

Thoughts on Friendship – The Story of Ruth – God Is Friendship

When I looked through Desmond Tutu's children's Bible, I discovered that one of the few stories we have not used in an all-age worship here in church since last summer, is the story of Ruth.

Those of you who know me well, know how much I love the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law... and: how much I love the theology the Book of Ruth transports.

If you are familiar with some of my old sermons, you may already hear me say: "God is not mentioned once in the 4 chapters of the Book of Ruth. But: God is all the individual figures in the story do. God is of course in what Ruth is doing. God is in Boaz's welcome, generosity, and love. God is in Naomi's smartness and wisdom. God is in the towns people's and fieldworkers' behaviour. God is in all they do.

They are "goding", as Carter Heyward, an American theology professor writes in one of her books.

The people in the Book of Ruth are bringing God forward, and out, and about in and with their very lives.

The essence of it all is friendship. Real, true, genuine, and serious friendship.

While doing research on Ruth and friendship, I came across statements of some old church fathers. St. Ambrose for example saw human friendship as a necessary part of the outpouring of God's friendship. St. Augustine understood community and human relationships as the ground of growth. "The more friends I shall have," he wrote, "the more can we love wisdom in common." Friends can help us grow... How true! St. Benedict considered the friendship of one person to another as a fundamental step on the path to full human development.

The significance of friendship in the theology and spirituality of these so-called church fathers is ever so obvious.

It reached its high point in the spiritual writings of Aelred of Rievaulx.

Aelred was the abbot of Rievaulx Abbey in the North of England in the 12th century. He dedicated his life to the subject: "God is friendship." He developed a theology of friendship...

You can imagine: as soon as I had come across this short passage of a monk writing a theology of friendship, I couldn't be stopped. I had to find out more about him.

And here we go:

Throughout his life, Aelred took great joy in his friends, and he believed that by loving and being loved by them, we learn to accept and return God's infinitely greater and absolutely wonderful love. Aelred saw friendship as an image of the relationship between God and each person.

Aelred was brought up in Northumbria and grew up deeply immersed in the Celtic tradition of the Christian faith. He came from a family of priests. Both his parents – his mother and his father – were priests in the town of Hexham in the North of England. He spent his early years at the court of king David of Scotland and was made the king's steward at the age of 22. He was clearly marked out for great things. However, during the course of a journey, while on business for the king, he came across Rievaulx, and was drawn by the way of life of the monks there. He decided to stay.

It became clear – at an early stage of his monastic life that Aelred had a gift for directing and guiding others, a capacity which was marked by compassion and gentleness. Bernard of Clairvaux, another of the famous church fathers, asked Aelred to write down his theological ideas. And when Aelred became the abbot of Rievaulx, numbers of the monks there escalated to hundreds... At Aelred's death there were 300 monks in the Abbey of Rievaulx.

Besides being a sensitive pastor Aelred was a spiritual writer of remarkable depth. In his later years he wrote a most valuable essay on Christian friendship.

He offers people then and now a view of relationships with Jesus and / or God in their midst. What was originally written for monastics in the 12th century could help us today to come to a Christian understanding of how to relate to each other.

Aelred speaks about spiritual friendship – a relationship which helps us grow in love: love of each other and love of God. In fact, for him friendship is a sacrament of God's love. A sacrament – just like communion is a sacrament, or baptism... How very thought provoking... How the quality of friendships could be transformed by such thinking... How the holiness of friendship could make our lives richer and happier...

“Human beings,” so Aelred, “are called to relationships based on mutual dialogue, exchange, sharing and self-giving.” Here, we could actually return to the Book of Ruth, couldn't we? Talking with each other, understanding each other, giving and sharing... Still, Aelred has more to give to us.

He refers to friendship as something very holy.

And again Ruth comes to mind: the relationship between Ruth and Naomi definitely is something very holy.

But Aelred tops it all, by saying, “...what we encounter in friendships is a microcosmic image of what we shall discover eternally in God.” Friendships in our lives, in other words, are only a foretaste of the great and overwhelming friendship with God...

With all this in mind, we may of course ask: “But what about the friendships that do not succeed? What about the friendships which end in disappointment and disaster?”

Here Aelred has an answer, too. “Friendship,” he says, “is everlasting. Friendship is an image of God's eternal love. So, a friendship which ends, has never been a true friendship.” Well, there is some truth in it, I think when I look back on my life, when I remember the broken friendships on the one hand and the ongoing, almost everlasting relationships on the other hand. The ones which ended, had they ever been real, true, genuine, and serious?

Back to Aelred: In his theology of friendship, he writes: “Those who abide in friendship, abide in God and God in them.” He speaks about the fruits of friendship and says, “...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.” He calls a friend “another self to whom you can speak on equal terms, to whom you can confess your failings, to whom you can make known your progress (or lack of it) without blushing, one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart.”

Aelred knows that not all friendship is spiritual, genuine, and serious. He offers help for discernment. He invites us to ask the following questions: What kind of relationship do we want to establish? What are our deeper motives? Do we treat the other reasonably or do we just use them? Are we moderate about the demands we make on our friends? Do we value the relationship as a gift? Or are we seeking some reward other than the friendship itself?

And he advises us to “delight more in the friend’s love than in any benefits we gain as a result.” And “once the gift of friendship is given, you must make a conscious choice to be committed to the relationship...”

So, and last but not least, he states, that in an authentic spiritual friendship the primary foundation of the mutual love is the love of God. We need companions of the soul, he says, and we should be prepared to work at the relationships through good days and bad, through joys and sorrows...

And here we finally go back to the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth decided that instead of staying with her own people, in her own country, she would accompany Naomi, whom she loved, into a country where she and her kind had long been considered enemies.

However much Naomi tried to dissuade her, Ruth simply refused to leave her side. “Your people will be my people,” she said, “and your God will be my God.”

The stakes were enormous. The cost was immeasurable.

Together they went.

The commitment of Ruth is the ultimate example of genuine spiritual friendship.

The friend who stands by is the friend who gets us through life – at times without doing anything but being there. Yet, the knowledge that a friend like Ruth is there – waiting, willing, available at any hour, under any circumstances – is what can make friendship more important than family..., what makes friendship holy.

The friendship of Ruth makes us aware that such is possible: someone who does not have to care for us – no social expectations require it, no blood ties demand it – will in fact care for us to the end. Out of sheer love. God’s love.

“The friend who stands by,” writes Joan Chittister, a present time Benedictine nun, “is the friend who stands by freely.” No paying back. No, I am in your debt.

And back in the Bible story we see: once Naomi was renewed and had regained her own strength, she gave it freely to the other. The Ruths and Naomis of this world teach us what it means to have a friend, and what it means to be a friend.

Let us regard friendships as something sacred. Let us live them as sacraments – to the glory of God. Amen.