

## **“For Better, For Worse”**

Date: March 24, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Cor. 13:4-7; Colossians 3:12-15

Occasion: Lent 3, forgiveness series

Themes: Forgiveness, marriage

On the third Sunday of Lent, we continue our series on forgiveness, focusing today on marital or other intimate relationships.

First, a joke to begin our time together: A frequently fighting couple sat with their new marriage counselor. At one point the wife called her husband “Hon,” and the counselor was relieved. “Well,” she said, “there is hope for this marriage if you still call him “Hon.”

“What?” said the wife. “I’ve been calling him that for years, “Attila the Hun.” Now, a not-so-funny story about a couple who lived in Switzerland: In a real life parallel to the movie “War of the Roses,” this couple waged a battle of mayhem. It all began when the husband cancelled one vacation trip too many for his wife.

She expressed her disappointment by pouring bicarbonate soda into the fish tank, wiping out his rare tropical fish. A long argument followed. Finally, he grabbed a selection of his wife’s diamond jewelry and threw it into the garbage disposal. She responded by flinging all of his stereo equipment into the swimming pool. He then doused her “\$200,000 wardrobe – fur coats, designer gowns and so forth – with liquid bleach.

Then things began to go downhill. She poured a gallon of paint all over his \$70,000 Ferrari. So he kicked a hole in the \$180,000 Picasso original she loved. She had just opened the sea cocks of his 38-foot yacht, causing it to sink into the bay, when the couple’s daughter came home and saw what had been going on.

She called the police. They were powerless to do anything. It was not

illegal for the couple to destroy their own property. Eventually the family lawyer managed to arrange a truce. How sad and tragic.

If couples don't learn how to forgive, their marriage is doomed. Forgiveness is absolutely essential for a healthy marriage. Falling in love is easy. Staying in love for a lifetime is, for most of us, hard work. Those romantic feelings that help to launch our relationships are really important, but they're not sufficient by themselves.

Marriage and long-term intimate relationships are part determination, part willpower, and a constant willingness to seek out and grant forgiveness. These intimate relationships simply cannot endure without forgiveness.

There are six words that must be said regularly if a marriage or intimate relationship is to last – two sets of three words each. Sometimes you'll say the first three and your partner the second three. Sometimes your partner will start and you will finish. But your relationship is hopeless without freely sharing these six words:

"I am sorry." "I forgive you." If we regularly practice saying these six words, we stand a much better chance of not only staying married, but keeping love alive in our marriage. "I am sorry." "I forgive you."

In the verses from Colossians which I read just a few minutes ago, Paul describes how Christians are meant to live in community with one another. The most intimate community I can think of is marriage. Paul writes, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience."

It's worth looking at each of these qualities individually, noting first that *clothing*, as used here, is a metaphor for our first way of responding to the other person.

**Compassion:** The act of putting yourself in your partner's shoes, trying to feel what he or she is feeling.

**Kindness:** Performing the thoughtful acts that bless and encourage your partner, with no expectation of something in return.

**Humility:** Respecting your partner as a human being and seeking to put his or her needs before your own.

**Meekness:** Another word is gentleness. When I think of meekness, I think of Proverbs 15:15 which says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

**Patience:** Endurance and longsuffering; a willingness to bear with unpleasantness. My wife practices longsuffering, listening to my bad jokes.

If everyone one of us lived up to Paul's prescription, our marriages or intimate relationships would be amazingly harmonious and blessed. We would never need forgiveness. Unfortunately, most of us struggle to live these virtues on a daily basis.

We don't think of the other first. We speak in harsh tones or find ourselves easily irritated. We fail to show the respect owed. Paul knows this about human nature, which is why he goes on to say in this passage: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive."

I love this verse for its realism. Paul knows that no one is always going to live up to the virtues he sets before us. He acknowledges that we are going to irritate each other. And so he counsels tolerance. He was talking to a faith community, but this advice is even more pertinent for Christians living in the same home in a lifelong covenant relationship.

After all, even the best relationships have regular sources of conflict, many of which seem awfully petty at times. There are times, early in the morning, when I'm trying to get ready to leave the house, and Barb and I

keep bumping into each other in the kitchen. On the wrong day, I can become irritated with her, as though she were purposely trying to get in my way and slow me down. I know better, but sometimes I get irritable.

And I may say something snarky, or give her a dirty look, or over-dramatically step out of the way so she can do her thing – making the obvious point that she is slowing me down. Do you think my behavior endears me to my wife at this point? Hardly.

As quickly as I can – in the moment if possible, or at least some time before we go to bed, it is so helpful to our relationship if I go back to Barb and say, “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to treat you like that this morning.” After years of living with me, she knows me and realizes I didn’t mean to offend her, and she quickly replies, “I forgive you.”

But what sometimes happens in many marriages, my own included, one or both partners begins to keep a score-card of wrongs done. It’s as though we have this mental ledger where we keep a list of things that have hurt us, offended us or let us down. And as that list grows, intimacy diminishes and a wedge begins to develop in that intimate relationship.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes, “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” At some point we need to stop keeping score and learn to forgive. So, what if, instead of keeping track of the hurts, what if we started to keep track of the blessings our partner has given us?

What if we changed our accounting technique, instead of looking for the mistakes, we tried to track the blessings our partner has brought into our life. Let’s flip the accounting from the negative to the positive, and see what a difference it makes in our marriages. When we change our accounting procedure, we begin to find more joy in our relationships.

Not all of the hurts in a marriage are of the small, insignificant kind.

Many of us can move past the thoughtlessness and the passing hurts. But sometimes the hurts are bigger and harder to forgive. Such hurts might include neglect, hurtful words, persistent insensitivity, public embarrassments, dishonesty and deceit, and the failure to love, cherish and bless. The smaller slights create gaps that divide us, but these bigger wrongs build stone walls.

How does the injured party respond to this flagrant and often ongoing hurtfulness? Well, we can seek justice, or offer mercy. We can try to get even, or we can try to restore the relationship. This kind of forgiveness is more than just a couple of words. It's a process. It takes time and it takes effort. It may involve a counselor to help facilitate that process.

And I would be remiss if I were not to mention the most serious sins people can commit against their partner, grievances so serious they tear at the soul of the other person and represent a serious threat to the relationship. Examples that come to mind include serious and persistent deceit; physical, psychologic or verbal abuse; addictions and infidelity.

Like all sins, these serious grievances require awareness, remorse, confession and change. But the deep pain caused may require more time in the remorse and confession stages. With these types of serious grievances, it is very hard to change without help from counselors, support groups, and other such experiences that promote intentional and serious soul work. Even infidelity can be forgiven but it takes a lot of work and time.

Forgiveness is essential to the health of our marriages. Some hurts can be easily forgiven and forgotten; others will require deep soul work on the part of both parties. But in all circumstances, God's grace is at work. May God give us the grace to practice forgiveness, and to practice confession and repentance when necessary. May we pray:

“Oh God, help us to forgive others as we seek your forgiveness. God help us to be reconciled in our relationships and faithful to them. Heal us, we pray, and restore us to the joy of your salvation. In the name of the one who gave his life for our forgiveness, amen.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Forgiveness: Finding Peace through Letting Go*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 38-64.