

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 20, 2026 – PENTECOST 17 / PROPER 20A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “Contentment is Trusting Our Loving God”

Jonah 3:10-4:11	(Jonah’s story demonstrates God’s unconditional mercy)
Psalms 145:1-8	(The Lord is full of compassion and kindness)
Philippians 1:21-30	(As believers, whether we live or die, we are with Christ)
St. Matthew 20:1-16	(Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers who were all paid the same)

A thread of human discontent runs through Scripture, just as it runs throughout our lives. Ever since the beginning—the munching on forbidden fruits, the grasping for birthrights, the liberated who’d rather have melons and leeks ... “Can’t we just go back to Egypt,” the wandering Israelites wondered? Like them, we tend to be malcontent with our reality. Like those sojourners in the desert, we moan, “*If only...*” But the past is hard to get back, isn’t it? Just because it’s difficult—not to mention, impossible to do so—doesn’t mean we don’t want it. A poll published in the March 2026 edition of *Harper’s Magazine* revealed that 45 percent of “Americans who, given the choice of living sometime in the past, present, or future, would choose the past.” Just maybe, we are like those Israelites: hungry for another day, far away.

Nostalgia feeds on our discontent, and discontent fuels our nostalgia. *If only...* it could be like it was before. *If only...* I was younger and less creaky (or cranky). *If only...* I had made different decisions. *If only...* I were somewhere else. Too easily, we use the gift of our memory as a tool to carve idols from our dissatisfaction. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in his 2023 book, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles our Judgment*, “The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are.” And, we might add, “when we are.” We humans are time-bound, geographically situated, culturally-formed creatures. But we’d rather not be.¹

Today’s Old Testament lesson reminds us that the prophet Jonah definitely wanted to be anywhere else than Ninevah (now in modern-day northern Iraq). As a devout Jew, he was adamantly averse to witnessing to a pagan people about repentance and conversion. So much so, he jumped on a ship bound in precisely the opposite direction. “Hey, I don’t want to share the Kingdom with people who are different from me!” *Hmm*. We may feel that way today, when we hear about people of other faith traditions—Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, etc.—converting to Christ as their Savior. When, like the Israelites in the desert, or Jonah the reluctant prophet, we long for a previous *status quo*, carefully trying to protect ourselves from change and the present, we end up dodging the heart-wrenching, faith-trying questions our lives require.

Our Gospel text for today provides a different angle on the persistence of human discontent. In Jesus’ parable, we meet some day laborers, characters whom the disciples would have immediately understood: men working day by day to earn a wage to feed themselves and a family. They are economically vulnerable and socially marginal—and they represent the majority of people in that first-century culture. Most of Jesus’ listeners would have known what it was like to be a day laborer and to be at the mercy of a landowner.

You know how the parable goes: The day laborers work for a varied numbers of hours, yet each is compensated equally. The grumbling starts when the first-hired workers notice that the last-hired workers are paid the same wage as they are. Such discontent festers from our sense of self-entitlement and fairness. Those who worked only a few hours should not be rewarded the same as those who worked all day. “Aren’t I more deserving?” we grouse.

Discontent feasts on the embittered fragments of constantly comparing our selves, our lives, or our circumstances with those of others. We struggle to be satisfied when we see people around us with things we want but don’t have; we grow envious when we see others living the life we dream of, experiencing our secret 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 but me have a gourmet kitchen? Does everyone else take a glamorous vacation? Is everyone more fit than I am? Does everyone have a higher income or better health or sturdier faith

or—(fill in the blank)? Comparison robs us of our contentment and our peace; it holds our gratitude hostage, blinding us to God’s daily grace before us.

There are various ways we are discontent, and some are holier than others. For instance, our discontent at hatred, greed, hypocrisy, or prejudice: That discontent can 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 the Lord use such grumbling for the provision of God’s numerous impoverished people. Our restless dissatisfaction that comes when our faith needs a boost? God can use that, too. God can shape our murmurings in the desert; our desperate cries for help when we are trapped inside the big fish; or when we are resentful about a shady plant that’s been taken away. God can remind us of His provision in times past, and He will help us recall that we live by God’s provision alone. Yes, some discontent can point us toward a deeper relationship with God and the essential work of discipleship.

However, that constant, nagging sense that we are not enough; we’ll never get what we think we deserve; we’ll never be satisfied; that our reality is never sufficient; that everyone else is better looking, happier, richer, more blessed, etc. than we are—this perennial, relentless, and bitter comparison with others—will eventually harm our souls and endanger our relationship with the Lord.

Rather, we must learn, as Christ taught us, to pray for our *daily* bread. To lean on the provision of God, the provision that is sufficient for today. We might watch and wait for the manna that comes from on high. We might, even, over time, learn to be content with the wage offered for the day, even if others have received more. Meanwhile, we are called to practice non-competitiveness, as reflected in God’s own life as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

At the end of the day, contentment is an attitude 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 flawed reality, even while we pray for God’s perfect 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 myriad gifts—sunrises and strawberries 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 enough for the day. That is certainly the point of our Old Testament reading for today, as God gives Jonah a lesson involving a plant, in order to illustrate God’s perennial care and boundless compassion.

This deep trust in God’s purpose and provision are what enabled St. Paul to pen in Philippians 4:11-13 (NIV), “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Another translation of this last verse is, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” A good mantra to carry with us throughout every challenge.

As for the parable about the day-laborers, I interpret this as Jesus assuring us that no matter when we come to Christ in faith, we are treated equally. Someone who’s been a devout believer since childhood has the same status before God as the person who came to faith in a deathbed conversion. A murderer on death row who comes to Christ is the same to God as a sweet old grandmother who’s believed for decades. Again, we see in this story the infinite mercy, love, and compassion of our God. He does not pressure us to come to Him, but whenever we do, God will welcome us with open arms and “equal pay”—or equal *gifts*—for all believers inherit eternal life. St. Paul declares in Romans 6:34 (NIV), “For the wages of sin is death, but the *gift of God* is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

To 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 are doing and 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 our daily bread and for grace sufficient for today. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Kellan Day, “If Only,” 20 September 2026, [The Episcopal Church.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons/if-only-proper-20-a-sep-20-2026/), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons/if-only-proper-20-a-sep-20-2026/> 14 September 2026. Used with permission.