

Sermon, Wedding Celebration service 30 June 2019:

'For better, for worse'

Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Silvia Purdie

Bible Readings: Galatians 5: 13-26 1 Corinthians 13:4-13

It's one of the rules of public speaking to never begin by apologising for yourself. So, here I go, breaking that.

I apologise that this isn't a very good sermon. It's a bit bitsy and not very clever. I've had a bit of a flu this week. Nothing very awful but enough to make sermon writing a bit of a challenge. You don't get a brilliant minister all the time. Maybe occasionally, but not 100%. For better or for worse, you could say.

We know all about that in our marriages. Marriage more than any other relationship takes us into our best and our worst. It brings out of us the best in us and sadly it brings out the stranger in us, the person we hardly recognise sometimes. And mostly, by the grace of God and the skin of our teeth sometimes, we can hold each other through it. It is easy to be loved and appreciated when we're being nice. It the most amazing thing of all to be accepted by another person when we're not nice, not even very clever or likable or pretty.

For better, for worse.

Only, sometimes, for many of us actually, the worse gets too hard, and marriage becomes something to be escaped from, grieved for, and ended. Many of you in this room have been through that. My own parents did. It leaves its scars. You will have supported friends through it, even your own kids. Tough stuff.

Sadly, sometimes the church makes it tougher than it should be.

My friend Daphne Marsden works and writes in the field of domestic violence, and she calls out the church for protecting abusers and holding victims in abusive marriages long past their use-by date.

It's an interesting challenge to stand here as a minister and call people to make life-long commitments to each other, and I do believe in the importance and power of whole-hearted life-long commitment of marriage, and I am fully in this project in my own life and grateful for it in the lives of others. But the covenant of marriage is not a death sentence. Marriage is worth fighting for but it cannot be a hollow pretence. It cannot be a win-lose game of power and control.

I uphold marriage as a thing of substance, importance and beauty. But I am currently supporting a friend of mine in Madagascar who has this week filed divorce papers against her husband. Not easy in a society where women do not have the same rights as men. My friend Harisoa has forgiven and forgiven, over and over, far more than I could have forgiven. She decided it is time to say enough is enough. But the emotional and social cost is huge.

One of the more interesting moments in my ministry this year so far has been when a couple came to me who had booked a wedding here, to say that their minister had refused to marry them and would I. Reason being, turned out, actually she was still married to someone else. Aha. So, before I could marry them I needed to divorce her. Don't panic, her divorce papers came through eventually and we didn't do anything illegal. But it was an interesting process – it challenged me to think about my role as a wedding celebrant and minister, and how I feel about weddings and divorces. It was important to me that we did some counselling and prayer of letting go, a prayer of forgiveness. Marriage is not lightly put aside, and there is a spiritual process in the ending as well as in the beginning.

You might be wondering why I am talking about divorce on a Sunday called Celebrating Marriage. I did warn you this wasn't a very good sermon ... but to me it takes us to the heart of this human living, that so often we live as ambiguity, in a space between hopes and fears; between dreams and nightmares we find our reality, and we work out our reality, and those of us the hold a faith find God in that working out. We find ourselves in partnership with a living God, not an abstract set of ideals. God is not a rulebook, for marriage or church or ethics. God

is the source, the one who loved us first and goes on loving us no matter what. God in Jesus was eternity with skin on, a glimpse of divine truth and love held together, a living breathing laughing weeping word.

We had today two of Paul's best bits – some of Paul's most timeless writings are lists. Love is patient, love is kind

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace

Oh people through the ages have analysed those lists of Paul's. Numbered them, counted them, categorised them.

When I speak at weddings I often speak of Love's Top Ten of 1 Cor 13 – there are 2 positives and 8 negatives. 2 things love is and 8 things love is not. Paul defines love by its negative, like an image cast in sharp relief, forcing us to shift perspective, confronting us with what love is **not** to push us out of our polite self-congratulation.

Love does not keep a record of wrongs (ouch – come on, we all do that!). Love is not self-serving, doesn't – not even secretly – enjoy what we know to be wrong. Words designed to cut the mustard, pierce the heart, leave no one smug.

For now, now we only see as in a mirror dimly. Despite our fine words and high hopes life, and marriage, is ambiguous, messy, we don't see the whole picture, things are rarely clear and no one is innocent. We're in this together, this complex thing called human relationship, family, bonds of love, life done together. Even if you live alone you are still part of community, committed relationships. You love. You can't not.

To help this sermon out of a morass of mess and ambiguity, I call upon the wise words of Mr Leslie Tizard

I can forgive him for assuming that wives are going to do all the boring stuff around the home – “an endless succession of small jobs”.

I can almost forgive him for addressing his book to only the husband, not the wife, though I presume he realised that women could read.

I don't know if I can forgive him for his stern warning against marrying a catholic – and I'm sure Dennis is pleased that Elisabeth didn't read this!

But he did help get Marriage Guidance counselling established world wide, so give the man some credit!

Mr Tizard does have some wise words ... (read from book)

So, to conclude: I do celebrate marriage. I celebrate every couple who stands here and vows to love for better, for worse.

For better for worse is a commitment to a stronger foundation than the circumstances you find yourselves in. It is about becoming less reactive to the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ – hey I even got a bit of Shakespeare in!

For better for worse is an ongoing, life-long process of choosing to act out of our better nature, no matter what anyone else says or does. And it is about taking full responsibility for the aspects of our own character that make life worse for other people.

And hopefully we catch a glimpse of that vision of the Kingdom that Paul gives us, that spiritual place where we know fully, even as we are fully known. Marriage, a good marriage, brings us closest to that in this life, and we celebrate it as a sphere where God is at work, in us and through us, together and apart. Amen.