



This summer my husband, Jamie, and I were sitting around a table with friends on an outdoor patio, and all the couples started sharing how they met. One couple there shared that she fell in love with her husband the first time she laid eyes on him – or rather, laid ears on him – when she first heard him singing in the church choir. They continued to meet each other at mass until he finally approached her and asked her if she would like to consider courting with the intention of discerning if it was God’s will that they enter marriage.

It was such a sweet, and it’s the kind of love story I envision for my children. Unfortunately, Jamie and I don’t have such sweet and simple beginnings.

The beginning of our relationship was really messy. I was fresh out of a long-term relationship that had ended as badly as you can possibly imagine. Jamie and I were in the final semester of our linguistics degrees, and since linguistics was a relatively small field at our university, especially as we moved into the higher-level classes, we were often the only two students in the class. He always jokes that I only started dating him because I had no other options. We started dating, casually at first, and when I went off to grad school in Winnipeg, Jamie, with nothing better to do, followed. We’d been dating a few months before we started living together in a one-bedroom apartment close to the university.

I was adjusting to grad school, and still emotionally wrapped up in my previous relationship. Jamie was sort of lost, not sure what to do or what career path to take now that his university days were over. We fought all the time. When he got a call to do a training course in Toronto, he took it, knowing that we simply could not live together any longer (we had lasted only a month!). A couple weeks after Jamie moved to Toronto, some mail came to the apartment for him from a company in response to a job application he had sent... to Latvia: our relationship was so bad, he was actually

considering moving to Latvia just to get away from me!

So with him in Toronto and me in Winnipeg, we had some space to figure out who we were in this stage of our lives that was so new and fluid. And in that space, we started writing letters, and falling in love in a way we weren't when we were living in the same city, and especially under the same roof.

Eventually, still living in different cities, we decided to get married. Jamie had moved back to Regina, but I was still in Winnipeg, trying to plan our humble little wedding from afar. I'd always imagined myself getting married in my aunt's backyard – she lives in a small town in a beautiful valley. I could see myself in my wedding dress coming up over the hill, and saying our vows under flower-strewn wooden arbour overlooking the valley. But I was having trouble figuring out who we would get to marry us, what the ceremony would look like, what the vows would sound like, and especially what we would do if it rained! As I tried to make all these decisions long distance, planning was becoming increasingly complicated, and finally, my mom said “Why don't you just get married in the Church? That would be the easiest.” (Moms are sneaky are that way.) So, it's sad to say, Jamie and I eventually got married within the Catholic faith, not out of any moral or religious reason, but because it was “easiest”. And that decision is probably one of two reasons that we are still together today.

We were happily married for a long time, I think., or at least from what I remember. We had some difficult times – we were married young so we were still trying to figure out what we wanted to do with our lives. We struggled with infertility for three years before we had our first child, and anyone who has dealt with infertility and pregnancy loss knows how all-consuming that longing and grief can become, but we faced our struggles together. We always had each other.

Our struggles with infertility came to an abrupt halt when we had our first son – we got pregnant with our first daughter when he was only five months old, and went on to have four children in only five years! That was such a busy and challenging time, but we were a team, and so happy. We certainly couldn't afford to not get along – raising our little family took all our energy and all our focus.

It wasn't until after our fifth child was a few years old, and all the other children were in school that we had a bit of space to breathe again. We were still busy, but it wasn't the constant busyness of dressing and feeding and bathing and changing and putting to bed of little ones anymore. We had room to breathe, and room to fight. And fight and fight

and fight.

Jamie likes to say that we've been married for 20 years, and it's been the best 17 years of my life.

"What was the main thing we fought about?" I asked him one day.

"Nothing, that's the worst part," he replied.

Actually, we fought about fighting. We fought because he wanted to fight, and I didn't.

We fought because he wanted to be heard, and I didn't want to listen.

He was insistent on bringing up unresolved issues: he would never accept an impasse or a gridlock, he would never "agree to disagree", he would continue to bring things up in hopes of coming to some resolution, and he always had hope.

I would say "why do we have to make this an issue", "why can't we just let it go", "this is so minor – why does this matter"? And what this said to Jamie was: this doesn't matter; your concerns don't matter; what you care about doesn't matter. You don't matter.

So actually, when I say that "we" fought, what I really should say is "he" fought. Because if I had my choice, we would never fight. I hate conflict. I would avoid it at any cost, even if it meant giving in, but mostly if it meant just avoiding certain issues altogether. I believed in peace at any price. And make no mistake, this peace comes at a very high cost.

I ran into an old friend in the grocery store a few months ago, and we ended up talking in the dairy section for an hour, her crying about her marriage, fearing her and her husband were headed for divorce. Sure enough, by the next time I saw her, they were separated and living in different homes, with absolutely no hope of reconciliation. And she said to me "we never fought, we didn't have a single fight in our entire marriage. We had a great friendship, we got along great, it was so easy."

And a little part of me was jealous of her for having a marriage with no conflict, at least no outward conflict. I told her, "Wow, marriage is the hardest thing I do in my life, and it will be my greatest accomplishment, because out of everything that I've done, it has required the most effort, on a daily basis."

She was stunned, and asked me "How does that make you feel, that your marriage is so hard?"

The answer came to me out of nowhere. “Above all, I am so grateful that I have a marriage that requires real effort, hard work,” I said. “It’s like people who have one of those metabolisms where they can eat whatever they like and not gain any weight. I do not have one of those metabolisms! But I’m so grateful I don’t have a metabolism like that! I’m so grateful that I have a body that forces me to drink water or I’ll get headaches, that forces me to eat lots of vegetables or I’ll get a stomach-ache, that forces me to eat in moderation or I’ll gain weight. Because if I could eat whatever I wanted, I’d eat so poorly, it wouldn’t be good for me. My body forces me to do what’s best for me. In the same way, my “labour-intensive” marriage forces me to be better, forces me to listen, forces me to have compassion and empathy, forces me to grow in love every day.

So, yes, one of the two reasons that my husband and I are still together today is because we randomly decided to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony within the Catholic faith. And because we did, we promised each other forever, and we knew, somehow, that we had received the graces we needed to get through anything, even years of seemingly unresolved conflict, even when we were considering separation. That grace was literally our only hope. It was all we had. But hope does not disappoint. (Romans 5:5)

The second reason that we’re still together today is because of Jamie’s willingness to fight. He refused to accept the mediocrity of the conflict-free marriage that I longed for; he was demanding and refused to lower his expectations, not of me, but of us, and of the covenant that we had formed together.

You’ll be happy to hear that we came out the other end of those few years where it seemed there was more conflict than peace and more tears than joy. But not without seeing our marriage, and the Sacrament of Marriage in a new way.

What is the Sacrament of Marriage to us?

It is an exactly tailored education in how to love one another.

It is a school of mercy.

It is a factory of hope.

marriageOur favourite love story, the one that has inspired us the most in our marriage, is actually one of the most unromantic stories of all: it is Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's account of his trip to a leper colony that changed the trajectory of his vocation.

"I had with me 500 silver crucifixes about two inches high. I intended to give each leper a silver crucifix. The first one who came to me had his arm eaten away by the disease. He held up the stump; there was a rosary around it. He put out his hand. It was the most foul, fetid, noisome mass of corruption that I ever saw. I held the crucifix above it and dropped it, and it was swallowed up in that volcano of leprosy. And all of a sudden there were 501 lepers in that camp, and I was the 501st. For I had taken that symbol of God's identification with man and refused to identify myself with someone who was a thousand times better on the inside than I. Then it came over me the awful thing that I had done. I dug my fingers into his hand and pulled out the crucifix then pressed it to his hand and so on for all other 500 lepers. From that time on I learned to love them by touch, by the incarnational principle.

It's not your typical love story, but to us, this account describes the marriage we've experienced and the marriage for which we strive. We're all wounded. We're all lepers. We're all broken. This is the common state of being human. The moral of Fulton J. Sheen's story, and ours too is: Don't be afraid of the mess, of the conflict, of the wounds, because it's not until we enter the wound that we truly learn to love.

Marriage is not the place where we can escape conflict, escape our wounds, and the wounds of others, escape being wounded, or escape wounding.

Marriage is not the place where all our dreams will come true, and all our suffering will end, despite what I would have wanted, and despite what today's wedding culture tries to tell us. Marriage is not a refuge from suffering, unfortunately. But marriage is a refuge for the suffering, for the wounded. **Marriage is a home for the wounded heart.** Not only that, **marriage is a place of healing, and what I've learned is that when you ignore**

the conflict, when you ignore the wound, you deny yourself and your spouse God's mercy and healing. And this is above all, the mission of marriage: to love, to extend mercy, and to not be afraid to reach into the wounds of the other, and to find healing.