

A School of Christian Love

BY PAUL J. WADELL

Friends, Augustine famously taught, are gifts entrusted to us by God for providential purposes. If so, a strong love for our friends does not detract from our love for God but is precisely the setting in which we come to learn what loving God rightly means.

My high school years were a little different. And I don't regret a minute of them. In the fall of 1965 I left my home in Louisville to join nearly two hundred other fellows at a high school seminary in a small Missouri town called Warrenton. It was a four-year adventure that changed my life. My cohorts on that journey gathered from across the country to navigate the dramas of adolescence as fledging members of a religious community called the Passionists. Some came from California, others from Chicago, Detroit, Birmingham, and St. Louis, and many more came along with me from Louisville. We were a ragtag bunch who clustered together in the most unlikely of settings to be initiated into a way of life designed to help us discover whether or not we ought to become Passionist priests. For four memorable years we studied and worked together, prayed and played together, and plotted some of the most imaginative and complicated practical jokes I have ever witnessed. Still, forty years later the most abiding recollection I have is that all of us who arrived in Warrenton as strangers left there as lifelong friends.

Although we did not realize it at the time, the pink stucco building that was our home for four years was a school of friendship; and friendship, at its best, is a school of Christian love. In a life ordered by prayer and worship, we learned there how turning our attention to God helped us to be more attentive to one another. In a place where none of us had very much, we learned how sharing and generosity build friendships, and why a life centered on Christ is the key to nurturing genuine friendship and intimacy

among ourselves. We did not choose each other, but we were given one another and entrusted with one another. Each of us was the “neighbor” all of us were called to love. And although we could not articulate it at the time, this meant helping one another grow in holiness by together moving closer to God. We did this by reaching out to one another and seeking each other’s good. We did it by being present to one another, encouraging and supporting each other, but also by challenging each other. And since we lived together twenty-four hours a day for nine months of the year, we also did it by learning how to be patient with and forgive one another.¹

It may be rare to spend one’s high school years at a seminary, but it is not rare to have friends. Friendship is one of life’s greatest gifts and blessings. We cherish our friends. Like Aristotle, we cannot imagine a good life without them. We know they have enriched our lives through the time they have invested in us and the care they have shown us. Being able to talk with them about the things that matter most to us is precious. And none would deny that our friends have shaped and changed our lives for the better.

Nonetheless, even though we know our lives would be terribly impoverished without friends, we may seldom consider the role of friendship in the Christian life. But cannot our friends teach us something about what it might mean to love God wholeheartedly, to follow in the way of Christ, and to radiate the goodness and holiness of God? Cannot friends help one another become “experts” at kindness, patience, mercy, compassion, and joy? Christians are called

to re-represent the love and goodness of God in the world. But there have to be places where we can learn what this means, and one of those places is in the best and most enduring friendships of our lives. Friendships can be schools of Christian love. In fact, if Christians are to learn and to grow in the ways of

Jesus, they need at least some of their friendships to be settings where friends can school one another in all the various practices of Christian love.

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FRIENDSHIP AS A SANCTIFYING WAY OF LIFE

One of the best places to begin probing what it might mean to think of friendship as a school of Christian love is the writings of Augustine. In his *Confessions*, Augustine’s stirring account of the first thirty-three years of his life, he makes no secret of the role friends had in his conversion. Looking back on how God worked through a variety of people to turn him from sin

to grace, Augustine concludes that it is best to think of friends not so much as the people we choose to bring into our lives, but as gifts entrusted to us by God. For Augustine, we do not initiate friendships, God does. Friends are gifts given to us by God for providential purposes. They are channels of God's grace because it is through them that God watches over us, blesses and provides for us, guides and supports us, and, most of all, loves us. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (4:7). Like Paul, Augustine came to see everything in his life as a gift, everything as a gracious manifestation of God's creative and redemptive love, but perhaps especially his friends. If we have such graced relationships in our lives, Augustine believed, it is solely because God has brought these people to us. Moreover, they are brought to us not only that we might know and experience God's love through them, but also that we might grow more deeply in that love with them.²

Augustine taught that Christians, remembering their baptisms, should think of friendships differently. In the Christian life the fundamental purpose of friendship is not to bring us satisfaction and success in the world, but to help us grow *together* in Christ in order that we might *together* enjoy friendship with God and the saints in heaven. But in order for this goal to be realized, friends must find ways in their life together to learn, be formed in, and witness the love of God.

We may wonder if our friendships ever reach such lofty heights, but perhaps Augustine's hope for friendship is not as far-fetched as we might initially think. Where else do we learn what it practically means to love our neighbor than in the most enduring friendships of our lives? Where else do we learn the fundamentals of charity, justice, fairness, generosity, and even sacrificial love than in the crucible of friendship, especially friendships that extend over time? Too, to speak of friendships as schools of Christian love is not to drain all joy from them by turning them into the kind of dreary relationships where all friends do is probe each other's progress in the Christian life. Rather, it is to recognize, as Augustine did, that God works not outside but within the ordinary settings of our lives, and that God works not apart from but through the people with whom we are most intimately connected. Augustine appreciated how a fundamental good such as friendship could be a setting in which people grow together in Christ. This is why he insisted that friends, in ways they may only later realize, cooperate with God in helping one another grow more resplendent in the love and goodness of God.

Like Augustine, the twelfth-century Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), also envisioned friendship as a school of Christian love. Not long after he was named abbot of Rievaulx, Aelred wrote *Spiritual Friendship*, a treatise that can aptly be described as a Christian reworking of the philosopher Cicero's classic work on friendship, *De Amicitia*. Aelred wrote *Spiritual Friendship* for his fellow monks at Rievaulx to show them

how the friendships that existed among them could aid their life together in Christ. At the same time, Aelred saw relationships among some of the monks that were not healthy. They were immature, manipulative, and self-serving relationships that might superficially appear to be friendships, but that could hardly bolster their life in Christ. Thus, Aelred begins by calling attention to two kinds of relationships that are counterfeit versions of friendship, not genuine expressions of it.³

The first he calls *carnal friendship*. One cannot accuse Aelred of being subtle! These are relationships in which each “friend” plays on the other’s weaknesses and encourages him or her in behavior that is morally and spiritually harmful. True friendships are marked by a genuine love for the good and a heartfelt desire to seek what is best for the friend. True friendships always make us better because they appeal to what is best in us and challenge us to grow in goodness, truthfulness, and love. But what attracts people to a “carnal friendship” is the perception that they have found another who will not challenge them and with whom they can continue to pursue what is wrong and not be bothered. Carnal friendships foster the wrong kinds of attractions and desires. At their worst, they deaden our consciences and harden our hearts. They make us comfortable with doing wrong and accomplished in nothing but sinning. It is because carnal friendships are so morally and spiritually debilitating that they require massive self-deception to be sustained; indeed, the only way one could continue in such a corrupting relationship is by lying to oneself about its effects.

It is disquieting to think about such relationships, relationships that can best be described as partnerships in self-indulgence, dishonesty, and wickedness, and certainly not as settings for growing in the virtues. But Aelred helps us realize that not every relationship to which we give the name “friendship” really is one; and not every relationship in which we find ourselves will school us in the love and goodness of Christ. It is important for us to reflect on—and to be honest about—the various relationships of our lives

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and what they might be doing to us. Are they making us better persons? Are they helping us grow in goodness, sensitivity, and respect for others? Are they leading us closer to God? Or are they making it easier for us to gossip, to remain bitter and unforgiving, to be stingy and inconsiderate? If we took an inventory of the “friendships” of our lives, would we recall any

that brought out the worst in us? Have we known relationships that made us more strangers to God than friends of God?⁴

A second relationship Aelred considers is *worldly friendships*. At first glance, they seem a step up from carnal friendships; however, in some respects they are more dangerous because their corrupting effects can be much harder to spot. For Aelred, worldly friendships are not motivated by

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a genuine desire to seek the good of another, which is a defining characteristic of any true friendship; rather, they are essentially self-serving relationships whose fundamental aim is the promotion and advancement of one's self. Instead of being focused on the needs of another, worldly friendships are "always full of

deceit and intrigue"⁵ because a person must disguise the fact that he or she has little genuine regard for the one claimed as friend. Perhaps these were the kinds of relationships Aelred saw around him in his earlier years when he served at the court of a king. But Aelred and his fellow monks at Rievaulx are hardly the only ones who are susceptible to such crafty and calculating alliances. Even though the language of "worldly friendship" may sound quaint to us today, isn't Aelred describing precisely the kinds of relationships that often thrive in business, in politics, in colleges and universities, and sometimes even in our churches? Aren't many of us at least occasionally tempted to seek out someone not because we really want a friendship with him or her, but because we suspect such an alliance might help us get ahead?

It may be hard for us to take Aelred's concerns about these relationships seriously because we live in a society in which worldly friendships are not only taken for granted, but also often encouraged and admired. We are taught to esteem people who know how to "get ahead" and how to "make a name" for themselves, even if they have to be a little manipulative and self-serving in doing so. We live in a society that persistently teaches us to look after ourselves first, and so it is easy to dismiss Aelred as an overly scrupulous twelfth-century monk whose musings have little relevance for us today. But that would be a mistake. As he did with his community members at Rievaulx, Aelred asks us to consider the impact that different friendships of our lives have on our life with Christ. Are they strengthening us in our baptismal vocation or pulling us away from it? Are they serving our life with God or making us increasingly unmindful of God? Worldly friendships are detrimental to the Christian life because any relationship that asks noth-

ing more of us than that we think of ourselves first can hardly help us fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.⁶

If certain relationships risk separating us from God, the third type of friendship Aelred discusses, *spiritual friendship*, will always draw us closer to God. By spiritual friendship, Aelred does not mean a relationship that pulls us out of our ordinary lives, but one that enables us to find Christ and to grow in Christ in our ordinary lives. Every friendship is formed around shared goods, and spiritual friendships are formed around a common love for Christ and a mutual desire to grow together in Christ. This does not mean that the friends must always be consciously aware of their devotion to Christ or that they only talk about spiritual things. But it does mean that they recognize their friendship as one that moves them along in the Christian life by forming them in the virtues and practices of the gospel. For Aelred, a spiritual friendship involves two or more people coming together to pursue a life of seeking God and of being conformed to the ways of God. Indeed, spiritual friendships begin in Christ, are lived in Christ, and are perfected in Christ. This is why they are an integral component to a life of discipleship. Spiritual friends, in their mutual imitation of Christ, help one another become better friends of God.

In this way, they are not only schools that teach us how to love our neighbor, but also schools that teach us how to love God properly. Love of neighbor and love of God are inextricably linked in spiritual friendships for Aelred because Christ, who is the perfect revelation of God and the perfect revelation of humanity, is an active partner in the friendship. In the opening lines of *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred speaks with his fellow monk Ivo and says: "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst."⁷ Spiritual friendship never exists solely among the two earthly friends, but always includes a third, Christ, who is the gift of God's friendship to us in person. It is because Christ is actively present in the friendship that the friends learn not only how to love one another, but also how to love God for God's own sake. Such uncalculating love is not easily acquired. But it is something the friends grow into as they journey with Jesus and learn from him how to love God not out of fear or sheer obligation but from a genuine desire to seek the good of One who has always sought theirs.

THE GOOD THINGS GOOD FRIENDS DO FOR US

There are many ways we are indebted to our friends. We are grateful to them for standing by us during difficult times of our lives. We are grateful to them for being patient with us and not giving up on us. And we are surely grateful for their goodness, their steadfast encouragement and support, and the joy and grace they bring to our lives. But Christians hold a special indebtedness to their friends because it is in the company of friends that we live out the promise of our baptisms by growing in the goodness and love of God. There are many ways this can happen, but three seem most important.

First, friendships can be rightly described as schools of Christian love because every friendship draws us out of ourselves and teaches us how to care for others for their own sake. To love anyone is to be called out of ourselves to attend to the needs of another. It is to redirect our attention and our energy away from ourselves and towards the neighbors we are given to love. But none of us loves this way easily or naturally because of our deep inclination to look after ourselves first. Thus, we have to learn the hard work of love somewhere. We have to find ways to break through the fetters of self-absorption and self-concern in order to find joy in serving and caring about others. We have to learn lessons in sharing somewhere, just as we have to learn what it means to be generous and just, patient and forgiving, loyal and faithful. There is no doubt that such qualities are absolutely crucial for vocations such as marriage and parenting; but it is also true that one had better know something about generosity, justice, patience, forgiveness, loyalty, and faithfulness prior to getting married or becoming a parent. And friendships are good places to begin.

Friendships are morally significant relationships (Aristotle called them schools of virtue) because it is in company with good friends that we become good people. In other words, we do not become good and loving and just all on our own but by spending time with people who are good or who at least want to become good. None of us learns to love, to share, or to be kind and considerate single-handedly. We acquire these virtues in partnership with others who are seeking them with us. This is why good friendships not only make growing in goodness and love more pleasant for us; indeed, they make it possible. Friendships provide the form of life in which we acquire such indispensable virtues for the Christian life as patience, humility, courage, faithfulness, and perseverance.⁸ In fact, we can even say that friends make one another good because friends appeal to what is best in us and give us ample opportunities to exercise the various manifestations of love that constitute the Christian life.

A second way that friendships contribute to our growth in love is that friends teach us about ourselves. Good friends not only know us better than most anyone else, but sometimes they can also know us better than we know ourselves. Aristotle captured this by saying that a good friend is like a mirror. Friends show us to ourselves. As they come to know us better they reveal certain aspects of our personality and character to us. We may learn from our friends that we have a gift for compassion or a gift for listening to others, perhaps especially the people in our midst who feel overlooked and forgotten. We may learn from our friends that our sense of humor brings people together and helps them feel at ease. Or we may learn from our friends that we too often insist on getting our way, that we are easily irritated, and that we sometimes take inappropriate joy at another's failure. Friends have insight about one another's character, for better or worse, simply because they have spent enough time together to come to know

one another well. If friendships are to be true schools in Christian love, friends must be able to challenge one another and be truthful with one another. Anybody can flatter me, but only a person who truly cares about me will be truthful with me. This is why if I want to be schooled in the discipline of Christian love I must allow my friends to call to my attention things I might rather conceal. I need my friends to challenge me to move beyond a hurt or to let go of a grudge. I need them to help me not take myself too seriously or to become excessively anxious about things I cannot control. And, in the Christian life, I need friends to help me stay centered on God.⁹

Finally, a third way friendships can school us in the rigors of Christian love is by continually challenging us to extend the boundaries of our world. Good friendships should always make our world bigger, not smaller, by calling us to expand the circle of love. A particular danger of friendships is that they can narrow our world by leaving us disposed to spend time, and to give attention to, only the people we enjoy being with and who make us feel good about ourselves. But Christians cannot afford friendships that become “clubby” or exclusive. We may not like all of our neighbors, but we are commanded to love them. Friends need to challenge each other to enlarge the scope of their love by reaching out to others, especially those we would rather avoid. Put differently, friendship is *preferential* love; but Jesus calls us to reach out in love not just to the people we prefer, but even to those we call our enemies.

When he was writing about charity, the Christian love of neighbor and God, the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas said charity calls us to love as neighbor everyone who is beloved and befriended by God.¹⁰ But because God’s befriending love has

been extended to all – even to those we might not particularly like – if we are true “friends of God” we must work to love them too.

Aquinas recognized that friendships become morally and spiritually dangerous when their effect is to leave us ignoring the diverse neighbors across the world that Jesus summons us to

love. Friendships are true schools of Christian love only when they deepen our awareness of the connections that exist between us and every other person – indeed, all of creation – and heighten our sense of responsibility towards them. For Christians, a true test of friendship is whether it enables us to extend the circle of God’s love and compassion to any neighbor who crosses our path.

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CONCLUSION

Augustine was right. Friends are gifts entrusted to us by God for providential purposes. They can come into our lives at the most unlikely of places (like a high school seminary in Missouri), but wherever they appear we must be able to recognize and to respond to the grace. When we look back over our lives we realize what a precious gift certain friendships have been to us and how incomparably blessed we are because of them. Christians should especially prize friendships because they recognize in them the potential to be schools of love, settings in which we encounter Christ in one another and gradually learn from one another how to grow resplendent in the goodness and holiness of God. This may not be how we customarily think about friendships. But it is certainly a very promising and inviting way because it suggests that a strong love for our friends does not detract from our love for God, but is precisely the setting in which we come to learn what loving God rightly means. For Christians, this is the secret of friendship's great intimacy and the clearest explanation of its joy.

NOTES

1 For an extended analysis of the role of friendship in the moral life see my *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), especially 1-26.

2 For a superb description of Augustine's understanding of friendship's role in the Christian life, see Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 185-217.

3 Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 70-100.

4 These points are covered in more detail in my *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 97-103.

5 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, translated by Mary Eugenia Laker, S.S.N.D. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 1:42.

6 Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 103-107.

7 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1:1.

8 Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 125-127.

9 Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 69-71.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by R. J. Batten, O.P. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975) II-II, Q. 25, a. 1.



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