

## Conflict as prelude

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Ott's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Matthew invites us into a whole variety of experiences this Sunday. Verses 10 through 20, considered optional, center around a conflict about tradition and authority followed by a parable about the truth of the actions of the heart. This is followed by healings and feedings. The next chapter begins with more conflict.

In my experience, this Sunday's texts and those that surround them are the life of ministry. Acts 2:44-47, in which "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their goods and distribute proceeds to all," reflects a sensibility that is fleeting at best. It is often misleading to people who are just beginning to get involved in congregational life.

Family systems specialist Roberta Gilbert writes that one of the ways to think about tense or intense relationships is to maintain connections and relate one to one. Her description of developing maturity in relationships is seeking something that is "open, equal and separate." Our commitment to communities of faith challenges us to think about how we might do that with those with whom we share our worship and ministry life.

Conflict is a way of making connections with others. I think it's an ingenious one. It both connects and distances all at the same time. It works this way in marriages as well as congregational leadership.

Students often approach me with their fears about dealing with conflict and the fact that they feel ill equipped. I do too. I have to remind myself that the key to conflict is to stay with it--to be curious about it, to stay thoughtful and try not to absorb the

intensity.

In Matthew, stories of conflict surround something new emerging for the church. It is a prelude to resurrection. We often avoid or deny conflict, resulting in more pain. How do we keep the resurrection in view as we stay engaged, think through a response and offer respect in the process?