

Apocalyptic Conversations

February 11, 2018

Have you ever pondered the formula of a TV sitcom? Invariably the premise is that two or more unlikely people live together and constantly misunderstand one another because of bad communication. Throw in a selfish neighbor or family member and I've literally just described a whole genre of television.

So if it's so formulaic, why do people watch? I'd suggest that in part it's because the two central ideas – unlikely people living together and miscommunication – hit home for so many of us. I think that one reason that people gobble up sitcoms despite the formula of – we're such an odd couple . . . look, one of us he hurt the other's feelings . . . but wait, we still love each other – is because they help us to feel a little less dysfunctional ourselves. They normalize the idea that in relationships, and especially within households, miscommunication is not the exception, but too often miscommunication is the rule. Sitcoms pick up on that all too true dynamic: that we often treat the people worst who mean the most to us.

While it's funny in sitcoms, most of us don't have Hank Azaria's comedic wit to make our own dysfunction seem so clever. Within our households, the miscommunication is usually all situation and no comedy. Indeed, all too often I hear of people's closest relationships being steeped in hurt, and struggle, even contempt and disdain. To that I lift up today's epistle, our lesson from Ephesians. Listen to it again as I read these ancient words that are as abundantly true now as they were 2,000 years ago. We read:

So then, put away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only say what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

There are some scripture passages that I think should be memorized, and that's one of them. If you're living in a contentious household, what if you were to print out that passage and clip it to the visor of your car and commit yourself that you were going to read that passage every night before you walked into the house? What if you made that what grounded you as you reentered the house for the day? Or maybe tape it to the inside of the medicine cabinet or the kitchen cupboard where the glasses are kept, ready to be read amidst the next heated argument. What if everyone in the household, everyone in an argument, agreed that when you're no longer able to hear one another, you're going to read that, take a five-minute break, and pray our Holy Spirit breath prayer?

The reality is that too many of our families and our relationships are in crisis. Over nearly four decades, Dr. John Gottman of the Gottman Institute has worked to develop research-based techniques and strategies to repair troubled relationships and to strengthen healthy ones. In fact, Gottman's research has discerned four kinds of negative communication that are so deadly he

has tongue-in-cheek named them the four horsemen of the relationship apocalypse. Those four ways of communicating are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

First criticism. The first horseman of the apocalypse is criticism. Criticizing someone is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues whereas the former is an attack on the person's character. In effect, we're dismantling his or her whole being when we criticize. A complaint would be, "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call. I thought that we had agreed to do that for one another." A criticism would be, "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe that you are forgetful. I think you're selfish. You never think of others."

If you find that you're critical in a relationship, don't assume that your relationship is doomed to fail. The problem with criticism is that when it becomes pervasive, it makes way for the other, deadlier horseman. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected and hurt and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity.

The second horseman, according to Gottman, is contempt. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the other which come to a head by attacking the accused from a position of perceived superiority. When we communicate with contempt, we're truly mean – treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, body language, eye rolling. (None of us have ever done any of that, right?) Gottman says this is the number one predictor of the dissolution of a relationship, and it must be eliminated both for the health of the relationship and the health of the individual.

His third horseman is defensiveness. We make excuses so the other will back off. An example that Gottman gives is if one says, "Did you call Betty and Ralph and tell them that we're not going to be coming tonight like you promised to this morning?" A defensive response would be, "I was just too busy today. As a matter of fact, you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn't you do it?" We've all been there, too. The response is not only defensive, it turns the tables and makes it the other's fault. A non-defensive response would have been, "My goodness. I totally forgot. I should have asked you this morning if you could have done it because I knew that my day was going to be jam-packed. Well, let me call them right now." There's a significant difference there, and that's the difference between a healthy relationship and one of the four horsemen.

The fourth horseman is stonewalling. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from interaction. In other words, stonewalling is when one person shuts down and then closes themselves off from the other in ways like turning off, tuning out, turning away, acting busy.

Many folks have felt this brief treatment of the four horsemen of the relationship apocalypse hit a little too close to home. I can see from the body language out there that we've all heard and felt some of this. But don't give up hope. Gottman has identified four antidotes to the four horsemen.

1. Criticism can be tempered by active listening and I statements.
2. Contempt diminishes when we build a culture of appreciation.
3. Defensiveness is actually counteracted by taking responsibility, even if it's painful.

4. And the antidote for stonewalling is to take time for self care.

Friends, from the formula of a sitcom to our epistle reading for today, we can see the difficulty in relationships is ubiquitous. Everyone will encounter it at one time and another in one form or another. Today I suggest to you that taking on the challenge of our passage from Ephesians, working to develop Gottman's antidotes, is a behavior of faith. If we believe that God wants what is best for us, individually and interpersonally, if we believe that God's dream for us is to be healthy and loving, then working toward health in our relationships serves the divine. Let us commit ourselves to seeking health for ourselves, for our relationships, and therefore, for our community and our world. Alleluia, and Amen.

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