“I’ve gotta lotta problems with you people - - now you’re gonna hear about it!”
So begins the “Airing of Grievances” ritual of Festivus: the anti-holiday created by an exasperated and irreparably jaded Frank Costanza on that now-classic TV show, Seinfeld. Gathering family and loved ones around the dinner table, Costanza confronts and accosts each guest one-by-one, exposing shortcomings and cataloging disappointments. No complaint too petty, no personal slight too small to evade calling out. It is a cathartic purge of pent up hurts and annoyances that get in the way of personal serenity and communal harmony. At the end of the ritual, with everyone’s faults and true feelings now out in the open, the new year can begin with a clean slate.

Frank Costanza might have been on to something. Why hold all of this in? Tell those people what you really think of them! Well, maybe not. Perhaps the “Airing of Grievances” unburdens the aggrieved of their own frustrations - - and it certainly makes for hilarious television - - but it does nothing to repair the relationship. I don’t think Jesus had Frank Costanza’s “Airing of Grievances” in mind when he taught about conflict in community.

Unfortunately, I think many people are far more like Costanza than Christ when it comes to confronting conflict.

The scripture lesson we heard today is the coda to the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus teaches his followers that God will seek to return to the fold the one who has gone astray. Jesus’s message about confronting conflict within the church puts that same responsibility on us - - that we are tasked with seeking restoration and reconciliation within our community. Jesus does not paint some sort of idealistic, naive picture of the church. He knows well that this gathered community will have its share of struggle and strife - - not only from external sources, but from divisions within. This is simply human nature - - as true now as it was then. It seems that anytime humans come together in a group, some nature of conflict is inevitable. But while conflict might be inevitable, fatal fracturing is not.

And since conflict in community is inevitable, Jesus’s lesson on confronting conflict poses a critical question: What kind of community do we want to be? How do we go about confronting conflict in a community? Jesus counsels us to be direct, to speak from a place of grace and love seeking restoration and reconciliation.

In my experience, direct communication about a conflict or a hurt can be anxiety provoking, and it is not something that many people can do with skill and grace. But direct communication for the sake of reconciliation is essential to a healthy, enduring, and authentic relationship. When we cannot do that, we are prone to respond to conflict in ways that do damage to ourselves and the community. This is not foreign to the church community.
Episcopal priest Father Rick Morely rewrites Jesus's message based on his experience with the church’s response to conflict:\(^1\)

“If another member of the church sins against you…just talk about them behind their back.
If another member of the church sins against you…just call a bunch of people in the church to complain about them. You may even want to start a letter-writing campaign [or petition] against them.
If another member of the church sins against you…just send them a nasty email. Copy the clergy. And, while you’re at it, CC the bishop.
If another member of the church sins against you…don’t say anything. Just avoid them. Un-friend them on Facebook. And, if you can’t avoid them on Sundays, then just leave the church.”

Maybe some of those are as familiar to you as they are to me - - I know I’ve been on both ends of those approaches! Especially that last one. For years, I have mastered the self-sabotaging art of conflict avoidance, deciding that this-or-that doesn’t bother me or really isn’t that big of a deal so that I would not have to face an unpleasant conversation or risk hurting a relationship. But that really doesn’t do anyone any good in the long run. I think of these little things that get minimized or trivialized as flecks of rust on a car. You can ignore a tiny fleck, but over time it will grow and erode and eventually lead to the whole thing falling apart.

We know we have other options besides gossip, smack-talk, flaming, and avoidance. As usual, Jesus is showing us another way. Not just a “calling out” of someone’s wrongs, but a “calling in” back to the community. Theologian David Lose summarizes Jesus’s strategy:\(^2\)

- People sin. Communities are made up of these sinning people.
- When that happens and you’re involved, do something about it; namely, go talk to the other person directly like a mature adult rather than behind [their] back.
- If that doesn’t work, involve some others of the community.
- If that doesn’t work, then things are serious and you’re all at risk.

Or, in Jesus’s own words:
“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell them—work it out between the two of you. If they listen, you’ve made a friend.”\(^3\)

Has someone in the community hurt you? Then go and talk to them about it. We should note a translation difference here. The actual Greek translation would read, “If your brother sins against you…” While substituting “believer” or “member of the community” rightly expands the inclusiveness of the reading, it misses the essence of the relationship that is at stake. Jesus is speaking of a familial bond. And to confront a sin that has been

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3 Matthew 18:15
committed against you by someone so intimately connected to you denotes the potential seriousness and depth of the wound – an action that risks separation from each other and God.

But when this happens, don’t let it linger and fester: go and talk to the person about it. Maybe you can resolve it between the two of you. Approach them with a clear and honest heart, prepared to offer grace and forgiveness. Give this a chance; it just might work. But…

“If they won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again.”

No, this is not a suggestion that you bring your big, intimidating friends along so that the person will apologize. Rather, this is an indication of the seriousness of the offense and the other person’s decision not to reconcile. It is a move from the individual to the communal; a reminder that this conflict could and likely will impact the health of the entire community.

“If they still won’t listen, tell the church. If they won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront them with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.”

Here, things have gotten serious. And here, Jesus shares the hard truth that sometimes relationships cannot be repaired. We know that if two people are in conflict, both people have to actively and authentically be willing to work towards reconciliation if the relationship is to be restored. Sometimes you reach an impasse. Sometimes that can’t happen - - at least for the time being. This happens in our personal lives with friendships and romantic relationship as well as families, and it happens in the church, too.

While the scripture doesn’t say this, I think those relationship-ending conflicts are a critical opportunity when we are called to an honest and prayerful assessment of how that relationship became irretrievably broken down. While withholding judgement and blame (which is often hard to do!), we need to look at all of the steps that led to that point and discern how we might avoid such a fatal fracture in the future. In my experience, what often emerges is the reminder of the importance of loving direct communication at or near the moment a spot of rust or hairline fracture occurs. “Easier said” and “hindsight,” though. Am I right?

Back to Jesus and the central question from this passage: What kind of community do we want to be? My vision, my hope, my prayer for us is that we would want to be and become a Beloved Community united in covenant.

A covenant is an agreement entered into willingly by at least two parties. A covenant is a declaration of mutual responsibility and accountability. It is not legalistic, and leaves room

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4 Matthew 18:16


6 Matthew 18:17
for flexibility and negotiation as new days dawn. Yet at its core, a covenant proclaims the intentions and sets the expectations of a relationship. In times of tension, conflict, or even breaking of the covenant, it calls for restoration and reconciliation, extending grace, forgiveness, and love as opposed to hardline termination and exclusion. Marriages and intimate relationships can be covenantal. My service to you as a pastor is covenantal. Our congregation belonging to the United Church of Christ and you who are members belonging to this congregation - all covenantal. An enduring and healthy covenant takes constant work on the part of all people involved - all in the interest of strengthening the relationship.

A few years ago, church leadership here recognized that there was a need for us to make our covenant explicit. What came out of this is one of the inserts you have in the bulletin: “Living the Welcome: A Covenant of Right Relations.” Through this covenant, we share our intentions to respect, welcome, and honor each other and our diverse backgrounds, identities, and viewpoints. We offer our ears to listen and our hearts to be changed, accepting responsibility in conflict by seeking common ground and forgiveness. And we do these things guided by Jesus’s teachings, his life and ministry, his sharing of God’s love with those who have been beaten up and beaten down, left out and lost. We do these things because this is the way we, ourselves, desire to be honored and treated. We do these things because how we honor and respect each other in covenant is the same as how we honor and respect God.

Jesus makes this point when he reminds the Disciples that however they live their lives on earth is how they will live their lives in heaven. That is to say: act as if you are already there, that God’s kin-dom on earth has been established - because it has. Pushing it further, Jesus gives a foreshadowing of the Last Supper and the promise of his continued and constant presence. “When two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there.”7 Which is also to say: Act as if Jesus is right there with you, watching - because he is. And what’s more, treat each other as you would treat Jesus, honoring the divine presence that lives on in each believer, comprising the Body of Christ.

If we are to believe and act as if Jesus is with us whenever we are gathered together, then there is a message of comfort for us here, as well. This is the Chris Mereschuk interpretation.

Jesus knows that being in community can be hard. Jesus knows that conflict is bound to happen, and that confronting conflict can be challenging, anxiety provoking, and poorly done. But fear not: Jesus is there.

When someone has hurt you and you need to confront them: Fear not; Jesus is there. When you have hurt someone and it is on you to accept responsibility and make things right: Fear not; Jesus is there. When the hurt is so deep and the one who hurt you won’t listen to you or to the community: Fear not; Jesus is there.

7 Matthew 18:20
When being in community and contributing your part to the covenant makes you uncomfortable by stretching your heart and expanding your vision, when you need to confront hard truths within yourself, when you’re wrestling with feeling like you’re giving too much and no one else is pulling their weight: Fear not; Jesus is there.

And remember also, (like the Psalmist writes) when kindred dwell in unity, when grace and love and welcome and respect and belonging flow freely, when everyone is doing what they can when they can, when the individual parts come together and work together in the Body of Christ: Rejoice! For Jesus is there as well.

My sisters, my siblings, my brothers: Something has brought us here to this time and place to be a part of this faith-filled, funky, often-fun, sometimes-frustrating community. And something has caused us to stay. We are in covenant. We are not promised a conflict-free utopia. We are almost guaranteed conflict or hurt or mild annoyance. And in those times especially, we are called to remember our covenant - - to call one another in with a spirit of grace and love, to seek restoration and reconciliation, and to remember that wherever and whenever we are gathered in our covenanted Beloved Community: Jesus is there.

Amen.

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8 Psalm 133:1 paraphrase