

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 91

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"God is Friendship"

One of the great joys in my life has been hiking and backpacking. Whether alone, with friends, with my wife, with children, or with my students, walking has been a wellspring of communion. In his beautiful treatise, "Spiritual Friendship," the 12th Century Cistercian Abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx, cautioned his monks on the selection of companions as friends, especially those that are quarrelsome or avaricious or unable to control their passions. Rather, one should seek out those who inspire virtue and unselfish affection, because "God is Friendship." Aelred's profound observation springs directly from his Trinitarian theology which characterizes God as "Three Persons in One." Moreover, in his treatise, he identifies the Divine Image as manifest where "two or three are gathered" in Christ's name--certainly a perfect foundation for friendship. I have found Aelred's sage advice to hold true in my selection of walking or backpacking companions. And more generally, as Unificationists, we can glean much wisdom from Aelred's insights.

As the children of our True Parents, living in the age of the Marriage Blessing, we naturally tend to focus on the Paternal and Maternal aspects of God's love and our rebirth through the Messianic Couple. Our language and metaphor reflects this transformative reality: we refer to each other as brothers and sisters, expressing the loving heart we share as children of the same Father and Mother, a reality existent beyond the descriptive power of words and one that inspires the deepest joy. Referring to these bonds of heart as "friendship" seems almost a diminution of the ties we have come to know so intimately. And as I recall from my many years living in Church centers and on MFT teams, particular "friendships" hinted at "private affections" which were specific and appeared to be "attachments," and thus generally discouraged. We underwent a rigorous emotional asceticism as we shed the habits of the fallen world. In the hardships of our daily lives, our hearts needed simple and pure redirection to be recreated. This process of relational mortification can otherwise be identified as "indemnity."



And yet, in truth, wasn't Aelred correct? Isn't God friendship? I can imagine there still exist circumstances in our movement which would require the old Church model, but in a broader sense, haven't we moved beyond the age of indemnity and outgrown the practices of MFT?

Moreover, do those filial bonds we share through our True Parents really crowd out "friendship"? Or is friendship an element of love that we would do well to identify, claim, and cultivate? To borrow a hackneyed phrase, there are many brothers in our movement I do not know from Adam (or sisters I don't know from Eve!). I often hear members distinguish levels of intimacy by saying "He is a brother I am really close to." Would it not be more true to say, "He or she is a close friend"?

Here in our community north of San Francisco, we have a gathering of members who meet every three weeks to discuss a book. For more than 10 years, we used to meet in person and share a potluck meal, but sadly during the time of COVID, that practice has necessarily been curtailed and given way to a remote meeting on Zoom. While we have long been brothers and sisters--for most of us coming on 50 years--in our more recent incarnation as a "Book Club," I prefer to characterize us as "friends." What originally drew us together

were our ties to the movement; what continues to bind us as a community are very particular bonds of affection, our friendships.

My wife will say to me, "you are my closest friend," and honestly, there are more--or at least different--levels of meaning to that than "I love you." When she speaks these words I hear: you are the person I most enjoy spending my time with; we like the same books; we work well together. Most importantly it means: there is no one else I would like more to go hiking with. But also, unlike marriage, friendship is not exclusive. She enjoys the company of others and it's important to me that she does so.



As I noted at the outset, walking is a wellspring of communion. Being on the trail with companions leads to the free exchange of ideas, thoughtful conversation, and the sharing of heart. This morning as I hiked with a few of my Catholic friends, a Dante scholar, two physicians, a lawyer, and several retired teachers, we discussed the hemorrhaging of young people from the Catholic Church. While I have a few unique perspectives on this problem as a Unificationist, I kept the theologically contentious ones to myself. After a while, we settled on an answer: many of our young adults don't feel the bond of community and are drawn away into more spiritually fulfilling avenues of worship in which these bonds exist. After our normal five miles, we parted and went our separate ways, some to coffee and bagels, and others to work. As for myself, I returned home to coffee and my laptop.

While I walked up the hill, Aelred came to mind, and I was reminded once again of the importance of friendship as a bond that transcended the ties of spiritual community. I thought of many of my young students I had taught over the years: when they faced a spiritual or emotional crisis, to whom were they most likely to turn? Their teachers? The chaplain? A counselor? Not really, or at least, not at first. Most often, students sought out their friends as confidants. As I reflected on this fact, and the disappointing number of young people who turn from their faith, Unificationist or otherwise, it struck me that Aelred's formulation has never lost its power or relevance, though to our profound and persistent sorrow, we may have become insensitive to its import. "God is Friendship." We would do well to revisit the wisdom of this 12th Century monk and with the insight gained, as parents, pastors, and mentors guide our young people in their selection of companions as friends. We may just preserve a few lives, as well as our community and tradition of faith.