

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 20, 2026
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30

I was thinking the other day about all of the things that bring me comfort and security. The things that I have come to rely upon to meet my needs. On the surface, naming those things seems straight forward. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my list of essentials leans heavily on the non-essential.

Do I need all of those shoes in my closet?
Do I need the latest iPhone?
Do I need all of those streaming subscriptions?

I started to look through my bills. And I realized something...what I truly need has very little to do with what I think I need.

We've come to expect that our needs are tied up in the multitude of shiny new objects and latest technologies. We are inundated with messages that our lives will be better and more efficient if we just buy this one miracle product or subscribe to this one app to track our sleep, report on our efficiency, and tell us how to improve our step count so that we can live longer and buy more of the things we are told we need.

Over time, we begin to believe that well-being is somewhere on the spectrum of what money can buy. And when we believe that our wellbeing is tied up in having all the things, it becomes harder and harder to let go of longing for what we do not have.

The result? The list of things that bring us comfort and security becomes longer. Our fear of scarcity becomes greater. Our definition of prosperity becomes commodified by every company out there wanting to sell you what you never knew you needed.

Not only that...once we've been sold the laundry list of things we now need, we convince ourselves that we deserve them. We forget how to live without them. And so, we circle the wagons. What's mine is mine. What's yours is yours.

It's a distorted economy of human flourishing. Where flourishing is defined by material gain. Where success is measured by what we can accumulate as we try to keep up with each new trend and influencer and latest product on the market.

But do we feel better?

Or do we just become consumed by the fear of falling behind?

More often than not, what emerges is a deep discontent within our hearts. Never having enough while at the same time always having what we need. We have just failed to realize it.

Might this be the story in our Gospel reading today?

In Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of the landowner who goes out early in the morning looking for people to work in his vineyard. He finds some workers, they agree upon a wage and begin their day's work. The landowner goes out again...at 9, noon, and 3. Each time, he gets more workers who need a job and sends them out to work. Then, he goes out again at 5. He finds even more people who need work and sends them into the vineyard even though the day is almost done.

And...in a strange twist of events, he pays a full day's wages to those whom he picked up at 5pm. The same amount as the people who had worked the entire day.

What happens? People are angry. Even though they were paid for their days labor, they become upset that others were paid the same amount for less work. They felt they deserved more. They start to compare and judge.

Now...we often hear this story told as a parable about fairness....that God's grace isn't fair, but it is abundant. For everyone. That's one way to think about this story. But I'm actually more intrigued with *the root of our worry about fairness*. If we have what we need to survive as individuals, why would we even care about the generosity of the landowner to give other people what they need to survive?

The Rev'd Kellan Day, Rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Greenville, SC, suggested that it might have something to do with that sense of discontent. I love her perspective. Now, Jesus defines it as *envy* in our text but I think *discontent* is a more accessible reaction to name within ourselves. Envy might feel like a more severe emotion reserved for certain circumstances, while discontent is something I think we can all recognize in our daily lives. An emotion we have become all too familiar with.

*"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....Comparison robs us of our contentment; it holds our gratitude hostage, blinding us to the daily grace before us."*¹

Blinding us to the daily grace before us.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons/if-only-proper-20-a-sep-20-2026/>

That is what's happening in our Gospel. The workers who had been working all day have become blinded to daily grace. In their comparison, their gratitude is held hostage. They have become bitter as they live from a place of scarcity, while overlooking their own abundance.

That is what being discontent does. It confuses our wants and needs. It clouds our judgement and cultivates fear that our needs are at risk. Where someone else is simply an obstacle to our well-being, a perceived drain on our resources.

We see it every time we have snow in the forecast. We saw it during COVID. Our basic instinct isn't to make sure everyone in our community has enough. It's to ensure that we aren't at risk of losing what we think we might need. We take all of the bread and milk even if we are gluten and lactose intolerant. And it takes the landowner to put up signs on the aisle...one loaf of bread per person...so that whoever arrives at 5pm still has food to eat.

So instead of a restless discontent longing for more, instead of living from a place of comparison or judgement, we have the choice to do two things...

First, we can rest in the knowledge that our comfort and security are assured. We can let go of longing for excess because we are able to discern what we truly need, not what we are influenced to need.

Second, we are then able to seek out and provide for others in their need. Because sharing isn't a threat. It's a gift of compassion and care. It's a gift of understanding what people are going through and recognizing how we can help.

The landowner's economy wasn't based on fairness. It was based on love. And love isn't a timecard that we can punch at the end of the day.

Instead, love sets aside discontent. It opens our hearts so that we no longer live from a place of perceived scarcity. We live from a place of peace. Having what we truly need and making sure that at 5pm everyone can go home with that same peace. This is Jesus' economy.