

## **Marriage That Doesn't Work: How to Divorce Without Killing Anybody**

**Mark 1:14-20, 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 by Patty Friesen (Jan. 21/18)**

Our scriptures this morning point to the call to discipleship in all stages of life and to Paul's rather open stance with regard to inequality or unbalanced marriages that if couples are making it – believers or not – stick it out but if they are not making it, it is better to separate. Divorced or married, we belong to God – that's the bottom line. But there is one verse that if we obeyed it we would never have any trouble in our marriages, 1 Corinthians 7:8 "It is better not to marry at all." And in 7:28, "For to marry is to have trouble. And I would spare you that." I'd love to preach that text at a wedding sometime!

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: But strength comes with the ox, meaning that you have to put up with the poo to get the positive benefits of the strength 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 isn't walking down the aisle with a bouquet of roses everyday. Movies and our own romantic imaginations expect marriage to be all roses and it's not. It takes work and discipline to fight in a non-destructive way. As Mennonites we want to practice peace-making in the world but that peace-making begins at home with our partners. One Mennonite friend who divorced said she couldn't believe how violent she got in her marriage. Fighting fairly takes skills

that we can learn and this is the value of pre and pre-pre-marital counseling – to give us the tools to practice fighting fairly.

Marriage therapists Julie and John Gottman refer to marital poo as the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They could predict with 95% accuracy, which couples would divorce after spending 15 minutes observing how they fight. The 4 Destructive Horsemen of a Marriage are: **1. Criticism.** We are our partner's best-informed critic. The risk of love and vulnerability is that one other person knows us as well or better than we know ourselves and can easily use that knowledge against us. Even if they are trying to help us make better decisions or be better people, 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, honey, where do I begin?"

When we say you always or you never, we are putting the ball of conflict on our partner instead of owning our feelings. It takes practice to say, "I feel let down when I keep asking for you to shovel the walk. How can we negotiate this responsibility?" We're not wired to think of our own feelings before we speak. It takes practice but we can do it.

**The Second Horseman is Defensiveness** in response to the first Criticism. We 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 take out the garbage." Again a way to dial down Defensiveness is to say, "I hate taking out the garbage. Can we negotiate another job for me to do?" We're not putting the ball of conflict back on our partner but bouncing it around for a negotiated solution.

### **The Third Horseman of the Apocalypse is Shutting Down or Stonewalling.**

This when our partners shut down and don't respond, don't hear or claim not to have heard in an argument. Patrick retreats to watch football when we fight and I follow him into the TV room to try to keep sorting it out and he's done with it and I feel rejected and say he is giving me the silent treatment or cold shoulder when he says he needs time to process things. I tell him, then say, "I need a time-out to process. Give me a couple of hours." I can negotiate with that. It might be a gender thing. But a sustained shutting down or silence will kill a marriage.

**The Fourth Horse of the Apocalypse of a Marriage is Contempt.** The final death toll on a marriage will be contempt. If we cannot respect our partners and if we show contempt by name-calling, calling our partners stupid or dumb or fat – we have killed our marriage. We may not think it is a big thing 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.

I believe any marriage can be turned around with work and commitment and it's amazing what couples have survived, sometimes for the sake of the children but have come out to a reasonable marriage in old age. There is always hope for repairing the damage done in a relationship and I think young couples are too quick to give up on it because it will grind our hearts to a pulp but it is always worth the work if we can find our way through with God's help. And while we do not condone divorce in the church, I also believe marriages that have gone too far down the path of mutual self-destructive and soul depletion aren't good for children and aren't good for us or for others around us and should be dissolved with grief and forgiveness and hope for a better life.

Dear friends of ours in Minneapolis, Tim and Lisa, looked like they had their marital act together. They shared the same values, went to church together, went cycling together, took fun holidays together and hosted great parties regularly in their beautiful home that they had worked on together to remodel. They completely shocked us one day with a phone call that Tim had had an affair and moved out. We couldn't have been more shocked and grieved. The demise of their marriage affected each of them profoundly and their families and their friends and their church. The ripple effects were like a tsunami. There was no repairing the damage, no Mennonite Disaster Service to clean up this mess and after the divorce was final in court, Lisa said she needed some kind of ritual to help her bring closure and move on. We marry with our friends and family surrounding us and blessing us but we divorce in solitude and isolation and loneliness. So we gathered our friends together in Lisa's living room, the place where she and Tim had hosted so many fun evenings for all of us. Tim was invited but would not participate. We had an undoing of vows, and placed them in a box along with wedding photos and with tears in all of our eyes, Lisa took off her wedding ring and placed that in the box and we walked it out to the backyard and buried it and sang, "Healer of Our Every Ill." We walked back into the house and had some drinks. We will need to end our first marriages well in order to remarry well.

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 live with! We have to accept that our partners will make us miserable, so what misery can we live with? And it gets even more complicated when

children enter the scene so we will speak to that in the Adult Ed hour here in the sanctuary.

When Patrick and I were watching the Gottman video on marriage, we fought through the whole thing. We had to keep stopping it and rewinding it because we missed the important parts of how to get along because we were fighting! The argument began earlier that day when we were driving to the MCC Annual Meeting. I thought Cornerstone church was Riverbend church near Bethany Manor so I drove to Riverbend. This isn't Cornerstone, I said. Patrick said, "I know." I said, "Why didn't you tell me I was going the wrong way." Patrick said, "Because I didn't want you to feel foolish." "Well, I'm feeling pretty foolish right now," I said and we're late for the meeting. A silly argument that we have since gotten over but we need to keep going for our river walks and cuddling in front of the TV and affirming what we like about each other, to bump up the positive over poo ratio!

May God help us have healthy happy, poo-free marriages as God intends for the blessing of our own souls and our partners' soul and the souls of our family and friends and church.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have given us a desire to be loved and accepted as we are and when we meet someone we think can give us that, it is a precious gift that we need help to nurture and protect. But God, we behave our worst with the people we love and trust the most and we sometimes kill the thing we want most. Help us learn how to be good peacemakers at home. Help us to admit our stubbornness and faults. Help us to cherish our partner's friendship and qualities that made us fall in love with them in the first place. Help us and forgive us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.