
God is Where the Wild Things Are

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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Where two or three are gathered together, there is... conflict! Have you ever watched *Survivor*? It takes only a few hours after contestants have been dropped off in some beautiful setting before they're arguing, lying, fighting, and badmouthing, and betraying each other. Making allies and making enemies.

But Christians are different, right? We are governed by different principles, like love, cooperation, grace, and humility. We are nice! We Episcopalians are especially nice, and inclusive!

While that all may be true, Christians are *not* immune to conflict. To offending and being offended, hurting and being hurt. What may, or may not, make Christians different is how we handle it.

In our Gospel today, Jesus presents some uncomfortable instructions for managing conflict: naming what's wrong; holding people accountable; and when push comes to shove, treating offenders as Gentiles or tax collectors.

Admittedly, this makes me squirm a little. After all, isn't God a God of justice and mercy, love and forgiveness? Yes! That's precisely why Jesus gives these guidelines.

Guess what comes into them? The parable of lost sheep! Right before today's reading, Jesus asks the disciples, "*What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*"

That's what leads into today's Gospel. And what comes after it? Peter's question about how often he should forgive his brother, and Jesus' answer: seven times seventy, which is to say, a lot!

So, here we are, sandwiched between a parable about restoring lost sheep, and a teaching about forgiveness, which suggests that we should hear these teachings in the context of God's desire for restoration and mercy.

When there's been an offense, Jesus counsels face-to-face confrontation. Not holding a grudge. Not gossiping, or triangulating. Not the silent treatment, or a social-media blast. But courageous, direct communication. Of course, that's not always possible, because of the nature of the harm done, or the possibility of further harm. But when it *is* possible, it's often enough to turn things—or people—around.

Jesus continues, "*If, however, the offender refuses to listen....*" Wait! Did you catch that? The offender or accused has a role to play, too! To listen. To listen to the other person and what they can teach or show you.

But if the offender refuses to listen, don't give up! Try again, but this time take someone with you—someone you can trust to bear witness to the exchange, without getting drawn in or escalating the situation.

If the offender still refuses to listen, *still* don't give up! Draw in the broader community, because the whole community is at stake here, and is affected and responsible.

But if the offender *still* refuses to listen, Jesus says, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Yes, this sounds harsh, and it has been used wrongfully, and harmfully. So I want to make two points about it.

First, remember that Jesus cares for tax collectors and Gentiles and doesn't give up on them. They remain the recipients of mercy, prayer, and hope. Many of them find their way into Christian community, after all, where Christ and his followers receive them, and rejoice.

Second, there *are* consequences to sin. And some behaviors are so harmful to communities, or victims, or offenders themselves, that they cannot be tolerated. There are times when the most loving and hopeful thing we can do is to say, "Enough. Stop. Time out!"

This takes me back to one of the books I used to read my children: *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak. We used to read that book so often that I could almost recite it by heart, still.

"The night Max wore his wolf suit to bed and made mischief of one kind, and another, his mother called him 'Wild thing,' and he said, 'I'll eat you up!' so he was sent to bed without eating anything."

"And that very night, in Max's room, a forest grew, and grew, and grew... and an ocean tumbled by," and Max sailed off through time *"to where the wild things are."*

He met monsters there, who *"roared their terrible roars, and gnashed their terrible teeth, and rolled their terrible eye, and showed their terrible claws, till Max said, 'BE STILL!'"* and looked them all straight in the eye. And they were still, and they made him king of all wild things, and they all had a wild rumpus.

But Max was lonely and missed home. *"The wild things cried, 'Oh, please don't go, we'll eat you up, we love you so!' And Max said, 'No!'"* And he sailed back, through years and weeks and a day, into his very own bedroom, *"where he found his supper waiting for him. And it was still hot."*

It's a great metaphor for today's teachings! Max was acting out in a way that wasn't good for himself or anyone else. Wearing his wolf suit, he was wearing his worst self, and his mother called him on it—or tried to call him *out* of it. When he didn't listen, she gave him time out. (Maybe she was really giving herself a time out!) Either way, she gave Max time and space to work out whatever he needed to, to face his own wild side, his fears and frustrations, without causing more harm. She gave him a path back to himself, relationship, and family—a path that she knew he could, and would, take. And she waited for him.

And Max came home, with a new perspective, and without his wolf suit.

This is what I see in Christ's teachings: justice that has faith in everyone involved. Justice that restores, heals, and transforms. Sometimes, that means holding your tongue or letting something go. Other times, it means having hard conversations, speaking hard truths, and saying "no" when you have to.

Too often, Christians tend toward one side or the other, as reflected in two common reactions to today's Gospel. There are those who take it as license to jump up onto a moral pedestal and to condemn, hurt, gang up. To cancel or dismiss people or issues they just don't like. To refuse to wrestle with them and learn from them.

Then there are those who hide behind their "niceness," using it to avoid accountability and confrontation and standing firm for anything. Who spiritualize away this Gospel's concreteness, or dismiss it altogether. But in their tolerance of harmful behaviors, they, too, are refusing to work *through* conflict or wrongdoing.

Both approaches miss the spiritual opportunity inherent in conflict. Yes, the spiritual opportunity! Where two or three are gathered together, there is conflict. But also, where two or three are gathered together, there is Christ.

We Christians trust that Christ is present when we agree, and when we disagree. When we hurt, and when we hurt others. God is present in our hardest conflicts. God is present where the wild things are.

And so, in hope and faith, we Christians hang in there in conflict, seeking God's will, and asking: How is God at work here—in this situation, in me, in you, in this community? What might healing look like here, and how can we move toward it?