

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167): Friendship's Child

1. When I was still just a lad in school, and the charm of my companions pleased me very much, I gave my whole soul to affection and devoted myself to love amid the ways and vices with which that age is wont to be threatened, so that nothing seemed to me more sweet, nothing more agreeable, nothing more practical, than to love. And so, torn between conflicting loves and friendships, I was drawn now here, now there, and not knowing the law of true friendship, I was often deceived by its mere semblance.

Who identifies with this experience; are there any social butterflies in the room? What's a strength of this kind of personality? What's a downside?

"God is friendship. Those who abide in friendship abide in God & God abides in them." after 1 John 4:16
This verse traditionally uses the word "love" or "charity". How does the shift to "friendship" alter the verse's meaning for you?

Where do you and I learn about friendship, relationships and intimacy?

What would you say are the most important aspects of close friendship? (self-disclosure? mutual acceptance?)

As the abbot/director of a thriving monastic community, Aelred was a sensitive pastor and a spiritual writer of remarkable depth. In his later years, he wrote short treatise entitled On Spiritual Friendship, the source of these readings. Aelred provides us with an in-depth Christo-centric spirituality of Christian friendship.

What might an obscure 12th century monk teach us modern, sophisticated people about spiritual relationships?

Aelred's book, *Spiritual Friendship*, is "a formula whereby I might check the vacillations of my loves & affections."

2. **Let one kind of friendship be called carnal, another worldly, and another spiritual.** The carnal springs from home of mutual harmony in vice; the worldly is enkindled by the hope of gain; and the spiritual is cemented by similarity of life, morals and pursuits among the just."

The real beginning of **carnal friendship** proceeds from an affection...following its own lustful ear and eyes in every direction. By means of the avenues of the senses it brings into the mind itself images of beautiful bodies or voluptuous objects... Then by gesture, nod, words, compliance, spirit is captivated by spirit, and one is inflamed by the other, and they are kindled to form a sinful bond, so that...the one will do or suffer any crime or sacrilege whatsoever for the sake of the other...And so this sort of friendship is undertaken without deliberation, is tested by no act of judgement, is in no wise governed by reason...consumed by its own self....

What does Aelred name as the three kinds of friendship?

"Carnal" comes from the Latin carnalis, from caro, carn- 'flesh.'

What associations does the word "carnal" have for you?

What do you think Aelred means when he talks about "carnal friendship"? What does it look like?

How does this carnal friendship play out in our own world today? Have you had this experience?

Aelred speaks of "mutual harmony in vice". Could there be a healthy carnal friendship?

3. Worldly friendship, which is born of a desire for temporal advantage or possessions, is always full of deceit and intrigue; it contains nothing certain, nothing constant, nothing secure; for to be sure, it changes with fortune and follows the purse. Hence it is written: 'he is a fair-weather friend, and he will not abide in the day of your trouble.' Take away his hope of profit, and immediately he will cease to be your friend....Such love their friends as they love their cattle.

Even the philosophers of this world have ranked friendship not with things casual or transitory but with the virtues which are eternal. Solomon...says: 'He that is a friend loves at all times,' manifestly declaring that friendship is eternal if it is true friendship; but if it should ever cease to be, then it was not true friendship, even if it seemed so.

How do you see worldly friendships at work in your professional, church, social, & family circles?

Elsewhere Aelred writes that 'those who have no friends are to be compared to beasts for they have no one with whom to rejoice, no one to whom they can unburden their hearts, or with whom to share their inspirations and illuminations.'

What does this statement mean to you?

Aelred speaks of true friendship as being eternal. Do you agree? How would you define the word friendship?

4. For **spiritual friendship**, which we call true, should be desired, not for consideration of any worldly advantage or for any extrinsic cause, but from the dignity of its own nature and the feelings of the human heart, so that its fruition and reward is nothing other than itself. ...And so spiritual friendship among the just is born of a similarity in life, morals, and pursuits, that is, it is a mutual conformity in matters human and divine united with benevolence and charity.

Friendship is...a stage toward the love and knowledge of God. Indeed, in friendship there is nothing dishonorable, nothing deceptive, nothing feigned. Whatever there is, is holy, voluntary, and true. And this itself is also a characteristic of charity. In friendship are joined honor and charm, truth and joy, sweetness and good-will, affection and action. And all unnatural does the ascent appear from Christ, as the inspiration of the love by which we love our friend, to Christ giving himself to us as our Friend for us to love...Thus charm follows upon charm, sweetness upon sweetness upon affection. Friend cleaving to friend in the spirit of Christ is made with Christ one heart and one soul." "I confess that I am convinced that true friendship cannot exist among those who live without Christ.

Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst...for what more sublime can be said of friendship...that it ought to, and is proved to, begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ?

There are four qualities which characterize a friend: Loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience. Right intention seeks for nothing other than God and natural good. Discretion brings understanding of what is done on a friend's behalf, and ability to know when to correct faults. Patience enables one to be justly rebuked, or to bear adversity on another's behalf. Loyalty guards and protects friendship, in good or bitter times.

Spiritual friendship is serious business. What do you notice about Aelred's description of spiritual friendship?

Do you agree with his assertion that true friendship cannot exist among those who live without Christ? Why or why not?

Next, Aelred goes on to talk about the four qualities: loyalty. Right intention. Discretion. Patience.

Have you experienced these qualities in any of your relationships?

5. **This type of friendship is not common...** Divine authority approves that more are to be received into the bosom of **charity** than into the embrace of **friendship**. For we are compelled by the law of charity to receive in the embrace of love not only our friends but also our enemies. But only those do we call friends to whom we can fearlessly entrust our heart and all its secrets..."

What is the difference between charity and friendship?

The Irish poet John O'Donohue writes about the ancient Celtic notion of "anam cara" or "soul friend." In the early Celtic church, it referred to someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the anam cara you could share your inner-most self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an anam cara, you were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the "friend of your soul." This art of belonging awakened and fostered a deep and special companionship. (Listen to O'Donohue's interview with Krista Tippett, <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>)

Did you grow up with any notion of "soul friend"? What does "anam cara" mean to you?

6. Selection: "Not all whom we love should be received into friendship, for not all are worthy of it. For since your friend is the companion of your soul, to whose spirit you join and attach yours...since he is the one to whom you entrust yourself as to another self, from whom you hide nothing, you should, in the first place, choose one who is considered fitted for all this. Then he is to be tried, and so finally admitted.

Aelred says that friendship is a precious gift, yet we should be discerning about those whom we choose as friends and not establish relationships based on either mere whim or animal attraction.

How can friendship with someone be both a gift and something you choose?

How do you begin to select a friend that might be fitting?

Can you talk about a time when you made a conscious choice to be committed to a relationship, where there was an element of personal responsibility?

Can you love someone without pursuing them as a friend?

7. Probation: "Therefore, to those friends for whom thus far we have thought probation was necessary, we ought not to confide to them all our profound secrets, but at first, external or little things about which one does not care a great deal whether they be concealed or exposed; yet this should be done with very great caution as if these smaller matters should do harm if betrayed, but would be of service if concealed....Misfortune is the best way to prove the fidelity of a friend: in adversity, we discover friends who are there not for prosperity.

What do you think of this strategy of testing? How can caution be helpful in a relationship?

8. Admission: "When the test is complete, and when admitted to friendship, one should never question the loyalty of a friend.

Have you ever made that decision—to admit someone, to never question their loyalty?

What questions do you have right now? What are you thinking, feeling about your own relationships?

9. Cultivation: "We disclose to the friend whatever confidences we have in our hearts, and that we be not ignorant of his confidences. Let us lay bare to him our heart and let him disclose his to us. For a friend hides nothing. If he is true, he pours forth his soul...And even though your friend think himself wronged, nevertheless correct him. Friendship heightens the joys of prosperity and mitigates the sorrows of adversity by dividing and sharing them. Hence the best medicine in life is a friend. And so, praying to Christ for his friend, and longing to be heard by Christ for his friend's sake, he reaches out with devotion and desire to Christ himself. And suddenly and sensibly, natural affection passes into spiritual love, as though touched by the gentleness of Christ close to hand. Thus, from that holy love with which he embraces his friend, he rises to that by which he embraces Christ

What good advice does Aelred offer here? What are some concrete ways you cultivate friendships?

How is friendship a holy, spiritual experience?

10. Dissolution: If you nevertheless suffer evils from him whom once you received into friendship, we said that your friendship should not be broken off immediately, but dissolved little by little, and that such reverence should be maintained for the former friendship, that, although you withdraw your confidence from him, yet you never withdraw your love, refuse your aid, or deny him your advice.[When] that interior delight is withdrawn which drank continuously from the heart of the friend; security is lost, but which is revealed its secrets to a friend; happiness is put aside, which friendly conversation produced. Therefore, that familiarity, in which such things find their place, must be denied a former friend, but love should not be withdrawn; yet all this should be done with a certain moderation and reverence, so that, if there has not been to great a shock, some traces of the former friendship always seem to remain.

Have you ever had a break-up? What prompted it? What was it like? How did it play out?

What would be causes for the dissolution of a friendship?

Aelred speaks of unstitching a friendship...Have you ever seen grace-filled “unstitching” happen in real life?

What new ideas has Aelred given you in his writing on Spiritual Friendship?

What questions are coming up for you now?

Do you think his ideal of spiritual friendship transfers to our context today?

How does Aelred change the way you might approach your relationships?