



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2026

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

[Exodus 12:1-14](#)

[Psalms 149](#)

[Romans 13:8-14](#)

[Matthew 18:15-20](#)

O Christ Jesus, we are gathered together in your name. You are in our midst. Help us to open ourselves to your presence as we hear and reflect on your holy word. In your name we pray, Amen.

Dear friends, good morning! God's blessings on this Labor Day Weekend. May these days bring good rest, bursts of refreshment, and times of deep gratitude for all workers and especially all who make things, grow things, repair things, and keep things flowing and moving in our lives. O God, help us always remember that our lives depend upon each other's toil.

It's also a time of Happy New Year. Yes, it's the start of a new school year, in some places already begun and in others just about to begin. But it's also the beginning of a new year religiously for some. The beginning of September marks the start of a new year in prayer and worship for Orthodox Christians – marked first by a celebration of creation and a reminder of our role as stewards and good keepers of this beautiful world, and then by a celebration of the birth of Mary who was to become the God-bearer, as a reminder that this is the deepest desire of God for every person – to become the house of God and to bring forth into the world the presence of God. In Judaism, the end of this week is the Holy Day of Rosh Hashana – the beginning of the new year, a celebration of creation and the birth of humanity in Adam and Eve, an awakening again to renewed spiritual life and rebirth, and the beginning of a time of deep honest reflection and repentance for sin and wrongdoing.

We thank God for the rain and the cooling we have with this season, and the quenching of destructive fires. We pray for God's same healing and cooling in the hearts of people. And we pray that we may be good caregivers and tenders of this earth and of each other.

I am so glad to be with you at this time of fresh beginnings. Right now, we are in the midst of walking through the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith – We have journeyed with Abraham and Sarah, witnessed the birth of Ishmael and Isaac and of Rebekah joining Isaac as beloved wife, followed the exploits of Jacob and his wives Leah and Rachel, and found God's continuing redemptive care in the journey of Joseph and then of all his brothers and their father into Egypt. Now, we have stepped forward in time to Egypt's forgetfulness of this history with Joseph who helped save them and the surrounding world from famine, when the rulers and people of Egypt had turned in cruelty and revulsion against the children of Israel, enslaved them, and were in a process of genocidal population control of them by killing their male babies. We are in the midst of the story of Moses, and today we have skipped forward from God's calling of Moses through his confrontations with Pharaoh and the first nine plagues that fell upon Egypt by God's action, to the preparation for final judgment on Egypt for its cruelty and its refusal to grant God's people freedom.

We have also been walking steadily through the book of Romans, and its constant undergirding focus on the boundless love of God and the call to follow Christ's Way of Love. Today we hear a clear call to love – and to "owe no one anything except to love." There is no debt except the debt of love.

And we have been walking through the teachings of Jesus in these recent weeks. Jesus has asked the questions, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus then has pointed to the path ahead of ultimate self-giving and the Way of the Cross. And today, we hear Jesus point us to the pathway to follow to reconcile broken relationships, heal hurts, confront and forgive sins against ourselves, and restore holy community.

A few key things from these readings to note, and then I want to lean heavily into Jesus’ teaching and push us a bit further.

- 1) From Exodus - Prepare carefully and make sure there is enough for all, and be ready to go
- 2) From Romans - Love others, let this become your full purpose and motivation, and let all other motivations drop away
- 3) From the Gospel - Seek to reconcile, as the fullest sign and practice of love

Undergirding all these is a spirit of honest, courageous, vulnerable humility.

So now, let’s get into this important teach of Jesus about conflict. The process Jesus lays out for us is solid. And, as always, the devil, or God, is in the details. It’s **how** we do each stage that really matters.

It begins with reconciliation and restoration at the aim. And this is to be our dogged, unrelenting commitment to one another and to the world around us, as citizens of the kingdom of God. What follows today’s Gospel reading, that we will hear next week, is the real kicker. Peter will ask, “Well, just how many times are we to forgive? Seven times?” And what did Jesus say in response? “Not seven but 70x7 times or 77 times” (depending on how the text is translated). A whole lot of times. More than we will be interested in keeping count of.

And, it matters how we understand what it means to “sin against” and “be sinned against.” Here, Jesus in this Greek writing of his sayings uses the word *hamarteses* – it means, “to miss the mark.” In the Greek poetry and drama of that age, it referred to an error or character flaw that leads to an unfolding of tragedy or disaster. So, its meaning is layered – both a “missing the mark” when seeking to aim well but failing (rather than turning in a completely different direction and aiming opposite) —and the way that a smaller sin can have far-reaching effects.

It matters how we view sin. Remember how Jesus spoke forgiveness from the cross for those who were condemning, crucifying, torturing, and mocking him – “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

And finally, and perhaps most important to our actions, it matters deeply how we approach and speak in these conversations, and how we listen. Note that Jesus emphasizes the hope that the person confronted “listens to” the one confronting them. Listening here means taking in – not just tolerating what someone says, but receiving it, sitting with it, being willing to digest it. Jesus here doesn’t say “if the person apologizes and changes,” but “if the person listens.” Because we may not agree fully about what happened or what was done that was wrong. But truly hearing another’s perspective on what we may have done, intentionally or unintentionally, and sitting with it, is the gift we bring when we are the ones receiving such difficult conversation.

It matters a whole lot **HOW** we as the speaker approach the conversation when we are the one to confront and bring the concern to light.

Imagine if we said we were following Jesus' approach, but we did this...

- In the individual confrontation: "I need to talk to you about the terrible thing you did to me. You were an awful person. You always do this kind of thing. I just don't know what to do, but I'm trying to follow what Jesus said about speaking directly to someone who hurt me. And you're that person." How do you think that would fly? How would you respond?
- In the bringing of witnesses: "I have brought my closest friends whom I've already told everything you did to me, and they're here to protect me from your meanness and see just how stubborn you are." I already hand-picked folks who are ready to join with me against this other person. So, how do you think that would fly? How would you respond?
- In front of the whole community: There are some churches that practice this in a way that is harsh and purely judgmental, putting someone in the sinner's seat to tell them the great offense they have committed, to force a moment of apology through shame, where the church community positions itself as the knower of truth and God's arm of judgment. And, how do you think this has flown? How would you respond?

No, none of these is going to work out well. And each of these only feeds our own feelings of self-righteousness, and the recipient's resistance will then confirm in our judgmental minds that this person really is a wreck of a human being.

Every step that Jesus outlines is undergirded by and dependent on an abiding spirit of humility, loving courage, and courageous vulnerability, all within trust and commitment to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. Humility, as a spirit of acknowledgment that I do not know everything and do not have the perfect perspective, that I am part of this dance and not the caller of the dance. Loving courage, in that I am willing to step forward and speak because I care about the other person and myself, because I am seeking to love the other person and myself and I am hoping to open the door for some rebuilding of trust and mutual respect and care. Courageous vulnerability, because I am daring to come and share clearly and directly what has hurt me, how it has hurt, how I want to be open to mending the relationship, and how I want you to be part of the conversation and path forward.

Over the decades, people have seen how poorly we work with conflict and disagreement, and have sought to build bridges and good tools to use and put into practice. I have found two resources really helpful in my work with clergy and congregations. One is Susan Scott's book, *Fierce Conversations*, for how to have the difficult but honest conversations that can make a powerful difference in our relationships in work, family, and community. The other, which I use with our vestry, is William Ury's *The Third Side*, which reminds us that in any community where there may be conflict between two parties, there are a whole bunch of people who are not on either side, who have roles to play in order to help prevent, contain, and resolve conflicts by providing a safe and sturdy container for people to air their differences and grievances, a set of possibilities for finding resolution, a deep and caring listening to both sides, and, at times, a set of firm boundaries and refereeing.

Jewish law process outlines similarly for need for witnesses, in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Lev. 19:17-18)

"A solitary witness against someone in any crime, wrongdoing, or in any sort of misdeed that might be done is not sufficient. The decision must stand by two or three witnesses." (Deut. 19:15)

Here's a rough adaptation of Susan Scott's guide for preparing a necessary confronting conversation. So you know, she strongly recommends writing your introductory statement down, and rehearsing it in advance – and that the whole statement should take no longer than 60 seconds to state, because after 60 seconds, the other person's defenses and turning out will begin to kick in more fully. So, here are the things she says should be part of what you say.

1. **Clearly state the issue or problem.**
2. **Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior you want to change.**
3. **Describe your emotions around the issue.**
4. **Clarify why you are naming this behavior. For example, the impact on you, on others.**
5. **If you contribute to this issue or problem, clearly name it.**
6. **Describe your intention to resolve the issue or problem and your ideas on how that might happen.**
7. **Authentically invite the other person to respond. You really want to listen to her or his perspective. And you want to hear his or her ideas on how to resolve the issues.**

When we open space for the other person to respond, we can expect that the first response may be disbelief, or defensiveness, or deflection. We can listen, and return again to what we initially said and ask for the person to sit with what we said really and truly, again conveying that we want to move forward together. If the person listens and acknowledges that they have heard us and are considering it honestly, this is a good space to land. We can agree then to meet again to work toward further steps of healing the divide – as long as we are also doing our work of letting go of any resentment we are tempted to hold.

Remember the pithy quote credited to various sources: "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemies to die."

Now, to the matter of Witnesses, in those situations where a person-to-person conversation did not go well or when it may not be safe to start with a 1:1 conversation. This type of conversation is not a gang-up situation. It is undertaken also in humility and loving courage, by seeking people who will listen with openness, wisdom, and commitment to seeking truth in love. These are folks we can trust to seek what is best for both parties in the spirit of healing and reconciliation.

It's interesting, what Jesus says in this teaching. He says to take 1-2 people with you, then says so that there can be 2-3 witnesses. Where did the extra come from? Is it the one bringing the complaint? Is it the one receiving the complaint? Or, is it the Lord? It is no mistake or misplacement that we hear Jesus say, "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" here at the end of this teaching on conflict. It's not just when we are gathered in worship or prayer or fellowship or service. It is even more when we are together seeking to live the path of love by finding our way toward reconciliation and restoring of relationship.

If a conversation with witnesses or with the whole community doesn't work, Jesus says "treat that person as a Gentile and a tax collector." But how did Jesus treat tax collectors and sinners and Gentiles? He welcomed them, ate with them, offered loving concern. He included them. Here, Jesus states some obvious biases of the Jewish people of the time against certain folks, and at the same time points to the

pattern he has shown in his life of opening space for all people. We may not be close, but we offer space and respect the dignity of every person.

This is not easy. This is challenging work. And we cannot do it alone. We put our trust in the help of the Holy Spirit.

There have been bold attempts to follow this way at national and regional levels in justice systems. In South Africa, we saw this effort in play in the Truth and Reconciliation process led by Bp. Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela. In places around this country and in other countries, there has been successful implementing of restorative justice processes as outlined by Howard Zinn and others, that looks for paths for offenders to hear directly and take in the harm they have done, from victims of crime they committed – and then to work slowly but steadily toward forging together a path whereby the offender can demonstrate and put into practice acts of restoration of what was wronged.

Forgiveness and reconciliation does not do away with the real-life consequences of sinful actions. But even when there are consequences, including a change in what is determined as safe and healthy between parties, there can be a path through all of this that leans toward restored relationship with people and the human community as a whole.

We are blessed to have a congregation that is in a healthy place and is hearing this sermon not in a state of deep conflict but in a state of good relationship with each other. But there are always minor conflicts and disagreements. And this is our learning ground, our place to practice this Way of Love that prompts us toward humble, courageous, caring, and vulnerable efforts to mend moments of broken relationship with each other. Our commitment now and always is to continue to learn and practice with each other this path of reconciliation. As we learn, we develop muscle memory and can more easily carry this out into the world around us.

May we always seek to lean into relationships that have been damaged, open doorways and possibilities for mending, speak the truth in love, and follow the path toward forgiveness. Here, we are truly ambassadors for the self-giving way of Christ, who prays and offers forgiveness for us all.

Amen.

Additional notes for deeper consideration, from our reading from Exodus:

Some conflicts grow beyond disagreement to mistreatment and abuse.

Power differences between parties can make it challenging to follow the roadmap that Jesus lays out.

The very foundation of the community of faith, and of the kingdom of God, is a radical sense of equity, a leveling of all positions and postures or privileges. This means that entry into the community of faith, into the Church, is accepting and affirming the equal and complete dignity of every person – and it means accepting and affirming that your own dignity and honor is no greater (or lesser) than anyone else's.

Such a sense of human community and of a kingdom ran fully in the face of the world of ancient Rome. It ran fully in the face of just about every culture in which the good news of God in Christ was introduced. It runs in the face of our own society today.

Moses and the people of Israel faced incredible inequity. They faced a situation where there was no appeal, no power, no respect, no dignity for themselves as a people. It's like the experience of enslaved and then freed Black Africans here in America. It's like the treatment of Palestinian villagers and bedouins by Israeli settlers and soldiers in the occupied West Bank today.

Any group can become Egypt, with enough power. Any group can become enslaved Israel, with enough enforcement and cultural bias.

What do we do in this situation?

We call for what is right. We cry out. And we demand and find audience with leaders to say, "Let my people go."

And, we protect and prepare. Because things will often get worse before they get better.

Most of all, in the midst of this action, we call out to God and entrust ourselves to God's judgment. Because God will bring judgment on the false gods of this world. Signs will come – and will be ignored. Troubles will rise – and responsibility refused. The price of cruelty will increase, until those holding the powers of Egypt take losses that are the same in order and magnitude, and then the point will come home and release will come. This is God's vengeance. It is not ours. Through all of this, we are still called to practice the way of reconciling love with each other and the world around us, to love our enemies and change the script by taking up moments of forced intrusion on our lives as moments of choice to serve and accompany as intentional acts of love. Not easy. And, if things cross over into abuse, we look for an exit, for ways to blow the whistle, for ways to hold up the mirror, to end the spread of this kind of evil.