

THE PEDAGOGY OF FRIENDSHIP FOR MARRIAGE

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Human beings crave intimacy. The desire to reach out in love to another human being is as fundamental to well-being as is shelter. Even today, when partnering, coupling, and marrying are the subjects of a good deal of political rhetoric, what remains unquestioned is the basic observation that people seek intimacy spontaneously, in response to the promptings of the heart. What is clear, though, is that these promptings are not without difficulty, evidenced not only by the many experiences of divorce, but also by the confusion among many young people about how and why to cultivate intimate relationships in the first place. Amidst the decline of common assumptions about marriage, many young people today find themselves unmoored when they consider how they ought to engage in relationships. To put it differently: when marriage is no longer a young adult's assumed compass point, the purpose and direction of his or her relationships to others becomes unclear. One will certainly engage in certain kinds of friendships; this much seems obvious, inasmuch as the craving for intimacy impels people to get to know one another. But the deeper question is how, over the long run, young people seek to draw lessons from their experiences of friendship for the sake of forging a vocation, of a single life or marriage or some form of religious life. At some point in a young adult's life, the question must arise—either implicitly or explicitly—“how do I choose to be in relation to other people?” One more specific version of this question is “how do I choose to use my sexuality?” And in the absence of cultural modeling or personal mentoring, the default answer is that to which every adolescent will devolve: I will imitate what I see. And what they see is a culture in which temporary relationships are the norm.

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A number of recent books, such as Donna Freitas's *Sex and the Soul* (Oxford, 2008) and Laura Sessions Stepp's *Unhooked* (Riverhead, 2007), illustrate the pervasiveness of hookup culture as a substitute for real intimacy on college campuses: a culture which offers the false gratification of temporary connection (usually physical, often genital) without the time-demanding investment of real emotional energy. Hookup culture thrives on pluralistic ignorance, the pervasive belief that everyone else is having more fun than I am. It is driven by what René Girard calls mimetic desire: desire shaped less by the object desired, and more by the imitation of what those around me desire. Once upon a time, the object of desire was marriage; today, though, in the absence of a robust imagination about the possibilities of married life—perhaps as a result of the pervasiveness of divorce—the object of desire among many young people is (to put it blandly) having fun. In Aristotelian terms, we might say that with the breakdown of a clear telos which would give some meaning to the ways that young people cultivate relationships, what fills the vacuum is the relatively easy-to-find hookup.

In addition to the fact that widespread casual sex presents a concern for public health, there is a concern about how an embrace of the hookup model for interpersonal relationship impacts a young person's understanding of the possibilities for intimacy. How does one respond to a student's observation that relationships take too much time? If real relationships take one's focus away from the "important" things in life, what does that suggest about the capacity to imagine marriage as life-giving, not to mention a vital

institution in a society? More basically, what does that suggest about the possibility of developing real friendships, upon which all good marriages are based?

RE-IMAGINING FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE

According to Aristotle, "without friends no one would choose to live," so fundamental is it to our well-being (see his *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially books 8 and 9). But people fail in friendships just as they fail in virtue, choosing a defective form of friendship instead of putting forth the *energeia* necessary for cultivating the virtuous life upon which any real friendship must be built. Some friendships are rooted in utility: each seeks from the other something that will benefit self. Others are rooted in pleasure, in which case each friend enjoys the company of the other because of the feelings that are produced in the other's presence. We see today many examples of these kinds of relationships. Among college students, for example, relationships with classmates and roommates often fall into the first category. Hookups generally fall into the second category; Aristotle himself observed that "the friendship of young people seems to aim at pleasure; for they live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them." The problem, says Aristotle, is that these kinds of relationships are temporary, because what people use and want changes.

Aristotle suggests, however, that there is another kind of friendship which does not so easily fall prey to the vicissitudes of utility and pleasure: that among people who are good and seek virtue. The key to real friendship is living the virtuous life, or at least the life that strives to understand goodness, and to delight in the company of someone else who shares that life.

The question of how to live the virtuous life is a link connecting Aristotle to the great writers of the Christian tradition. If Aristotle is correct that true friendship depends upon shared seeking of the good, then it would seem to follow that friendship is intimately connected with the moral and spiritual life. This was precisely the thesis advanced by Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) in his remarkable text *Spiritual Friendship (De spirituali amicitia)*. His primary source was Cicero's *De Amicitia*, a work that draws from Greek philosophy and perhaps even Aristotle directly. Aelred's claim that God is friendship borrows from the

theological claim of 1 John 4:16 that God is love; he develops the idea in order to suggest how the cultivation of friendship is a spiritual discipline.

A key to Aelred's meditation on friendship is his reliance on a basic Augustinian sobriety about the tendency of all people toward the corruption of otherwise good desires. The three movements of friendship—attraction, intention and fruition—all carry with them the danger of corruption. One can be attracted to the wrong person (say, the physically beautiful one rather than the one with whom one can build a life); one can intend to pursue what one knows is wrong (as in sexual gratification with no intention of a greater good for self or other); and one can enjoy a relationship in a disordered way (for example, to advance one's social capital). The spiritual life, and therefore the spiritual friendship, is predicated on the right ordering of these movements. The purification of attraction comes through the will; the exhortation to love one's enemies can thus be read as a kind of medicine for overemphasis on attraction. I suggest that the key to spiritual friendship—and by this I mean simply a friendship that is constantly growing—is the discipline of desire, rooted in a rich imagination of the possibilities of friendship itself.

What is lacking in many intimate relationships today is not desire (even though it may be defective); nor is it effort (even though it may be misplaced). Rather, what is often lacking today is imagination. My guess, though unscientific, is that this lack stems from the fact that many young people do not cultivate imagination, but are rather force-fed through TV, video games, ipods, Youtube, and so on. And in the absence of opportunities to practice the skills of building intimate relationships through dating (which for many is archaic), they stumble from one defective friendship to another without a strong sense of how to deepen and expand them in ways that are, over the long haul, life-giving and, in a word, sacramental—in the broadest sense of being revelatory of God.

Aelred's work is a resource for re-imagining friendship and, by extension, marriage. In a monastic world in which particular friendships were often seen as suspect, he offered a new way of conceiving of friendship as a deeply sacramental practice, a way of living a life of love that manifested God's own Trinitarian life. The foundation of his doctrine is that friendship is itself a participation in the divine life: a response to the invitation of God to share in the

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overflowing of love characteristic of Trinitarian interrelationship. One implication we might draw from this basic idea is that in friendship—in the ups and downs, the warp and woof of ordinary shared human life—there is already an experience of encounter with God. In contrast to relationships that grow out of attraction, of feelings and emotions which may come and go, the true friendship that is rooted in constantly renewed acts of will holds endless possibilities. In particular, the experience of conflict, which is inevitable in any friendship, can be seen not as the end of the relationship, but rather as a difficult hill in the middle of a long yet rewarding journey.

Perhaps most importantly, Aelred's suggestion that "God is friendship" de-centers the individual. Individual feelings at a given moment in the relationship are not as important as the larger story in which each partner plays a part. The story is not about me: what I'm feeling, how I'm being fulfilled, what I'm getting out of the relationship. Instead, the story is about the friendship itself, how I participate with the other in an unfolding drama where God is the key actor. The questions are different: what is God doing? How is God challenging me to grow? What is God revealing to me about myself, about the other? Such a de-centering can be liberating, in the sense that it allows me freedom to grow, instead of being limited by my own self-interest and especially my own often unruly emotions.

What Aelred writes about friendship is equally true about marriage, if not more so. In Catholic tradition, reflection on marriage began with the understanding that it is a natural human endeavor, good in itself, which Christ blessed and "raised to the dignity of a

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sacrament,” in the language of canon law. From the perspective of Catholic teaching, the key difference between spiritual friendship and marriage is the latter’s public nature. Friendship is a private matter between two people; in marriage, the matter is brought before the community, in order that it might officially and permanently recognize the friendship. Canon law and liturgical celebration serve to remind both the couple and the community that the marriage is no longer a matter of private interest; it is for the community a public symbol of not only the couple’s participation in the divine life, but also the couple’s symbolizing for the community the way that Christ loves the Church. It is a friendship made sacred not only because of the love shared between husband and wife—a love which overcomes the divide (*sexus*) between men and women because of sin—but also because that love is a public symbol, a sacrament.

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How can friends come to the decision to make their lives into a public symbol? What is the motivation for pursuing marriage, when at face value it would seem so much easier to simply enjoy the fruits of a good friendship? More basically, why even pursue a spiritual friendship at all, if it requires energy and time and willingness to undergo difficult growth? These are the kinds of questions latent in the experiences of many young people today.

For Aelred, as for Augustine (upon whom Aelred relied heavily), the key is understanding the nature of human desire. Temporary friendships—even those

where there may be the excitement of sexual energy or shared passions—simply don’t satisfy. The desire of the human heart is to love and to be loved, and so the limited or temporary experience of love is wounding—in fact, it is not really love at all, but rather a defective form of relationship rooted not in will but emotion. Only a love that is rooted in a shared desire for that which transcends what is temporary can satisfy the heart. On a practical level, we can observe that no one likes being rejected, and no one starts a friendship expecting that it will end soon. Both Aristotle and Aelred recognize that there are certainly friendships which are not truly intimate; not all friendships need to be truly intimate spiritual friendships. Yet in seeking a person with whom we can share our entire lives, we necessarily seek permanence, the security of knowing that the other will always be present. It is precisely that desire for permanence that leads people to make their intimate friendships into marriage, a public symbol by which others know that their relationship is an inviolable trust.

To grow toward this kind of life commitment takes time. The great pilgrimage of adolescence is the discernment of how to love: how to recognize the roots of desire, the perversion of desire, and the objects of desire, both in self and others. In childhood, one learns from parents and extended family how to relate to others. One is taught manners and basic skills of relationship-building. Today, unlike the practices of a generation ago, “play dates” are one way that young children develop practices of relationship. Interestingly, though, during the same period in which a kind of dating has become the norm for young children, the practice has almost entirely faded away from adolescence.

There is, then, a need for some kind of recovery of practices that guide young adults through the deeper experiences of friendship and love. The older terms like dating, courtship, and betrothal, the notion of the suitor and the sought—these point us to ways that prior generations sought to give structure to the natural desires of young people, and to guide them toward decisions that were more than simply passing flights of emotional fantasy. Perhaps it is too much to anticipate that families will arrange marriages—even though some data suggest that such marriages tend to be more permanent. But it is reasonable to imagine ways that churches, schools and colleges, for example, might help young people to navigate the complexities of

friendship-forming, and perhaps even romance. A colleague of mine has with great success included in one of her courses an assignment that requires students to go on a date; she even provides rules that help them to share very clear, reasonable, and creative expectations. A group of college students I know have recently formed a dating service, precisely with the hope that it will provide an alternative to the default party scene. Faculty and administrators can aid in these efforts by beginning to think expansively about how they might help young people to develop skills and confidence in reaching out authentically to their peers—face-to-face, and not through technology.

There is no better preparation for marriage than learning how to forge and sustain real friendships. Our culture has a myth of the young romance, and indeed since at least the Middle Ages in the West there is a vast and beautiful literature of young love. What we lack

today, though, in contrast to the literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans, is a robust myth of friendship that might help cultivate imagination of why seeking and sustaining a deep, intimate friendship might be salutary for the soul. In the absence of such a myth, expectations of marriage look more like expectations for romance, including its fleeting nature. A great challenge for educators today is that of encouraging a pedagogy of friendship as a preparation for marriage.



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