

15th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Sr Greta Ronningen

On September 6, 2026

Exodus 12:1-14 / Psalm 149 / Romans 13:8-14 / Matthew 18:15-20

In today's gospel passage, Jesus lays out his conflict resolution plan for us. If we have a problem with someone, he doesn't want us to publicly embarrass or humiliate the offender but to "point out the fault when the two of you are alone." First, he wants us to address the conflict without involving other people. He instructs us to offer the offender a chance to make amends before we involve others.

I don't know about you, but I come from a long line of conflict avoiders. My Scandinavian ancestors were all conflict adverse. My family never ever discussed problems, everyone just seethed quietly in their own rooms. This went for my grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins too.

In seminary I studied non-violent communication and I have spent 2 decades in restorative justice work. So, I have certainly recognized the problem and tried to break the pattern I inherited of avoidance at all costs. But honestly, I cannot say I am very good at facing conflict. It is still pretty terrifying. I once bravely told my sister that she had hurt my feelings, and she didn't speak to me for 3 years!

But I go the other way - if someone says to me, "Sister Greta, you hurt my feelings." I will tie myself in a knot asking for forgiveness. I might blurt out before even hearing the issue, "Oh my goodness, I am so sorry, I didn't mean to!" I am a big apologizer.

But at the ripe old age of 72 I have come to realize that there are a lot of people in the world who seem incapable of apologizing. My mother for one. She had a feud with her sister, and they did not speak to one another for the last 20 years of

their lives. By the end I don't think they even remembered what it was about. See what I mean about us Scandinavians? We cannot talk about it; we just never speak to you again— over and done.

Jesus knew that just as in a family, the church community can struggle with conflicts. A problematic situation can become a big topic of conversation and take up a lot of time and energy. Jesus knows it is hard for us humans to get along. So, he laid out his conflict resolution plan.

I am about to attend the annual Conference of Anglican Religious Orders of the Americas at a convent in Toronto. Monks and nuns living together in monasteries and convents face all sorts of disagreements large and small. We have a saying about Benedictines: "It is like a pocket of rocks. Everyone rubs all the rough edges off each other."

This year we have invited professor Dr. Wanda Malcolm to speak at our conference on this very issue. She teaches a college course called, "Boundaries and Bridges." She helps parishes establish rules or guidelines so that when there is an offence it is recognizable for everyone to address it.

One of the guidelines or rules she speaks about is preserving spiritual boundaries in our sacred spaces. We all need to feel safe and not have the behavior of someone else interfere with our time in worship. It makes so much sense to me that there is an explicit message to the congregation so that if someone feels at all violated there are rules of conduct that support them. I wonder what these guidelines might look like. She gave an example of swearing; a parish might decide that this is not acceptable in church. Monasteries and convents have guidelines regarding conduct such as quiet voices and appropriate level of singing and dress codes for modesty. It isn't to restrict someone's experience but really to protect the greater good.

The bridges she teaches about are very much in line with today's gospel. She said that when there is a conflict that one doesn't just respond in terms of rules but does their best to connect on a deeper level. She recommended being curious, not angry by addressing possible underlying issues that might be at play. Explore the "why" of the behavior and not just be accusatory.

None of this is easy as we Episcopalians vow in our baptismal covenant to seek and serve Christ in all people. It is in our mission statement to be radically hospitable. But sometimes the greater good must be cared for with healthy boundaries.

It isn't easy to point out a violation, it is easier to just let it go and hope it doesn't happen again. But I am not sure this is in the best interest of community. In my years of walking with the incarcerated I have learned a lot about taking responsibility for harm. The men and women might want to justify their actions or minimize the harm they have caused, but to heal there needs to be honesty. There can be no reconciliation without the one who caused harm taking not only responsibility but accountability. Healing comes when we are finally able to own the harm and the pain, we are responsible for and be accountable for ways we can change to prevent future offenses.

I recently had an unfortunate run in with a neighbor, and I felt very hurt by his actions and words. I did what I could to bring my feelings to him in a responsible and respectful manner. But it didn't go well. He felt like he was the victim and was unable to address my feelings at all. He felt completely justified in his actions. It was hard for me as I have said – I am conflict avoidant. But I realize on reflection that I was triggered and angry and not curious at all. I was accusing him and waiting for an apology. And believe me an apology would have been appropriate and changed everything. But I should have made sure I approached the conversation with a calm heart. And be curious as to why he did what he did. Maybe I can try again down the road.

I think what most of us want is for the offender to admit they were wrong and to say, "I am sorry." It is just that simple. If we made someone feel hurt or violated in some way we need to own it and do better in the future. Like Jesus tells us, we don't want to shame someone or make them feel they are a bad person. We must be wise and compassionate when approaching touchy issues.

It takes courage to address conflict, but we grow when we speak up and not just ignore a problem. It is worth a try and we have scripture to support the process. Jesus wants us to love one another as we love ourselves. So, let's honor ourselves by respecting our needs and feelings as they arise. And be kind and patient with all our brothers and sisters we bump into along the way.