

There is something a little ironic about the way we approach the important things in our lives. When it comes to our professional lives, we are willing to work very hard. We take risks, accept criticism, work long hours, and put ourselves in uncomfortable situations because we believe there is a reward on the other side: achievement, advancement, financial security, perhaps even recognition or success. Even when children are young, we tell them: work hard now because it will open opportunities for you later.

And yet, when it comes to our relationships, we often assume they should simply work—that friends, family members, or spouses should somehow know what we are thinking and what we need. When they disappoint or hurt us, we can be tempted to retreat rather than do the difficult work of conversation. It takes effort and vulnerability to find the words to express our hurt, feelings, and needs. The other person cannot read our mind any more than we can read theirs. Love requires us to speak honestly, listen carefully, and sometimes struggle patiently toward understanding.

St. Paul tells us that we owe one another a debt: the debt of love. Christian love is more than affection; it is a gift of self that seeks the good of the other, even at a cost to ourselves. Love respects the other person; it does not use them for our own needs or desires. Sin does the opposite. Sin turns us inward, so that instead of asking what is good for another person, we ask what that person can do for us. We can use people for affection, attention, pleasure, status, security, or simply to get our own way. Love recognizes instead that the other person is created and loved by God, with a dignity and a good that I am called to respect and nurture. God's commandments are not

restrictions on our happiness; they teach us how to become capable of the love for which we were created—to receive love and to give love.

And this is one reason the Sacrament of Confession is so important. We go to Confession because we need our sins forgiven, but something more happens there: Confession teaches us how to love. It teaches us vulnerability—to put into words what we would rather hide. It makes us more attentive to the ways our choices have wounded our relationship with God and hurt other people. It humbles our pride because we stop defending ourselves and expose our sinfulness before God and his Church. And precisely in that vulnerability, we encounter mercy. Sacramental grace not only forgives our sins; it strengthens us to become different. God gives us grace to grow in holiness, and holiness is ultimately a growth in our capacity to love.

Jesus is very realistic about human relationships. When someone sins against us, he does not tell us to end the relationship, ignore the hurt, or tell everyone else about it. He says, “Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” And notice the goal: “If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.” The goal is not to win the argument, but to win back the relationship. Yet when we are hurt, instead of speaking to the person, we often speak about the person, gathering others who agree with us. Sometimes what we call seeking advice is really gossip disguised as concern. Jesus gives us the harder path: go to the person.

That requires vulnerability. The word comes from the Latin *vulnerabilis*, “capable of being wounded.” That is exactly what happens when we love. I can tell someone honestly that I have been hurt, but I cannot control how that person will respond. Love involves risk because it means giving something of ourselves without controlling the response. The same is true with God. To love God means surrendering our will to his without always knowing where he will lead us or what he will ask of us.

Perhaps that is why it can be easier to work on our careers than on our relationships. Professional achievement gives us measurable results: a degree, a promotion, a salary, an accomplishment. Love asks something more personal. Love asks for ourselves. But the reward is greater. The deepest fulfillment of our lives will not come from titles, positions, money, or accomplishments. It will come from having learned to love—from the love we received from God and others, and the love we gave in return.

So, which relationship in my life needs some work? Is there a conversation I have been avoiding, someone I need to forgive or ask forgiveness from, a friendship or marriage I have taken for granted? If we work so hard for achievements that eventually pass away, how much more should we work for the people God has placed in our lives. We were created to receive love and to give love. As we learn to speak honestly, listen, forgive, and reconcile, we become more fully the people God created us to be—and discover a reward no professional achievement can give: the peace, joy, and fulfillment of learning to love as God loves us.