



Pentecost 15 (Proper 18)
September 6, 2026

RCL: Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, **Matthew 18:15-20**

Opening Prayer |

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Context |

The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes Jesus's role as a rabbi, highlighting five discourses—or blocks of teaching—that Jesus offers to his first followers. Alongside the most famous “Sermon on the Mount” in chapters 5-7 of Matthew, Jesus teaches on mission (chapter 10), the kingdom of heaven (chapter 13), and the end times (in chapters 24-25). In chapter 18, the disciples hear Jesus's fourth discourse, which focuses on life in community. Here the rubber meets the road, as Jesus acknowledges quite openly that conflict will happen, even among believers who love each other. Given human brokenness, disagreement and even dissension will be inevitable in the church, but how the people of God respond to their conflicts will make all the difference, both for the health of their communities and for the kingdom of heaven.

Theological Reflection |

“We need to talk.” If someone approaches you with these words, they’re probably not saying they want to chat about the weather. They’re saying, “Something is broken between us, and we need to mend it.” What happens next in the conversation will have significant consequences—for good or for ill.

Jesus tells us his disciples plainly that the quality of relationships within the church really matters. Starting with the baseline assumption that there will be conflict within the beloved community, Jesus lays out rules and practices of engagement: practices centered on love, respect, and reconciliation.

What are these practices?

First, he tells his followers to choose depth instead of denial: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault...” When conflict arises, the healthy response is honesty. No one should allow a wounded relationship to wither in the shallows, all authenticity lost. Christians should risk honest conversation and strive for genuine healing, rather than the illusion of peace or harmony.

Second, Jesus reminds his disciples to protect one another’s dignity: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Even as he stresses the importance of engagement, he also calls for discretion. We are to protect one another’s privacy, not drag names and reputations through the mud. Jesus warns his disciples not to use conflict as an opportunity to gossip-monger, one-up an opponent, or split the wider community.

Third, he insists that his followers take pains to help each other to guard the truth: “If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence...” Sometimes, a one-on-one conversation won’t suffice. When that’s the case, Jesus tells the church to bring in a few more people—not to spread gossip, gang up on the wrongdoer, or escalate the conflict—but to make sure that the truth is articulated, guarded, and honored.

Fourth, he invites his listeners to lean into the Body: “If the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church.” We tend to think of the church as a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. In contrast, the Scriptures describe the church as a body, each part dependent on every other part. And the space between us is filled with nothing less than God’s presence: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Our refusal to accept this deep spiritual truth doesn’t make it any less true. Individuality might be a cherished value of the cultures we live in, but it’s not the currency of the family of God.

Fifth, he exhorts the community to lament relational brokenness: Sometimes, all efforts at reconciliation will fail. To address this circumstance, Jesus uses the language of losing and regaining, implying that such losses should be met with grief. The fracturing of the body of Christ is never an occasion for gloating. When a relationship breaks, we have lost a limb, an organ, our own flesh and blood. The appropriate response is lament.

Finally, Jesus encourages his followers to practice hospitality: “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” At first glance, this instruction might sound like permission to shun or “cancel” people with whom we experience conflict. But consider how Jesus treats Gentiles and tax collectors. Recall the love and respect with which he treats Zaccheus, or the Roman centurion’s servant, or the Gadarene demoniac, or the Samaritan woman at the well. Even as we grieve brokenness, even as we make painful decisions to safeguard the church, we are exhorted to practice hospitality, holding open the possibility of repentance, reconciliation, restoration, and renewal.

These are a challenging and timely set of practices for our cultural moment.

Jesus invites the church to live into the high calling of being a beloved community, even in troubled moments of conflict and division. What would it be like for all the world to know that we are Christians—not by our rightness, but by our love? Are we ready? Are we willing? *We need to talk.*

Reflection Questions |

- In this passage Jesus articulates six steps or practices of engagement in resolving conflict. Which step do you find most challenging? Why?
- What practices for facilitating repair after conflict have worked in your own experience? What has worked less well?
- Think back on a time when you witnessed conflict in the church. How was the conflict handled? What consequences did it have for the community?

Faith in Practice |

With whom do you need to be reconciled? Are you ready to seek or offer forgiveness? Start the journey today by praying about the conflict: Pray for the other person; ask God to guide

you in what stapes to take; reread this passage of scripture, asking God to open your heart. Then take one concrete action to begin building a bridge toward forgiveness.

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