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One of the most important books I read during the time of my conversion to an active Christianity was Thomas Merton's "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander."

The title is quite catching, isn't it. I know it caught my attention. And the essays it contained were a wake up call for me. They reminded me that the journey of discipleship is not just about me, but about me taking part in the larger process of God's salvation of the world

That's what I think is going on in today's first reading. God, speaking through Ezechiel, reminds the people that the very fact of living in the human community obligates us to be concerned about the well-being and salvation of those around us—even when it comes to raising the red flag and saying, "that's not right! God calls us to something different."

Of course, how we go about doing that will determine to a great extent whether we are successful or not.

Of the four Gospels Matthew spends the most time applying Jesus' words and instructions to the life of a Christian community. And Chapter 18 offers a blueprint for how to proceed when a challenging word needs to be spoken.

We do well to refer to it often, because our

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tendency is to take quite a different approach.

For one thing, Jesus says the first step is to address the issue one-on-one with the individual in question. That flies in the face of what we are most inclined to do, which is to go find allies who will support our cause.

We get them to buy into our version of things and then feel justified because we are no longer alone in our thinking. A great deal of gossip is one form of this approach. It comforts us in thinking that, because others agree with us, we have right on our side.

Maybe a factor that contributes to our wanting to bolster our position is that, when we have done the one-to-one approach, it hasn't gone well. The other person has interpreted things differently, and may even think that the blame lies elsewhere—with us!

That can be hard to hear. Especially if I am caught up on my own sense of hurt or righteousness it can be difficult to entertain the thought that I might have had some part to play in how things developed.

I think one of the most helpful attitudes to bring to a conversation in which some conflict needs to be resolved is humility. I know that I am totally susceptible to the charge another would make in

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saying to me, “You’re no better!” because it’s true. Unless I am willing to fess up to the fact that I also am in need of salvation and correction, I can’t help but come off in a way that will not be helpful.

Better to admit up front that I stand in need of God’s grace and reconciliation before attempting to confront the behavior of someone else.

What the Gospel passage underlines at every step in the process is that care and concern has to motivate our efforts. If the other has the feeling that we are acting out of a sense of care and wanting their good, it will be so much easier for them to hear the message. Without that, we should save our breath, and work on our own hardheartedness first.

That applies even in the last step in the process, where Jesus tells his disciples to “treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.”

We might think that that means we ought to shun them until they come around. A better interpretation would be to show them the same kind of love and compassion that a missionary shows those to whom she has been sent to proclaim the Gospel: recognizing that God’s saving work applies to them and has already been begun in them.

We look for points that we can build on and hope,

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genuinely hope, that they will be able to take in the message of God's saving love.

The next time we find ourselves in conflict here are two questions that we can use for our personal reflection before doing anything: "Do I care about this person? If not, why not?" and "What role have I played in matters getting to the point that they are at."?

I think we will all find that we are in that category of being guilty bystanders. Thanks be to God that, in his kingdom, reconciliation reigns and the benefits of His grace are meant for all.