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Apprenticing Ourselves to Wise Mentors: Pastor Al's (d. 1167) Paradigmatic Vision for "Spiritual" Friendship

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**Apprenticing Ourselves to Wise Mentors:
Pastor Al's (d. 1167) Paradigmatic Vision for "Spiritual" Friendship**

*Zondervan Library Book Talk
Sponsored by the BSCP Department and the Sacred Roots Project
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"Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. . . and Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself."

I Samuel 18:1-3 (c. 1000 BC)

"You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third."

Aelred (c. 1167 AD)

An opening prayer:

May this time contribute to each of us growing in our understanding of Christian friendship, particularly may we understand with Aelred that all spiritual friendships "must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ" (SF, 1:10). Amen.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Big Idea:

The pursuit of spiritual friendship is an essential spiritual discipline for those who want to grow into deeper friendship with the triune God.

B. Objectives. As a result of:

1. Habitat: learning about Aelred's vision for spiritual friendship you will better understand some of the specific challenges to Christian friendship in this generation.
2. Head: exploring how Aelred used Scripture, Christian tradition, Science, and his own experience to develop a vision for Christian friendship, you will be better equipped to develop your own vision making use of these sources.
3. Heart: listening to my journey into better understanding spiritual friendship, you will desire a deeper understanding and experience of spiritual friendship.
4. Hands: engaging with Aelred's idea of Spiritual Friendship you will be better equipped to respond to four perennial issues thoughtful Christians face as they pursue Christian friendship.
5. Habits: participating in this workshop you will consider intentionally pursuing one of four habits to develop and deepen spiritual friendships during the four weeks until graduation.

C. Why “spiritual” or “Christian” Friendship is especially challenging in North America at this Time.

1. Western culture approaches the world in far more individualistic ways than other cultures and generations.
2. We tend to be very task-oriented and leave little time for nurturing relationships.
3. We tend to sexualize relationships and so limit the possibilities for friendship that were once more common.
4. We are far more transitory than previous generations.

II. SIX STOPS ON HANK’S JOURNEY INTO SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

A. Stop 1: Second West Wengatz, Rooms 208 and 209. Fall of 1995.

B. Stop 2: Second Floor of Zondervan Library. J-term, 1996

C. Stop 3: Cracker Barrel, Gas City. Dec. 29, 1999.

D. Stop 4: La Mirada, CA. Talbot School of Theology. Spring 2003.

E. Stop 5: St. Andrews Monastery. Spring of 2017.

F. Stop 6: Pantheon, Rome. June 2022.

III. WHO WAS AELRED AND WHY DOES *SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP* MATTER TODAY?

Big Idea: Growing disciples of Jesus will not thrive on their earthly journey without developing skill in choosing, testing, trusting, and enjoying friends. One of the best ways to learn how to do this well is illustrated by a pastor named Aelred (d. 1167).

A. Who

1. Aelred is known as one of the greatest friends in the history of the church. He was a pastor, a theologian, and an exceptional friend to hundreds of people who wanted to grow into spiritual maturity (i.e. Christlikeness).
2. Wrote the most important book on Christian friendship in church history.
3. We are wise to apprentice ourselves to him to learn about spiritual friendship.

B. Where and When?

1. Aelred was born in AD 1110 to a family who had served in various positions of church leadership for generations. As a young man he was a steward to King David I of Scotland, but soon decided to leave court life and become a monk. In 1134, Aelred left Scotland and joined a new Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx, near Yorkshire in England.¹
2. Insert slide of Map.

C. What?

1. Thesis:

Spiritual friendship is vitally important for those seeking spiritual maturity in Christ. Your relationship with God and your ability to thrive as a Christian are dependent on how well you steward your spiritual friendships.

2. Definition: Spiritual Friendship involves people who

Love me, and love Jesus even more (*SF* 1.1).

I trust to “guard my soul” (*SF* 1.20).

Share character, goals, and habits in life (*SF* 1.46).

3. Structure: Three conversations between four friends about spiritual friendship.

Spiritual Friendship was written as a book consisting of three conversations, each beginning with Aelred and a different friend. The first conversation (Book 1), takes place between Aelred and his friend Ivo. The second conversation (Book 2) takes place some years later and begins with Aelred’s friend Walter, although a second friend, Gratian, soon joins them. The third conversation (Book 3) covers practical questions about spiritual friendship and includes Gratian and Walter again. This edition of *Spiritual Friendship* breaks the three books into eight chapters to help readers follow Aelred’s argument and to align with the format of all Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics.

4. Aelred’s uses reason (science), Scripture, Christian tradition (spiritual classics), and his own experience (i.e. Wesleyan quadrilateral) to provide an excellent exploration of Christian Friendship.

Table 1: Aelred’s Wisdom on Spiritual Friendship Comes from Four Sources

¹ Aelred’s community followed a rule of life developed by Saint Benedict around AD 600. For more information on what Aelred’s daily life looked like see Greg Peters, ed., *Becoming a Community of Disciples: Guidelines from Abbot Benedict and Bishop Basil*, Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics 2 (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2021).

Reason	Tradition	Experience
<p>Aelred learned from the wisest students of human relationships available to him. He collected insights from Cicero’s study of human friendship called <i>On Friendship</i>.</p>	<p>Aelred learned from many of the wisest teachers of the church who had come before him including leaders like Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Cassian, and Gregory the Great.</p>	<p>Aelred lived in a community of men who had all taken vows to pursue friendship with God and one another by following a discipleship plan known as Benedict’s Rule. Within this community, Aelred was known as a legendary friend, and stories about his skill at friendship have been told for centuries.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Scripture</p> <p>Aelred’s life centered on Scripture. Like all members of his discipleship community, he spent a minimum of four hours a day, 365 days a year, reading, studying, meditating, and praying Scripture. He prayed through the book of Psalms every week, and lived in this rhythm for some four decades until his death on January 12, 1167.</p>		

IV. AELRED AS MENTOR FOR SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Aelred’s spiritual classic, *Spiritual Friendship*, has helped thousands of Christians over dozens of cultures and across many centuries to thrive in Christian leadership while serving in challenging ministry settings. One reason for the fruitfulness of Aelred’s work over the centuries is that it is a well-balanced text addressing four areas: reason, Scripture, Christian tradition, and personal experience.

A. Wisdom from Creation: Reason (Science) and Cicero

1. Cicero’s work on Friendship represents some of the best thinking on friendship that human reason can deduce. It displays the common grace found in creation. Aelred begins his text with serious engagement with this creation wisdom.²

²Cicero was probably the most well respected thinker produced by the Roman empire. He was roughly a contemporary of the Apostle Paul. He collected all the “wisdom under the sun” regarding human friendship up to

2. Aelred discusses Cicero's definition of friendship at four different places in *SF*, the threefold structure of the book echoes Cicero's structure, and he cites Cicero some 96 times in a relatively short text.³
3. Today we can use insights from both natural, life, and social sciences to better understand the nature of Christian friendship.
 - a) If Aelred was writing today, in this subject area of "reason" he might also consider the Grant Study from Harvard Medical School. This study, begun in 1938, is one of the longest longitudinal studies of adult development ever done (over seventy-five years long). Its current director, Robert Waldinger, claims that the study's clearest message is, "good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."⁴
 - b) A similar message comes from *National Geographic's* Blue Zones project, which identified nine characteristics shared by happy, healthy, and long-lived peoples around the world. Friendship was one of these variables, and the researchers point readers to Japan where small groups of Japanese create *moais*, five friends who commit to each other for their entire life.⁵
 - c) A third example comes from the research of Robin Dunbar who has spent a lifetime researching human friendship and social networks. He recently summarized the results from numerous studies—including one with over 300,000 participants, and explained, "Perhaps the most surprising finding to emerge from the medical literature over the past two decades has been the evidence that the more friends we have, the less likely we are to fall prey to diseases, and the longer we will live."⁶

B. Wisdom from Tradition: Teaching and Practice of the Church

that point and wrote about the topic in the form of a conversation between a couple of friends who were talking about friendship. See Cicero, *Cicero: On Old Age On Friendship On Divination*, trans. W. A. Falconer, 1st edition, edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1923). Cicero builds on thinkers like Aristotle who wrote a book for his son, Nicomachus on what being a true man looks like. Aristotle included two chapters on what friendship between a man and his friends should look like. See Aristotle, *Aristotle, XIX, Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1934).

³See index in Aelred of Rievaulx, *Aelred of Rievaulx*.

⁴ Robert Waldinger, "Transcript of 'What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness,'" www.ted.com, November 2015.

⁵ Dan Buettner and Sam Skemp, "Blue Zones," *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 10, no. 5 (July 7, 2016): 318–21.

⁶ Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships* (Great Britain: Little, Brown, 2022), 7.

1. Aelred builds on the wisdom of Jewish believers who lived before Jesus but after the Hebrew Bible was complete (Apocrypha, 11x).
 - Sirach 6:7 “When you gain friends, gain them through testing, and do not trust them hastily.”
 - Sirach 6:16 “Faithful friends are life-saving medicine; and those who fear the Lord will find them.”
 - Sirach 22:20–22 “One who throws a stone at birds scares them away, and one who reviles a friend destroys a friendship. 21 Even if you draw your sword against a friend, do not despair, for there is a way back. 22 If you open your mouth against your friend, do not worry, for reconciliation is possible. But as for reviling, arrogance, disclosure of secrets, or a treacherous blow—in these cases any friend will take to flight..

2. Aelred builds his teaching on friendship from the foundations he finds in:
 - Ambrose (Cited 46 times)
 - Bernard (a contemporary and friend, 30x)
 - Augustine (24x)
 - Jerome (10x)
 - Cassian (7x)

C. Wisdom from Experience: Aelred and His Friends

1. Aelred was a legendary good friend (*Life of Aelred*, Walter Daniel). Some five hundred men thought of him as their “best friend.”

2. Aelred’s spiritual classic is a dialogue between himself and three (four!) friends (Christ, Ivo, Walter, and Gratian). Aelred also discusses a number of other unnamed friends. He cannot talk about friendship except with friends.

Friend	Description	Reference/s
Christ	Always present in every conversation.	Book 1: Ch. 1
Ivo	A friend from Aelred’s younger days. Book 1 is a conversation between Aelred and Ivo that supposedly took place many years before the conversations recorded in books two and three.	Book 1
Walter	Loud, proud, and a bit impatient.	Books 2 and 3
Gratian	A gentle man, humble and quick to serve.	Books 2 and 3

D. Wisdom from Scripture

1. Scripture is Aelred’s “Mirror.” It is the source and measure of all understandings of true friendship.

2. Aelred cites 34 biblical books in his work, and constantly makes uses of biblical narratives, the life and teaching of Jesus, deep meditations on the text. Aelred reflects on friendships:
 3. between Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden
 4. between Ruth and Naomi
 5. between Ruth and Boaz
 6. between David and Jonathan
 7. between David and his Three, David and his Thirty.
 8. between Solomon and his Bride (Song of Songs)
 9. between Solomon and his friends (Proverbs)
 10. between Jesus and John
 11. between Jesus and his other Disciples
 12. between members of the early church in Acts
 13. between Paul and his coworkers
 14. And many more.
15. David's Friendships are the Paradigmatic OT Examples
16. Examples from David's Life
17. Oikos principle in King David's Example.
18. Jesus's Friendships are the Paradigmatic NT Examples
19. Examples in Jesus Life
20. Jesus Pyramid of Prioritized Friendships
21. An example of what Jesus Example applied to today might look like.

In sum, Aelred's teaching on friendship can be thought of as a four legged chair. Spiritual friendship is built upon four pillars: 1) the wisdom of practical reason found in creation; 2) the wisdom of Scripture; 3) the wisdom of church tradition; and 4) the wisdom of lived experience with friendship.

V. **APPLYING AELRED'S *SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP* AT TAYLOR**

Aelred's *Spiritual* classic serves Christian leaders in at least four ways.

A. It helps Christian leaders imagine, address and answer perennial pastoral questions about friendship

First, Aelred's text raises many practical questions about friendship for Christian leaders. There are at least a dozen, but these four are illustrative.

1. **Can One Become a Friend With One Who Is Not Your Equal?** Aelred teaches that men and women are equal (1.57). See also page 42). Thus:
 - a) It is possible for men and women to be friends. Both as married and as non-married.

- b) It is possible for a pastor to be friends with members of his congregation!
2. **How Long Does True Friendship Last?** True friendship lasts forever. It begins and ends in Christ, thus it exists forever in Christ.
 3. **Can One Become a Friend Without Loving Oneself?** No. One must also know oneself if one wishes to know God. The limit of self-knowledge is your limit of God-knowledge.
 4. **Can One Love God Without Loving a Friend?** No. Your love for a friend is also the limit of your love for God, and vice-versa.⁷
 5. A Christian Leader Must Love Everyone in His Congregation, but Must a Christian leader Like Everyone in His Congregation?
 - Aelred teach us that we must understand the difference between Christ's command to love (*agape*) everyone, even our enemies, and the way Christ entrusted his innermost soul to a select few. In the ministry of Jesus, we see an ordering of friendship:
 - —namely John,
 - the three,
 - the twelve,
 - and his inner circle of disciples (including women).
 6. Aelred teaches us that we must love everyone, but choose very wisely and carefully our friends.

B. It helps pastors imagine a Christian Vision for Same-Sex Friendships

1. Covenant Same Sex Friendships

David and Jonathan provide a case study of what covenant same-sex friendships among Christian Leaders can look like.

2. Faithful Christian Friendships Between Same-Sex Attracted Friends

Christian leaders desperately need a positive vision of same-sex friendships when they or those they pastor experience same-sex attraction.

⁷ For more on this claim, see Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time With God : A Christian Spirituality of Friendship With God* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2001).

A resource here is Wesley Hill's text *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Brazos, 2015) and the group that blogs with Hill at the website of the same name.

C. It helps pastors imagine a Christian Vision for Cross-Sex Friendships

1. Christian Marriage as Covenant Friendship

Aelred cites Adam and Eve, Ruth and Boaz, Christ and the Church as examples of spiritual friendship. The description of spiritual friendship is a model relevant to all Christian marriages and an antidote to the cultural poison much of the North American church has imbibed in relation to Christian Marriage. One contemporary writer who develops this theme is Paul Stevens in his *Marriage Spirituality* (Regent University Press).

2. Faithful Christian Friendship Between the Sexes as Evidence of God's Kingdom Come on Earth

Aelred cites an example from the Maiden of Antioch and a Roman soldier as an example of spiritual friendship between the sexes (1.29). See page 42).

Aelred provides a wise and robust vision of the relationship between Christian brothers and sisters that can be expanded the example many have found in the "Billy Graham Rule." Aelred's vision for Christian friendship is one that can help urban churches flourish moving forward into the third millennium.

D. It helps pastors imagine a Christian Vision for Catholicity and Cross-Cultural Friendships

1. The Catholicity (i.e. universality) of the Church as a School for Christian Friendship

- The catholicity of the church is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Our ethnic and national identities provide unique gifts to bring God glory.
- Cross cultural friendships allow us to give greater glory to God for his gifts, but perhaps more importantly, to identify the cultural vices that one's ethnocentrism invariably blinds one from seeing. There are few more painful and yet more sanctifying relationships than a cross cultural covenant friendship.

2. Consider Dana Robert's 2019 book, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* for dozens of examples.⁸

Conclusion

To sum up, Christian leaders will never grow into spiritual maturity without developing skill in choosing, testing, trusting, and enjoying friends. The twelfth-century pastor and theologian, Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) has provided wisdom to the church for many centuries and across dozens of cultures. His teachings as collected in the Spiritual classic, *Spiritual Friendship*, provide an example of how to develop spiritual friendships.

Pastor Aelred's use of reason, Scripture, tradition, and experience in his book *Spiritual Friendship* was presented as an example for Christian leaders. His careful consideration of questions about spiritual friendship, and his advice on same-sex friendships, opposite sex friendships, and cross-cultural friendships continue to be important resource for Christians today.

Once again in Pastor Aelred's words, may we understand and embrace the truth that all spiritual friendships "must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ" (SF, 1.10). Amen.

⁸ Dana L. Robert, "Cross-Cultural Friendship in the Creation of Twentieth-Century World Christianity" (IBMR, 2011).