselves to being there and showing up for people that carries more weight and more importance in the eyes of the Divine. We were made to be people of compassion, not people of perfection.

And so what if we don’t get everything right? Mistakes can be miracles in and of themselves. They are the ways that we learn and come to understand ourselves and the world. They give us the guidance to know how to pick ourselves up and recommit ourselves in a way that allow us to profess a care and a love that is deeper and more impactful. And just as the Divine continues to hold us in love in the moments when we mess up and have to pivot and go in a different, may we also learn to hold ourselves in love and to see past the mistakes that we have made. And may we learn to be those people for others—those that come into our lives and through our doors—who feel like they are nothing but the mistakes they have made and the failures they have had, and help them to see the beautiful children of the Divine that they are and always will be.

When I was looking up the theological definition of grace, I was thinking of it in terms of being a noun. But it can also function as a verb. The definition of “grace” as a verb—from the same Merriam Webster definition as earlier—is “to confer dignity or honour on.” We are the recipients of dignity and honour from the Divine; we have been valued as worthy and important. And that will never go away or be taken from us. It will be with us in the highest of high points and the lowest points of all. And that is something that can have more power and more impact than we can realise. And we get that opportunity to be reminders of the grace that we all have to others, and to help them see the grace that they have forgotten that they have always had.

So, as you leave from here today, I invite you to put aside the perceptions you have of grace—what it is and what is supposed to be—and also to take some time this holiday season to forgive yourself for all of your mistakes, missteps, failures, foibles, and imperfections, and allow yourselves to be someone for whom dignity and honour has been conferred upon. And know that dignity and honour is something that will always be yours and that you are always the recipient of Divine love. And that is something that will never be taken away from you. May it be the companion that you need along your journey and ever present with you in the struggle. And may you be the encouragement to others to find that same grace that has always been theirs, and allow it to change their lives.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste. Thanks you all so much.