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The apostle Paul composed this, his letter to the Philippians while in prison at an uncertain location. Named for Alexander the Great’s father King Philip II of Macedonia, Philippi was an ancient city in northeastern Greece. It was ten miles inland from the modern city of Kavalla and surrounded by mountains on three sides. Paul ventured to Philippi to found his first European Christian community in the year 50. As the tone of today’s scripture reading might suggest, Philippi is known as one of Paul’s favorite churches. He wrote this letter to them in the year 54 and would pay them another visit the following year.

Some scholars have suggested that Philippians actually represents a compilation of several separate letters, which early on were shortened and combined into a single letter. There are several places where the shift in tone is rather pronounced, including within today’s reading. One minute Paul is urging Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind, to make peace. The next he is thanking, reassuring, and blessing the community. And then he is back to redirecting them away from their conflicts, toward the honorable, the just, the excellent. In fact, we might want to think of these nine verses as two letters: a “letter of thanks” framed by a “letter of conflict.”

It’s kind of comforting to note that even one of Paul’s favorite churches experienced conflict, isn’t it? It’s an unavoidable fact of human life and nature—wherever two or more are gathered, at some point in time, some conflict, large or small, will emerge. The variable is how we deal with that conflict. Do we privately dwell on it, speculate, and assign motives? Do we drag other people into it, seeking to shore up alliances against another point of view? Do we gossip or form

communication triangles, talking to everyone but the person with whom we are upset or in conflict? Do we openly seek revenge or subtly attempt to sabotage that person? Do we practice the art of passive aggressiveness—either saying one thing and doing another or avoiding altogether?...Or do we speak to one another directly and resolve whatever differences or grievances we may have, so that we can be of one mind, so that we can each be our best selves, so that we can keep our sights on why we are really here: to rejoice and serve God, to acknowledge and be part of something far larger than ourselves, to approach and experience the sacred here in our sanctuary and in our daily lives.

Easier said than done, right? Believe me, I know. I grew up in a family where triangles were-- and sometimes still are--the preferred mode of communication. If you wanted to get a message to dad, you talked to mom, and she could be counted on to deliver it. If dad had a concern about us kids, he too would filter it through mom, the trusty familial buffer... At some point in the past couple of decades, the roles shifted, and suddenly I found myself on the receiving end of everyone's gripes and worries about everyone else. It's a powerful place to be, for sure. It can be a real ego boost. But it's an extremely delicate and unpleasant position to occupy as well. It can easily backfire and leave the go-between holding the bag of resentment and blame. And it can become extremely convoluted and inefficient: I recently received an e-mail from a family member asking me to speculate on the motivations and the intent of an e-mail received from another family member. It was *really tempting* to offer up my own thoughts on the matter, but I somehow managed to resist that urge. I mean, really, what do I know? Why not go directly to the source? My thoughts may well be totally off base, informed as they would be by my own personal biases and reference points...An opportunity for open communication, clarification, and reconciliation could well be missed...And, frankly, I have finally come to realize each of these is

an inappropriate and codependent role to play. Truly, we can only be responsible for mending and tending to our own relationships and situations. We are neither our brothers' or our sisters' nor our parents' or our adult children's keepers. Only our own.

So, given all the risks and the drawbacks, why do we is it that we allow ourselves to get tangled up in interpersonal triangles and webs? I mean, it certainly doesn't sound like there's ultimately much in it for us or for anyone else involved. Well, first of all, if we were raised with this, shall we say, *indirect* style of conflict management, our awareness of its pitfalls and dysfunctions, let alone its very existence, may actually be somewhat limited. It's just *what we do*. *How else would we do it?* No, it hasn't necessarily served us well, but it's *what we know*. It's familiar. It comes naturally. Even when we become aware not only of its existence, but that it is unhealthy, it takes a whole lot of effort to do something different. We all know how challenging change can be, and most of us are probably pretty adept at avoiding it in our lives.

This is all true, but we may have *some other* reasons we tell ourselves that it's better to maintain the status quo than to interact differently with people. Chief among them may be that we don't want to hurt other peoples' feelings. We may tell ourselves, "If I am honest with you, you might be devastated, so I'll just blow off steam with some other people instead." Or we may wait till we have collected a critical mass of people who share our point of view and only *then* speak our minds to the other person. If other people agree with our assessment or can be persuaded to do so, then we certainly must be right. It may *feel* right and cathartic when we do any or all of this, but we do so at our own risk, ignoring few realities: First, do we *really* think a people's feelings would be less hurt were they to discover that we have been talking behind their backs? Second, do we really think that people can't pick up on the negative energy that is created by these

activities? Third, do we not realize how destructive these behaviors are--not only to ourselves and the people directly involved--but to the entire community in which they occur? Finally, do we recognize that we abandon our Christian values of unity, peace, love, and compassion when we engage in these ways?

I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that, when we tell ourselves we are sparing someone else's feelings by triangulating our conflicts and disagreements, we might just be making excuses for ourselves. Frankly, it's pretty scary to confront someone directly with a grievance or a problem, especially if we don't have much practice at it. We might say the wrong thing. The other person might get mad and lash out at us. They might talk behind *our* backs and gather up a posse of their own. Do we really want to take that risk? Maybe, truth be told, when we avoid speaking directly to the person with whom we are upset, it is *our own* fears and feelings that we are in fact sparing. Not only this, but, admit it, sometimes it's fun to go negative and stir the pot. Some people are so gifted in this area that they can make a sport of it! Among other things, it can be an ice breaker at parties and other gatherings when we don't really know what to say. And it can pump up the adrenaline when we're feeling bored...

Do any of you catch reruns of the "Seinfeld" comedy series? I couldn't stand to watch it when I myself lived in New York. I thought, "All I have to do is ride the subway or go to work to hear this kind of whining! Why would I tune in to a show that immerses me in more of the same?" On top of the kvetching, nothing ever really *happened* on the show. And I didn't actually *like* any of the characters. They weren't very nice to one another, and, in all honesty, their lives were pretty self involved and meaningless...When I moved to Colorado and grew homesick for New York, I suddenly wanted to watch "Seinfeld" to recall all those New Yorker idiosyncrasies I'd left

behind. Episode after episode, I'd laugh heartily and knowingly... Then one day I woke up and realized that I too could whine and triangulate with the best of them. It wasn't actually a geographically based trait.

But, as distasteful as "Seinfeld" had shown me it was to interact in this way, why would those characters or I choose to do so? They could claim a lack of self awareness, but I no longer could. Eventually I had to face the fact that I got something out of complaining about others even as I had gotten something out of being the telephone switchboard operator for my family. More than just power or ego strokes or insider information, what I got, what the "Seinfeld" characters got, was a means of avoiding looking at or owning our own "stuff." Was my life self involved or meaningless? Did I have flaws or mistakes to address? Did I bear some culpability for the situations about which I whined? You betcha. Did I really want to know any of these things? Probably not. Not only would such admissions be painful, possibly more painful than hurting someone else's feelings, they would commit me to some pretty hard work on myself, a lot harder than talking about or critiquing things *outside of* myself. And this can be as true for a community as it is of an individual. It a whole lot easier to create static that prevents us from ever getting to the very cores of our selves.

As you're probably aware, "Seinfeld" went off the air and seemingly without its characters ever having discovered or possessed the secret of joy. Of course, from all appearances, they weren't really looking for it either. We, however, are still here, and God wills for us what Paul wished for his beloved flock at Philippi—excellence and joy. How were they to attain excellence and joy? Through rejoicing and gentleness, prayer and truth telling, honor and purity of heart.

One thing I learned at this weekend's conference meeting is that, although so many of us liken our churches to families, we would be better served by converting that metaphor to a village. While families signify love, closeness, and commitment, they also tend to be the places where we act out our most dysfunctional dynamics. Ironically, perhaps, villages call us to a higher standard of excellence. Another thing I learned this week is that much of the language used in Paul's letter to the Philippians is based upon sports metaphors. And many of the Greek words used to convey that metaphor begin with "s-y-n." All I could think as I read this was about "synergy."

We are all needed and valued in this community, and together we create a functional system. I pray that it will be a system of joy and excellence comprised of the dynamics of gentleness, honor, prayer, truth telling, and purity.

May it be so.