Marriage, Mess and Merciful Encounters

Juliet West 28 January 2020



I like neat things. I was the kid who always coloured inside the lines and preferred colour by numbers so I knew I was colouring in 'correctly'. Tell me which colour must go where and guarantee me that it will look beautiful in the end. I prefer those odds. Unfortunately for me, life, parenthood and marriage is not like that at all.

Near the end of 2019, my husband and I attended the Marriage Encounter course run by our local church, Joshua Generation Church. My husband was the one to ask me to sign us up for the weekend, which I did, albeit with a few groans and delays. I tried to convince him that the timing wasn't ideal. Life was (is) busy and we were both so tired, we'd have to find babysitters for our 1-year-old for 3 days in a row etc. I have to admit that I wasn't jumping up and down to attend the course.

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Fortunately, I'm feisty but not totally blindly stubborn, so in the end we signed up and attended the marriage encounter with course leaders Mac and Naudine Adaimi (who also happen to be

the couple we walk with in our marriage). Day 1 and 2 were really good. Day 3 was good too…well, until three quarters into the day when, during one of the discussion times, we hit a major wall. It felt like 'all hell broke loose'. There we were, almost at the finish line – I was so ready to put a neat little tick next to 'attended Marriage Encounter' and move on – and here we were in a full-blown fight.

Our course leaders saw us struggling and gently encouraged us to 'shelve' the stand off until we could fully discuss it and keep going with the group activities. Neither my husband nor I were cool-headed enough in the moment to see that option as a reasonable one. My husband, ever the honesty-bringer, very swiftly said to them, 'I'm not faking it…I'm leaving'. I was mortified. Most of the conflict had been due to my bad attitude and now my 'sins' were catching up with me, publicly. All the other couples appeared to be sweetly enriching their marriages and there we were about to physically walk out of the session before it was done. With my 'people pleasing' weakness, this was my worst nightmare. I wanted the ground to swallow me up right then and there. "Please, Lord, come back NOW", was my heart's cry.

> **The 'problem' was that my expectations and the reality of what God was allowing to happen were poles apart.**

Not only was I embarrassed, but I was also upset that this marriage enrichment weekend was now 'messed up'. This was not my idea of colouring inside the lines, and I was ready to throw the entire weekend's learning away and start planning when we'd re-do the course so that we could get it right the second time around.
The truth was that the encounter time had done what it needed to do. It had forced us to STOP and start scratching beneath the surface of our marriage and busy stage of life. The 'problem' was that my expectations and the reality of what God was allowing to happen were poles apart. Things were getting messy and I wanted to run from the mess.
Despite my shame and panic, I knew I loved my husband and I loved Jesus…so I could either keep running or I could face the mess and allow God to use this weekend and our very patient course leaders to help me find a better space in our marriage.

It took a few hours, prayer and deep honesty with God and myself BUT God began to open my eyes to different areas of our marriage that I'd been neglecting or downright messing up in. A big one of those areas was submission and respect for my husband. I repented and then, with much humility (that wasn't easy, to be honest), I apologised to my husband. We spent a long time talking things through and, by God's grace, the messy day ended with us feeling much more connected and 'on the same page' than we'd felt in a long while.

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So was the Marriage Encounter what I expected? No. Was it tidy? No. Did it come at a cost? Yes. Could I have navigated what God was doing through the course in a less messy way? Probably. But the point is that God worked through the course anyway. The most important step was us just showing up, being there and allowing God to help us both.
Sometimes I put off participating in certain things in church life because all my 'ducks aren't in a row' or because I'm scared it may get messy. The thing is that if we don't show up, if we don't open ourselves up to the unknown, we don't give God the opportunity to meet us at our point of need, often when we need it most.

So I really encourage you, when you're next afforded the opportunity to do so, sign up to do 'that course', attend that equip or go to that conference. The training times and courses we're invited to across Four12 are such incredible tools God uses to bring us into the more. Yes, sometimes amidst the 'mess' of life or our own brokenness, but God is so faithful that He will meet us there in the mess if it means bringing us into more beautiful, open spaces.