

## **Anger, Adultery and Divorce**

Matthew 5:13-27 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 12/23)

I've finally gotten Netflix and have been binge-watching *The Crown* Season 5 - the years of the royal family in which Princess Anne, Prince Andrew and Prince Charles and Diana all divorce. *Annus Horribilus* as the Queen called it – the horrible year. It's like watching a train wreck. Quite addictive.

In our journey through Matthew's gospel this Epiphany season, we have been digging into the challenging teachings of the Sermon on the Mount on our behaviour as disciples of Christ - practical, relational things like anger, adultery and divorce - fitting topics for Valentine's Day! With regard to intimate relationships of all kinds, Jesus does not abolish the Law of Moses (cf. 19:16-19), but neither does he merely affirm the status quo. In Matthew's view, Jesus accomplishes an ultimately positive action with regard to the Law: He "fulfills" it. Fulfillment means transcendence with the principles that mercy, justice, love, and covenant loyalty are the weightier matters of the Law by which the rest of our actions must be judged. Jesus declares that his own life example and teaching are the definitive revelation of the will of God.

Jesus starts with anger in Matthew 5:21 because he knows it's the root of all our relationship challenges. Relationship therapists Julie and John Gottman refer to anger's potential fall-out as the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The 4 Destructive Horsemen of a marriage and of any family or work relationship are: #1 Criticism in anger. The worse words we can use in a fight are: You Always or You Never or What's the Matter With You? Has anyone ever actually answered that question What's the Matter With You? "Well, where do I begin describing what's the matter with me?" When we say you always or you never, we are putting blame and shame on someone instead of owning our feelings. It takes practice to say, "I feel let down when I have

to keep asking for you to shovel the walk. How can we negotiate this responsibility?" We're not culturally trained to own our feelings before we speak. It takes practice but we can do it.

The Second Horseman is Defensive Anger in response to Critical Anger. No one likes to be criticized. We all get our backs up and respond in the same tone as criticism or with more volume and heat, "Well, if I didn't have to do everything else around here, I would have a minute to shovel the walk." A way to dial down Defensiveness is to take a deep breath and again own the feelings and say, "I hate shoveling. Can we negotiate another job for me to do?" We're not putting the ball of contention back on our partner but bouncing it around for a negotiated solution.

The Third Horseman of the Apocalypse is the Silent Treatment. This when our partners, family members, co-workers shut down communication and don't respond, don't hear or claim not to have heard in an argument. Naturally it's often hard to hear in marriage - especially when one partner has their head in the refrigerator and is trying to ask what should we have for supper when the other partner is in the bathroom - with the resulting, "I never heard you say that." Being hard of hearing in a relationship is typical but a sustained I never heard you say that or a silent treatment is what Matthew 5 calls an insult.

The Fourth Horse of the Apocalypse is Contempt or Matthew 5 would say calling someone a fool. The final death toll on a relationship will be contempt and disrespect and distrust. We may not think it is a big thing to take people for granted, but we would never treat our friends in that way and expect them to stay friends so we cannot treat our partners in a contemptuous, disrespectful way and expect them to stay around.

Although both men and women can be guilty of adultery, Jesus presupposes the patriarchal setting of both the original Law and his own time by addressing men in particular.

This is remarkable, since women were often considered the offending party in cases of adultery since they acted with free will when they were supposed to be the property of their husbands and before that fathers (cf. John 7:53–8:1). Strictly interpreted, this text on adultery does not deal with natural sexual attraction, but with possessiveness, ownership, assumed right to look and treat women like property. Jesus creates the original *#MeToo* movement in equity and respect between women and men in relationships.

Adultery is escape, Dr. John Eidleman said when he preached here a number of years ago. It made sense to me that when we are bored in our lives or feeling insecure or unappreciated by our spouses that we find other people attractive. It's natural but it's also dangerous and "what feels natural" can lead to flirtations which can lead to all manner of impropriety that grind down a marriage.

If adultery is escape - then we need to ask ourselves what are we escaping and how can we work at stronger, happier marriages that are life-giving, not just staying together because we think divorce is wrong. How are we nurturing our marriages? It's back to the good old 5 Love Languages in how we show our partners we care in the way they want to be cared for with either - words of appreciation, acts of service, gifts, quality time, or physical touch. How are we each showing our partners that we care these days? It's so easy to get into daily habits and take our partners for granted. How do we keep the friendship and the appreciation alive? It's such hard work.

There is one verse that if we obeyed it we would never have any trouble in our marriages; in 1 Corinthians 7:8 Paul says "It is better not to marry at all." And in 7:28, he says "For to marry is to have trouble. And I would spare you that." No one ever requested those verses for their wedding sermon!

Marriage therapists Julie and John Gottman say that we will always marry the wrong person – there is no one right person out there, only right habits and right ways of relating to making marriage work. They say that marriage is finding a partner who makes you miserable in ways you can learn to live with! From the book of Proverbs: If there is no ox, the manger stays clean. It's true – you don't have poo if you don't have an ox. But the rest of the proverb says: Strength comes with the ox, meaning that you have to put up with the poo to get the positive benefits of the ox. Mathematically put: Ox equals strength over poo. So too, marriage is life-giving if it is in the right ratio of strength over poo. And for those of us who have been in difficult marriages or have divorced, we know what happens to marriage when the ratio is inverted, when there is too much poo on top. (Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage by Mark Gungor)

We have to be honest about marital poo. Marriage, straight or gay, isn't walking down the aisle with a bouquet of roses every day. Royal weddings and our own romantic imaginations expect marriage to be all roses and it's not. It takes work and discipline to negotiate any relationship in a non-destructive way. Any relationship can be turned around with work and commitment and rewiring bad habits. It's amazing what couples have survived, sometimes for the sake of the children, but who eventually, have come out to a reasonably companionable marriage in old age.

There is always hope for repairing the damage done in a relationship and I think young couples may be too quick to give up on it. Divorce doesn't create happiness either as we see in the Royal Family. But while we do not condone divorce in church, I also believe marriages that have gone too far down the path of mutual self-destruction and soul depletion aren't good for

those in it or others around it and should be dissolved with grief and confession and hope for a better life singly or a better life-giving second marriage.

The Old Testament assumed divorce would happen. It was Jesus who said marriage and the family are not a contractual arrangement regulated by law, but a part of the structure of creation itself, God's good gift to humanity. How is God a part of our marriages and relationships? Let's take a moment - How would we answer the question...I feel God in my marriage, relationship when...I'll answer for myself...I feel God in my marriage when we go for walks along the river and see birds and revel in its beauty in each season together. I feel God when we share a laugh. I feel God when I feel my conscience tweaked when I've been harsh and critical. I feel God when we reconcile. I feel God when we are our best funny and smart selves with other people.

In today's scripture we can see the interplay between the vision of the kingdom of heaven and the practical ways that this kingdom is to be lived out in Christian community. The first half of the passage (5:21-22) says, in effect, that all anger and hostility are outside the bounds of God's kingdom. The second half of the passage (5:23-26) admits that Christians get angry and suffer through broken relationships, and tells us what to do when that reality occurs: leave whatever we're doing, even praying and go reconcile.

Ultimately, Jesus would say whether we are single, partnered, married, divorced or remarried, whether we're in a difficult family or work relationship, we always belong to God and where there's death in relationships, there is also hope for resurrection. Jesus said he will be there to help us with the anger, the grief, the confession, the forgiveness, the separation and the starting over. May we hear Jesus' words this Valentine's Day for all our relationships and take them to heart and practice. Let us pray...