

January 24, 2021

"I Can't Imagine". Rev. Lara Cowtan

Homily 1 – (failure of imagination, resistance to empathy)

When something tragic happens, we often find ourselves saying, "I can't imagine what you are going through." It's a common sentiment, as accepted as "get well soon" or "I'll be thinking of you." but what does it actually mean. I think that a lot of times it is meant to say, "I can't presume to know what you are going through". Which is right. Because even if you've experienced similar, it's different. But the very fact that you don't know is all the more reason to imagine. Because right at the root of empathy is imagination. They rise or fall together. If you can't imagine what someone is going through, you can't empathise with them.

It may be that we can't imagine what it's like to be the victim of systemic distrust and profiling. Or what it's like to worry about putting food on the table for a family. Or what it's like to be fighting a chronic illness or being unjustly accused of a crime or afraid for your life because of civil war.

We cant ever really understand another's experience, but we can try. Just because we can't imagine—it doesn't mean we can't care.

I think there is also an element of , "if I can't imagine it, I am sort of safe from whatever that is, it can't touch me." Like, even the imagining of something scary feels very risky. When I think back about when I have used that phrase, I cant imagine, and this is just me, but as I think about when I would say that, I can only remember the conversation ending. Like it has nowhere to go from there. I can't think of a time when that phrase has opened up more connection and conversation afterwards.

Truth is that we can and do imagine challenging scenarios a lot. Maybe too often. What if my mom gets Covid? What if I have to

be away from my home for an extended period of time? What if my partner dies? But when these realities are staring back at you from a friend's frightened eyes, they can be too close for comfort. So out comes, "I can't imagine," and off you go. There is something self-protective in saying I can't imagine. In fact, saying "I just can't imagine" is a bit of a cop-out. Simply saying "I can't imagine what you are going through" It's not true and drives people away, what we are really saying is I don't want to imagine what you are going through. I don't want to imagine, either because I don't care enough to try, or it might take me to a place of despair that I am not prepared for

Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton wrote on Despair and the Imagination, "It may sound strange to locate the problem here, but some of our most despairing moods are caused by failures of the imagination. We are not merely 'sad'; we cannot picture any better life than the agonized one we currently have. What we really mean by imagination is the power to summon up alternatives. When we are sad, we can't imagine finding another job; we can't imagine retraining or shifting profession. We can't imagine not minding what the gossip says about us. We can't imagine finding another partner and letting ourselves trust someone again..." De Botton says,

"In order to increase our chances of fulfilment, we need to feed and massage our imaginations; we need to provide them with countless examples of alternative narratives, so that they can grow more skilled at throwing out plan Bs when fate commands. Whatever way we happen to be living, we should constantly force ourselves to picture different, more arduous but still bearable ways to be. We should go through our lives like a pilot who is at all times wondering what alternative runway they might head to in order to crash-land the plane if a crisis demanded it."

While that sounds a bit extreme and pessimistic to me, I do agree with imagining multiple alternatives and being prepared to adapt to changing circumstances. It is the law of nature, adapt or perish.

This theme of coming up against our resistance to changing, in not being able to imagine things we haven't experienced, is part and parcel with what is calling us to reimagine and transform not only how we do church, but also decentering whiteness and our personal and collective proximity to white supremacy culture. We are called again and again to pay attention to what is keeping us from imagining a different way of being, what is triggering us to cling to old ways, to protect and thereby prevent ourselves from moving forward. We must be able to imagine the unimaginable, to let ourselves see and feel and experience things that make us uncomfortable, that may cause pain in order to have empathy. Imagination is encouraged in children, but not so much in adults. Resistance to change is much greater in adults, so we need to practice it.

It takes 300 – 3000 times to master something new, so we need to be about that messaging again and again and again to keep in front of us the re-imagining the re-imagining of who are as people, as a congregation and collectively in association with others.

“Imagining what the future will bring post-pandemic is daunting for most of us. Our brains are wired to choose negative scenarios over positive ones. I know that my worst days so far have been those on which I cannot visualize anything other than my current narrative—unending physical distancing, donning a mask to go pick up groceries, and staring at the computer screen for yet another meeting or webinar. But in order to get through this marathon, we now must begin to see beyond it with not only imagination, but also with a sense of self-efficacy, creativity,

curiosity and willingness to try. This is how we will arrive at the finish line months from now... We will get there, I know we will

Musical interlude "Woyaya"

Homily 2 – for dreams to come true they must first be dreamed

“At the pinnacle of his career, Norman Rockwell put his brush to work for equity and social justice with his bold portrayals of the Civil Rights Movement, creating in 1964 the iconic image *The Problem We All Live With*, which memorialized 6-year-old Ruby Bridges’ walk as the first black child to integrate her elementary school in New Orleans in 1960. One hundred years after white women secured the right to vote, and sixty years after Ruby’s courageous walk, and just 45 years after the amended Voting Rights Act of 1975 (first enacted in 1965) enshrined the right to vote for ALL women, Kamala Harris, a woman of African American and Indian-American heritage, is elected the first woman to serve the White House as Vice President. She walks in the footsteps of the Suffragists, of Ruby Bridges, and so many others, who broke barriers of equality, often against a tide of fierce racist rhetoric and physical threats to their lives. The image of Kamala Harris walking with the shadow of Ruby Bridges, went viral over the weekend, shared tens of thousands of times on social media. Bridges herself shared it on her personal Instagram

for dreams to come true they must first be dreamed

We talked a few weeks ago about how science fiction imagined so many things that have come to pass, medical and scientific marvels that were the stuff of dreams. Dreams made real. Ruby Bridges walked into a school 50 years ago because not only was she courageous but also because others imagined it into

becoming, set it into motion, lobbied, argued fought for and won the rights for a young black girl to get the same education as the white children. :Do you think Ruby Bridges could have imagined that during her own lifetime she would witness Amanda Gorman owning the stage at the inauguration of the first woman and first woman of color to be elected to the office of Vice President of the united states? Maybe she did. Certainly she made it possible for future generations to imagine it and make it real.

I know from my own experience that women still are not accepted as equal to men, even here, now, there is still a hill to climb. But I can imagine it being so. It is not a science fiction fantasy, equal treatment, equal rights, equal pay for equal work, with equal opportunity, it is all within our reach, and in imagining it we work towards making it real.

Who could have imagined a year ago how the world we live in looks today, with more than 2 million dead, people living in isolation and fear of a virus. Who could have imagined how quickly and completely our world can change. In this pandemic time it feels like so much of our lives have been put on hold, like someone pressed pause on the video of our story, and we know that, when we hit the play button again, things won't be the same as they were before. And, in many ways, this can be a really good thing. An opportunity to reset, to reboot and refresh, continuing only with the things we choose to, letting go of things that no longer make sense or serve us, discarding old habits of buying things we don't need or doing things just because that is how it has always be done. This is an opportunity to re-imagine our relationships, our priorities, how we connect with and use our resources.

This is the time to Imagine what it might be like when we can meet again in person, imagine what worship might look like, imagine what it might be like to re-engage with community, imagine what that community might be like when it is some in person and still online.

The MTT task forces came up with proposals for the future of UCV to optimise staffing, governance structure, membership and volunteer management and how to engage more young people. The Young persons task force came up with some real concrete vision about what would bring more young adults to UCV. Some key points were: Having intentional inviting space, physical and virtual to gather, and on weekday evenings as well as Sundays, to have young people represented in decision-making, have music that appeals to different ages, backgrounds and tastes, programs for young people supported by dedicated staff or volunteers, more focus on spirituality, better outreach and targeted communications, openness to the value of experience and diversity that Young people bring as assets to enrich the community. The report is comprehensive and filled with an energetic vision that I can imagine.

Imagine what UCV might become and imagine it becoming the vibrant, diverse, welcoming  
Imagine it, dream it and make it so.