



## **“Discontent”**

**Scripture – Jeremiah 17:5-8**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, September 20, 2020**

There is a natural human longing to connect. While some are introverts and cannot abide too many people too much of the time, no one yearns to live in total isolation, cut off from others. There is a longing in our soul to connect. We yearn to connect with other people for love and affection and emotional wellbeing. There is also a longing in our soul to connect with our Creator, the One who is not only the source of all life, but also the source of meaning, wisdom, joy, and hope.

In the fourth century, Augustine captured the human situation in a handful of familiar words: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Poet and priest John O’Donohue points out that the modern expression of this was captured by none other than the Rolling Stones when they belted out, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” We may name a few things that leave us feeling dissatisfied—lack of money, love, power, or prestige. Then, again, we may even have those things but still struggle to identify the restlessness within us. We can’t quite put a finger on it. Our discontent runs deep. It stems from our desire for a closer bond with God and a longing for a world as God envisions it could be.

Much of the time we imagine that we can alleviate our longing with superficial things. “Our consumerist culture thrives on awakening and manipulating our (discontent). This is how advertising works. It stirs our desire and then cleverly directs it”<sup>1</sup> away from God toward something much easier to access: STUFF. Cars, clothes, home furnishings, technological gadgets, the things that fill our homes and bring momentary happiness, but do not fulfill our deepest yearnings.

Mick Jagger groaned “the man comes on the radio with useless information that is supposed to fire my imagination...but I can’t get no satisfaction. A man comes on the TV and tells me how white my shirts can be” but the consumerist culture does not satisfy. Perhaps, he sings, the answer is to make it with a woman. But, in the end, he is still lamenting the feelings he has within himself: “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

That song struck a chord with people all over the world, and they drove it to number one on the charts. I suspect most did not identify the source of their dissatisfaction. But throughout the ages, people have been drawn beyond the material world to a spiritual life because they have sensed that this is where we CAN find satisfaction. A spiritual path is the way to overcome the restlessness and to discover contentment.

More than 2,500 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah spoke about this basic human condition in stark terms. Picture the following: A waist-high shrub stands alone in a barren land, slowly baking under a blistering desert sun. Its leaves are brown and shriveled; its branches are brittle. The ground beneath it is so dry that cracks appear like

varicose veins on the earth's surface. There is no trace of water, not the slightest hint of moisture. Nearly every drop of life has been drained from this shrub.

Traveling away from this desolate scene, we enter a lush field brimming with healthy grass. Minute balls of dew resting on each blade make the grass glisten like a field of emeralds. A stream meanders through the field and on its bank we spot a beautiful fruit tree. Its leaves are shamrock green and its branches bow under the weight of its plump fruit.

Jeremiah declares that these represent our choices in life. If we ignore or neglect our connection with God, we end up thirsty, craving what we need. But if we cultivate a spiritual life, our roots reach down into the life-giving stream that hydrates our souls.

When the prophet compares the shrub in the desert with the tree by the stream, he does not intend to imply that if you plant your roots in God all will go well and life will be beautiful. Jeremiah knows that no one gets a free pass on troubles. But he also knows that if we soak our souls in God, we generate the help we need to handle our hardships.

Jeremiah notes that a tree nourished by the life-giving stream will not panic in a season of drought. It will become neither anxious nor afraid, because it maintains the vital connection it needs to weather harsh times. No matter what comes, it will still bear fruit.

There are detrimental forces in life that can disrupt our relationship with God. Some turn from God when suffering strikes. They imagined God would keep disaster at bay and when storms rolled in they gave up on the life of the spirit. Others never quite understood that a life centered on one's self cannot find a meaningful purpose to rise out of bed in the morning.

There are countless ways that we can distance ourselves from God – by focusing on destructive thoughts, by overlooking moments of grace, by failing to develop a grateful heart, by living as if all that matters begins and ends with myself. However, if we nurture our spiritual life, we can overcome our small, self-focused way of being. That is why it is so critical for us to participate in worship weekly, to set aside time for personal prayer, to study the Scriptures, and to discuss matters of faith with fellow Christians.

In the secular society in which we live, it is a challenge to nurture a spiritual life. Countless forces have withering effects. We must mount a determined effort and spawn a receptive attitude to wake up to the divine presence and to forge a tighter bond with God. Jeremiah's image of the desert shrub warns us of the danger of not having our roots planted in God – our Spirit shrivels. His image of the tree planted near the stream reminds us how abundant our lives can become.

The good news – as well as the bad – is that we are free to choose. And if we choose to extend our roots into God, living water pulsates through our bodies. Ironically, even during those times when we are dying of thirst, some of us find a way to plug the flow. If we fail to wake up to how parched our souls are, we will wither into a brittle bush. However, if we acknowledge our thirst, we can open wide the spigot, so that we can thrive like a healthy fruit-bearing tree.

Last month, Timothy Hart-Andersen, the senior pastor of another Westminster Presbyterian Church – the one in Minneapolis – spent some time at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian retreat center in New Mexico. At the end of his time there, he drove back to Minneapolis on two lane roads. It must have taken him awhile because he drove more than 1,100 miles.

He said that along the way, he occasionally spotted political signs in people's yards. Then, somewhere in the middle of Kansas he drove past a farm house that had several political signs on the property, but the next farm stood out to him because it had only one sign and it was homemade. He backed off the pedal so he could catch a good look. It was a hand-drawn image of Jesus, and underneath it, the words: "Jesus, I trust in you."

His first thought was that the sign was in response to the neighbor's political signs. "I don't trust those people, I trust Jesus." His second thought was that it was simply an affirmation of that households' faith. Either way, he appreciated them saying publicly where they placed their ultimate trust. He was also grateful that the farmer-artist chose the particular verb he did. The sign did not say, "I *believe* in Jesus," but, rather, "I *trust* in Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

According to the prophet Jeremiah, that is the crux of it. It is not what doctrinal statements we profess. It is not being able to affirm the Apostles' Creed without crossing our fingers on parts of it. It is simply this: where do you put your ultimate trust? How you answer that question makes all the difference in the world.

#### NOTES

1. John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings*, (London: Bantam Press, 2007), p. 43.
2. Timothy Hart-Andersen, "Learning to Trust on the Way," August 9, 2020.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

God — You are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. For your faithfulness to us, we give you thanks, O Lord. In times of joy, we lift our voices in praise for the blessings we know in you. And when we are weary, or disheartened, or sorrowful – we give thanks for the comfort you bring.

In the stillness of this hour, we open our hearts to your Spirit moving in our midst. We open our ears to hear your life-giving Word. And we open our lips to offer you our prayers:

We pray for **your creation**, which is groaning for redemption. With waters rising and wildfires raging, be with those who flee their homes, and with those who remain as witnesses to the devastation. Lord of Life — Renew and restore your world, and teach us the ways of preservation and peace so that all creation may flourish.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for **our nation** in crisis and lament the fractures that destabilize our common life. We long for a more just world where all people enjoy the gift of life abundant — life marked by freedom, dignity, opportunity. Lord of Love — Heal our brokenness and help us always to do justice and love kindness, until all people experience your wholeness.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray, O God, for **those who feel lost to the parched places of life:**

For those without food or shelter,  
who are unsure if they will have their daily bread and feel like there is never enough;  
For those who suffer the pangs of loss —  
loss of health, loss of a relationship, loss of a beloved;  
For those with aching bodies or ailing minds,  
and the friends and family who care for them.

Lord of Grace — Sustain these sisters and brothers, and give all of us compassionate hearts so that we might be messengers of hope, instruments of peace, and beacons of light.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed are those who trust in you, O God; they shall be like trees planted by water. When our souls are parched, when fear consumes and anxiety overwhelms, pour out your grace upon us and replenish our spirits. God of Life, in this season marked by destruction and death, we thirst for your hope, your peace, your joy. Draw near to us, we pray, and renew our trust so that we may be like trees planted by water, which never cease to bear fruit. Sustain us, nourish us, strengthen us. And may the fruit we bear feed a world hungry for good news.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who taught us to pray together saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**