

Sunday, October 12, 2025
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia
on
John 15:12-27
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Love and Imagination

For a number of years, I volunteered for *Switchboard*, the oldest LGBT helpline in the UK, which offers free and confidential support by phone and online chats. I heard about it from a friend and, hesitantly at first, I filled an online application form. My hesitation came from the fear that they might object to me being a priest, considering the dismal homophobic record of Christianity. To my relief and joy, they had no objection whatsoever – as long as I agreed to complete the *Core Acceptance Training* and to be supervised during the first few months of service. It turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. As a priest, I was not new to listening to people through confession and counselling but soon I discovered how much I still had to learn from the accumulated wisdom of an organization that had honed training and skills over forty years of selfless dedication.

One of the training exercises was the **role-playing phone-call simulation**. Trainees acted out what might happen during a real call. One trainee played the caller with a particular scenario (coming out, suicidal thoughts, relationship stress), while another played the volunteer listener. Trainers observed the scene and then debriefed us. They would point out listening techniques, tone, pacing, boundaries, and how to handle distress or crisis. This helped us to internalize the listening skills they had refined over years of practice: showing genuine interest, giving space, not being afraid of long silences, using the same language of the caller, reflecting back the caller's feelings, resisting the urge to speak of ourselves, showing empathy, and especially being non-judgmental.

During the years I volunteered for Switchboard, I experienced over and over again how deeply comforting and affirming these attitudes can be for the callers. I wished I had received a similar training when I became a priest to learn how to listen to people who came for confession or counselling.

Not for the first time, I felt that there exists something I like to call 'secular wisdom' that resonates profoundly with the core values of Christianity and can help us to flesh out, so to speak, Jesus' teaching in the Gospel.

It is experiences like these that have given me a deeper insight into the sentence we have just listened to from John's Gospel: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12).

Invitations of this kind can be overwhelming. The word 'love' often sounds elusive, unmanageable, difficult to make sense of.

Of course, there are plenty of passages in Scripture that explain what love is: forgiveness, patience, selflessness, and the like. There are beautiful and lyrical descriptions of love in Paul's letters – think just of the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Then there is the example of Jesus himself: he does not just ask us to love in general, but adds "as I have loved you". We learn the meaning of love meditating on the way Jesus behaved with his disciples, treated his opponents, cared for the poor and the sick, gave his life on the cross.

Even with all these explanations though I find that I need more details. I need to see what this love actually looks like, the forms it can take in my everyday relations. I want to understand how I can break it down in concrete attitudes, behaviors – learn the tricks from those who have tried. This is where spiritual writings and the example of the saints help, but also the secular wisdom of those who try to embrace selfless dedication to others even without the support of Christian beliefs.

Most of the time we confuse love with *feelings*. It is not difficult to cherish those who love us in return, those we are attracted to and are able to give us in return – although even in these cases sooner or later we are exposed to aspects of the other person's character that can be challenging and we need to learn how to come to terms with them.

There we discover that love is not just feelings, but also *commitment*. At one point, I keep loving my partner or my friend only if I am determined to overcome incomprehensions, hurt, wrongs and the like. Even commitment though only takes us so far. Sometimes the hurt cuts too deep. We reach the limit of what we can put up with, of what we can excuse.

There we reach the third dimension of love: not just feelings, not just commitment, but also *imagination*.

Take for example Jesus' sentence about turning the other cheek to those who strike us (cf. Mt 5.39). I think that it is meant to provoke us to become more creative in our reaction: there has to be a way of meeting the wrongs inflicted on us other than retaliation, resentment, or irreparable breakdown in the relationship.

Many obstacles to love and forgiveness derive from our inability or unwillingness to *imagine* what has happened, to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, to take into account where he or she comes from, to see beyond our version of what has happened. I am not saying that this always works. Sadly sometimes breakdowns in relationships cannot be repaired – we have to be realistic. And yet, a truly imaginative love will not give up too soon, will at least try to see whether there is another way.

Over the past month in our theology classes and reading groups at Saint Thomas we have explored the poetry and writings of *Pádraig Ó Tuama*, a remarkable Irish poet who has worked for years in the process of reconciliation between people who are locked in generational and tribal hatred. O'Tuama's approach strikes me as a great example of this 'imaginative' aspect of love. He never tires of explaining that reconciliation is not about erasing difference or forcing consensus, but about creating **spaces of encounter** where listening and vulnerability can happen. This requires asking hard questions, owning our complicities, and staying present even when pain lingers. He emphasizes that reconciliation is a

messy, ongoing practice – rooted in humility, courage, and mutual transformation rather than quick fixes or simple closure. More than anything else, he believes in the power of the *story*: “I do not know how to love you, or forgive you, but at least I want to know your story, your version, the way you see things from your viewpoint – I want to listen to your suffering”.

The more I think about how to translate ‘love’ in something I can make sense of, the more I find that one of its most powerful forms is this ability to *listen*.

And here is where my experience with Switchboard proves very useful.

If we want to be a bit more imaginative in the way we love we have to learn how to suspend judgment, stretch our empathy, resist the temptation of seeing things only from our point of view, and be willing to give space and time to the other person.

I know that the love Jesus talks about is not just a question of listening skills. And yet think how much better the world would become if more people tried to embrace at least this form of dedication to others. It does not have to be only a last resort to deal with crises in relationships or help people in distress. It can improve all our relations on a daily basis.

On this, Christian insight chimes with secular wisdom. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “The first service one owes to others in fellowship consists in listening to one another.” The famous American spiritual author Henri Nouwen declared: “Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Real listening is a form of spiritual hospitality.”

Loving one another as Jesus loved us can sound daunting only when we picture this love just as feelings or as a duty. The moment we turn the other cheek, that is look for another way, become really interested in one another – then we enter into the territory of imaginative and resourceful love.

Then we might begin to understand why Paul can be so confident in his declaration that “Love never ends” (1 Cor 13.8).
