



Pentecost 17 (A) – Proper 20

[RCL]: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

If Only

A thread of human discontent runs through scripture. Doesn't it also run through our lives?

Since the beginning, since the munching of forbidden fruits, the grasping for birthrights, the wannabe dreamers, the freed who'd rather have melons and leeks...we have been those who suffer from our realities. And we try to run from that reality. "Can't we just go back to Egypt," the Israelites wonder? More strongly phrased, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread."

If only...

The past is hard to get back to, though, isn't it?

But just because it's difficult to have doesn't mean we won't want it. A poll published by the March 2026 edition of *Harper's Magazine* reveals the "Percentage of Americans who, given the choice of living sometime in the past, present, or future, would choose the past." And the answer is: 45.

Forty-five percent of people living in the United States would rather live in a different time. Maybe we are just like those Israelites: hungry for another day, far away.

Nostalgia feeds on our discontent. Discontent fuels our nostalgia. If only...it was like it was before. If only...I was younger and less creaky. If only...I could have made different decisions. If only... I could be somewhere else, so I wouldn't have to be here. So quickly, we use the gift of our memory as a tool to carve idols from our dissatisfaction.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said in *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles our Judgment*, "The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are." We might add, and "when we are." We are time-bound, geographically situated, culturally formed creatures. And we'd rather not be.

It's no surprise, really, that the Israelites would rather not be hungry. Who wants to be hungry? They can remember a time when they were less hungry. The gifts of the present evaporate in the face of their need. Freedom seems worth nothing to them if they now die out in the desert, bellies empty. But crucially, they've forgotten the great provision of their God. The God who saw their plight and provided a way out. The God who opened a sea, carving dry land from waves, and brought them through it. Would this God now forget them?

Perhaps, here, their discontent masks a more pressing issue: a crisis of faith. Has God grown weary of them? Will God, now, after all this, turn his face away? Will the provisions keep coming?

While we long for the past, carefully protecting ourselves from the present, we don't have to face the tender, heartbreaking, faith-trying questions of our lives.

Our gospel text for this Sunday provides a different angle on our human discontent. We meet some day laborers in Jesus's parable. These are characters whom the disciples would have immediately understood: folks who worked, day to day, to make a wage to feed themselves and a family. They are economically vulnerable and socially marginal—and they represent the majority of people in the moment. Most folks in Jesus's time would have known what it was like to be a day laborer, to depend on a day laborer, and to be at the mercy of a landowner.

You know how the parable goes: The day laborers work for various amounts of hours yet are all paid the same. The grumbling occurs when the first-hired day laborers notice that the last-hired day laborers are paid the same wage as them.

Here, discontent proceeds from those roots of comparison and our own hope that things will be fair. Those who worked fewer hours should not be compensated the same as those of us who have worked all day. Who are they that should get what they got? Aren't I more deserving?

Discontent feasts on the embittered morsels arising from comparison. We struggle to be satisfied when we see those around us with things that we want; we grow envious when we see others living the life we want or experiencing our long-sought dreams. The windows into our neighbors' lives—through social media and the internet—have amplified this temptation to compare and contrast our lives with others. Does everyone in the world have an updated kitchen and double ovens? Is everyone more fit than me? Does everyone have a higher income or better health or sturdier faith or—fill in the blank... Comparison robs us of our contentment; it holds our gratitude hostage, blinding us to the daily grace before us.

Now might be a good time to name that there are different ways of being discontent, some holier than others. Take our discontent at hatred, stinginess, hypocrisy: That discontent might shake us out of our apathy and pull us toward the good work of the Gospel. Our discontent with the physical hunger and lack of shelter faced by so many of our neighbors? May God use such discontent for the provision of God's numerous people. The discontent that comes with faith that needs a bit of sanctification? Well, God can use that, too. God can shape our grumblings in the desert; God can remind us of God's provision in times past. God can help us recall that we live by God's provision alone. Yes, some discontent can point us toward the essential work of discipleship.

But that constant, nagging sense that we are not enough, that we'll never be satisfied; that our realities are never enough; that perennial comparison with our neighbors... what to do about that?

We must learn, as Christ taught us, to pray for daily bread. To lean on the provision of God, the provision that is enough for today. We might watch and wait for that manna that comes from on high. Those gifts that fill our bellies and our souls. We might, even, over time, learn to be content with the wage offered for the day, even if others have received more. We are called to practice the non-competitive life, as reflected in God's own life.

Contentment, at the end of the day, is a posture that trusts in the vast goodness of God and in the provision that flows from God's own life and self. Contentment is the spiritual discipline of accepting reality, even while we pray for God's kingdom to come. It is the fruit of gratitude – of realizing that everything we are and all that we have derives from God in the first place. We are beneficiaries of a life and love far beyond each of us. Contentment realizes that it is God who has given us our breath and limbs and lives. It is God who has placed us in this world with gifts and berries and fireflies. It is God who has bestowed upon us the giggles of our children and the smiles (and even the tears) of our beloved. It is God who has filled our lives with sufficient grace—with enough for the day.

To this God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we say: thank you. Thank you for all that you have given us, for all that you have brought us through, and for all that you will do in our lives. Thank you for the wonders of this world and for this reality, the one that we are living. Thank you for manna and daily bread and grace sufficient for today. Amen.

Amen.

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