

A Spirituality of Mercy: Aelred of Rievaulx*

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Characteristics of Our Culture at the Juncture

We are here to reflect together on spirituality at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity. What are the characteristics of our culture at this juncture? What are the questions and concerns of the human spirit? My reflections in these introductory remarks will focus on that culture which I have had the most time to ponder: the youth and academic culture in the United States as it moves toward the third-millennium. Six years of high-school teaching, years of graduate studies at three universities, and my first semester of teaching at the university level have not made me an expert on the postmodern world, but they have given me plenty to ponder.

Two summers ago I was one of a dozen individuals taking an intensive Latin course at a university in the Chicago area. We were all aspiring scholars, united by our common effort to memorize Latin grammar and painstakingly work our way through Cicero's *De amicitia*. In spite of this common ground, we had an underlying philosophical and spiritual diversity that fascinated me. We included a devout Mormon; a young evangelical whose eyes sparkled when he spoke of knowing Jesus personally; a Catholic who appreciated the Jesus story, but not necessarily the person of Jesus; a philosophy professor who did not believe in God but admired the rigorous thought of Catholic philosophers such as Aquinas and Alasdair MacIntyre; and a second

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atheist who thought some people had eternal souls, while others, as revealed through their eyes, seemed to be dead already.

One of the most vibrant characters in our group was an impassioned humanist who had rejected, years ago, his Christian upbringing. He still believed in a subtle and awesome mystery which permeated the universe and an almost infinite untapped capacity within each human spirit. This last Latin comrade was deeply concerned about the thousands of youth, especially those in the inner city, who had not even begun to develop their human potential. Many of these never knew the joy of learning because their lives had been sidetracked into patterns of drugs and violence. His concerns were graphically substantiated by the daily news reports on rising gang warfare that plagued Chicago's inner city.

One undeniable mark of this culture at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity is plurality. There is a diversity in ethnic backgrounds, goals, political ideals, patterns of thinking, religious beliefs, and moral practices. This was obvious even in the Latin course. Diversity is sometimes seen as an end in itself. When I asked a bright and pensive college senior what he wanted to do with his life, he responded "be different." When I further inquired for what purpose or reason he wanted to be different, he had no answer. Apparently being different was a sufficiently worthy goal in itself.

Most observers of our culture see no sign that this diversity will decrease in the coming years: different ethnic and religious groups continue to come to the United States and the multi-cultural movement at universities appears to be gaining strength. Ideologies which encouraged a melting-pot culture, such as nationalism, seem to have lost their primacy. The balance has tipped from a focus on "one nation" to a focus on the rights and freedom of the individual to do, think, and believe whatever he or she pleases. The lonely isolation of a radical individualism is usually avoided by the creation of a plethora of interest groups, each championing its separate causes. In some areas the walls of ethnic ghettos have been broken down, only to be rebuilt by equally isolated interest-group ghettos.

This diversity and concern for group rights is accompanied by a sensitivity to social justice issues—or at least a great deal of talk devoted to social justice issues. Students are quick to criticize any comment that appears to be unfair or prejudiced, including comments which place one race, one ideology, or one religion above another. They are also

aware of the almost incomprehensible suffering endured in far-away, famine-stricken countries and among the homeless in their own cities.

The majority of people I have encountered, however, do very little to help: their right and freedom to pursue their own happiness takes precedence. They may bring a can of cranberry sauce for a Thanksgiving food drive, but, for the most part, they let others worry about the suffering masses. The students seem to assume that if all have the rights and freedom to do whatever they want, then the suffering people can solve their own problems. When discussing whether or not they could morally spend \$100,000 on a car, the chorus argued that if they fairly earned the money they had the right to spend it as they pleased. As part of their own academic communities, the students rest secure in their isolation.

In addition to diversity, an awareness of social justice issues, and each person having an overriding concern for his or her own pursuit of happiness, this age also seems marked by an intellectual ambiguity. The willingness to let others believe whatever they please has been accompanied by an absence of rigorous intellectual conversations. A postmodern combination of relativism and perhaps intellectual sloth seems to prevent people from trying to discern which idea or belief might be more accurate. Students rarely speak in terms of truth and tend to react against anyone who claims to grasp a truth: such a claim seems cruel to them because it necessarily condemns someone else's position as false. There is rarely any common hunger to find the truth and hence rarely any desire or ability to dialogue with others to find it. This lack of dialogue further isolates separate interest groups and belief systems.

Moreover, not only do students seem to doubt anyone's ability to discover some ideological truth, they are also beginning to doubt whether physical and social sciences can ever solve the riddles of the universe and the suffering of human society. There is a certain loss of confidence and hope. They have accepted the inevitability of change—change in society as well as change in text-book answers—but they are no longer convinced that with change comes inevitable progress. There were medical breakthroughs in cancer research, but new, more horrible medical disasters such as AIDS appear before the problem of cancer has been solved. The iron curtain finally fell, but brutal civil wars erupted. Germany was reunited and a neo-Nazi movement began. There was a sense of freedom which accompanied the

sexual revolution, but free-sex itself became a mandatory ritual—with the young women getting themselves drunk in order to participate.

Such a loss of hope was combined with a certain distrust among those in the Latin course. The humanist did speak enthusiastically of his hope of one day founding a new kind of school which would revitalize students who dropped out of the regular system. Nevertheless, most of the others spoke of his plans as a foolish dream doomed to failure. They did not share his belief in an innate human goodness which lay dormant, waiting to be awakened in rough, uneducated youth. As already noted, one student believed some humans were already walking dead.

Then there was the bitterness that developed in the main area we had in common: our efforts to learn Latin. Those who did well looked down on those who were struggling unsuccessfully to keep up, and accused them of laziness. One student was convinced he could not survive the course and dropped out. Those who continued the struggle looked on those who seemed to do well with relative ease and accused them of a cold-hearted arrogance.

One of the most poignant comments about our culture came from a big-hearted senior who was not part of the Latin course. He and his live-in girlfriend were together raising their two-year-old daughter. They had been faithful to each other for three years and talked of marrying after he graduated. As his graduation drew near, I asked him how the marriage plans were coming along. With a pained expression he said that he was not sure if he believed in marriage any more. I assumed he was going to give me some 1960s-style answer which argued that their love did not need the approval of any authority or the legitimization of some piece of paper. Instead he sighed and explained that he was becoming more and more convinced that all relationships inevitably dissolve into bitter quarrels.

The final characteristic of our culture which I would like to mention is in direct tension with the diversity, the loss of hope, and the seemingly ever present quarrels. It is an unrelenting hunger for relatedness. My students are quick to argue that everyone is radically unique, choosing for herself or himself some personal set of values that will bring happiness. They claim, at first, that there are no universal human values. Upon further examination, however, they all admit that there is still at least one thing that everyone desires: they agree with Cicero that all long to love and be loved.

Thus at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity, a spirituality is needed that can survive and even blaze forth in a pluralistic, ambiguous, and suffering world. A spirituality is needed which can unite people who do not share common values, beliefs, or ways of thinking, people who have retreated into separate interest-group ghettos. A spirituality is needed which can give hope to people who have lost confidence in scientific and social progress; people who have also lost confidence in themselves and one another; people who have lost confidence in the possibility of permanent relationships, yet people who still yearn to love and be loved.

Our culture has been humbled. This, in itself, is not necessarily a problem. The danger with being humbled, however, is that we can slip into despair.

Aelred's Spirituality of Mercy

A wise friend once quipped that there is a simple answer to every problem, and it is usually wrong. With that stated, I will nevertheless propose for your reflection and critique a somewhat simple answer. I hope that the answer I am tentatively putting forth, when combined with the corrections and different approaches of others, may help meet the spiritual needs of the postmodern world. To explore this answer, I will draw extensively from the works of Aelred of Rievaulx. My proposed answer for a spirituality at the junction of modernity and postmodernity is a spirituality of mercy.

Those familiar with Aelred may be surprised that I intend to use his works to reflect on a spirituality of mercy, rather than on spiritual friendship. Yes, he is the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot who is most famous for his treatise on friendship, *De spiritali amicitia*. Mercy, however, was also one of his favorite topics—both God's mercy toward humanity and humans' mercy toward each other—and I believe that his insights on mercy are more relevant to the topic. Let me justify my choice with a brief explanation of how Aelred understood the difference between friendship and mercy.¹

1. Aelred's term is *miser cordia* and his understanding of this term is formed primarily through meditations on Scripture. In the Vulgate, *miser cordia* is used in place of the Hebrew *hesed* and the Greek *eleos*. In English translations it can appear as mercy, steadfast love, loving-kindness, or covenant love. It is the steadfast love of God which gave the author of Lamentations hope (Lam 3:22). It is the

Friendship, according to *De spirituali amicitia*, was the original model for all human relationships. Adam and Eve were created to be friends and all humans were meant to enjoy the mutual affection of friendship love. Friendship is also the model of relationships in the heavenly life. In that state of final perfection God will pour friendship upon all, who will pour it upon each other and back upon him. Yet in the time between the original perfection and final glory, friendship cannot exist among all. Jealousy, pride, selfishness, distrust, and a host of other ills have prevented universal friendship. True friendship does not, according to Aelred's thought, require friends to be mirror images of each other. Yet it does require both parties to have attained already a certain level of virtue and to share already a common understanding of life's goal. True friends, according to Aelred, are attracted to each other because of the goodness they see in each other.

Mercy, on the other hand, was not needed in the original peace of the garden of Eden and will not be needed in eschatological glory. It is not needed when love and affection flow easily from all toward all. It is only when humans become divided by bitterness, quarrels, and rivalries that there is a place for mercy. Mercy appears only after mutual love has grown cold and humans are too weak to unite with God and each other. When no other type of love can effectively unite alienated spirits, mercy comes forth and unites them. Unlike friendship love, mercy flows outward toward another without having first to see any goodness in the other.

After examining as best I can the situation at the juncture of the modern and postmodern world, I think that it is mercy, not friendship that is the necessary foundation for a spirituality today. Our culture, taken as a whole, is not ready to begin with friendship. A spirituality which fosters friendship and draws strength from friendship is a later stage. Among ourselves we have too great a diversity in ideals, vision, foundational beliefs, and ways of thinking for friendship. There is also too little trust and too little trustworthiness among rival ideologies for friendship to take root.

If I may so speculate, I think Aelred would have rather spoken

covenant love of God in Hosea that initiated the love relationship without having to be loved first, and which longed to restore the relationship when the beloved ceased to love (Hos 2:19). Depending on the context, it is also akin to *agape* and *caritas*.

on mercy if he were with us today. (And, I will frequently let him speak, since I find that my attempts to paraphrase sap too much of the rhetorical beauty and force out of his reflections.) Meditating on mercy seemed to make his soul sing. While he loved God's power and splendor which were revealed through creation, he delighted even more in God's mercy which was revealed in the incarnation.

Only at the incarnation, when God embraced sinful humanity, was the otherwise inconceivable magnitude of God's love fully revealed. Mercy is that ineffable kindness by which God gazes upon the miserable and desires to surrender his power and shed his splendor in order to be with them.² Mercy is the love revealed during the Christmas season, the love of Emmanuel, God with us:

His name is Emmanuel, which means, God with us. With us, indeed, is God. In the past God was above us. In the past, God was against us. But today Emmanuel, today God is with us in our nature, with us in his grace; with us in our weaknesses, with us in his goodness; with us in our misery, with us in his mercy. God is with us through love, with us through kindness, with us through affection, with us through compassion. O Emmanuel, O God with us. How are you, O sons of Adam? God is with us. With us. You were unable, O sons of Adam, to ascend to heaven in order to be with God. So God descended from heaven so that he may be Emmanuel, God with us. He cast himself out so that he may be Emmanuel, God with us. . . . In what manner could he possibly be more with me? Small and insignificant as I am, weak as I am, naked as I am, impoverished as I am. In all things he conformed himself to me, taking up all that is mine and surrendering all that is his.³

Thus Aelred dwelt on the love of Emmanuel, a merciful love which not only *is capable* of uniting with those that are separated by sins and weaknesses, separated by radical differences, not only is it capable of uniting with these, it *longs* to unite with these.

2. *Sermo 31 "In apparitione domini," Aelredi Rievallensis Sermones I-XLVI: collectio Claraevallensis prima et secunda*, ed. Raciti, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 2A (Turnholt: Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1989).

3. *"In annuntiatione Dominica," Sermones inediti B. Aelredi abbatis Rievallensis*, ed. C. H. Talbot, Series scriptorum S. Ordinis Cisterciensis, vol. 1 (Rome: Apud Curiam Generalem Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis, 1952) 91. If there is no published translation of a text, as in this case, the translations in the article are mine.

Mercy is a love which longs to "come down" to the weak and suffering without any of the negative connotations attached to "con-descend." Mercy does not appear in splendid dress to pass out food, clothes, donations for the homeless. Instead mercy surrenders its splendor and becomes one of the hungry, naked, and homeless. Mercy is so consumed by its gaze on the other, its concern for the other, that it has no room for thinking of itself as better than the other. It is the refusal, even in the case of an all-perfect God, to be considered as any better than the most wretched human.

Mercy is the self-emptying love of a God who yearns to be with humans in their suffering. Mercy's power, however, is not limited to this coming down to be one with the suffering. Mercy also raises the suffering up: it heals, strengthens, renews, and recreates. Aelred reflected on Christ's passion, observing that: "He who is as bread for us, hungered himself. He who is the fountain, thirsted. He who is strength, wearied. He who is life, died. Yet his hunger fed us, his thirst inebriated us, his exhaustion refreshed us, his death gave us life. This is his work of mercy."⁴

Mercy heals and gives new life because it does more than simply suffer with the other. It actually absorbs others' suffering so they no longer bear its full weight. When mercy unites with sinners it does not act "holier than thou." Instead it mysteriously absorbs the sin and lets itself be treated as "more sinful than thou." Mercy, in its strong and steadfast embrace of sinners, shields them and takes on the scorn and punishment they deserve.

Aelred used the story of Samson and Delilah to meditate on the strength of mercy's embrace. Samson, a figure of Christ, falls in love with the harlot Delilah, a figure of sinful humanity. Rather than abandoning her, he lets himself be caught, bound and ridiculed. As part of sinful humanity, Aelred spoke to Christ, his Samson: "These your chains were certainly mine. Not you, but I was held by these, debased by these, enchained by these. But what is it, my Lord, my Samson, my sun, my light, which finally captured you, finally held you, finally enchained you. You fell asleep in the bosom of Delilah, the harlot. O love wonderfully burning, . . . bringing down the heights, making strength weak, emptying majesty. . . . That Samson was held, that he was bound, that he did not break the usual chains, was not because

4. *Sermo* 12 "In die sancto paschae" 20, CCCM 2A.

of weakness, but because of love."⁵ In the end Samson dies. Yet in dying he crushes the power of the Philistines who symbolize the powers of sin which had entrapped humans and bound them to suffer eternal death.

Throughout his meditations on the gospels, Aelred focused on Christ's mercy, revealed in his gentleness and compassion toward sinners. "He did not shrink from the prostitute's touch or the publican's table; he took the defense of one adulteress so she would not be stoned and conversed with another that she might somehow after being an adulteress, become an evangelist."⁶

Note again the transforming power of mercy! Mercy is not a blind love which flows out amorphously toward the masses. It fixes its gaze on individuals and sees all their faults, imperfections, and sins. It knows that one is a prostitute, another a publican, another an adulteress. Yet only because it simultaneously recognizes sin and continues to love, can it inspire a change. Here, in a reference to the woman at the well, merciful love transformed an adulteress into an evangelist. This mercy, in Aelred's mind, is so unexpected, so extraordinary, so powerful, that it works a transformation in those who receive it. Merciful love, not the threat of justice, inspires a freely chosen interior change. The woman who was almost stoned for adultery did not give up her adultery because she was almost put to death under the justice of the law. She gave up her adultery because of the mercy which spared her life. Mercy *did* say "sin no more," but without condemning, and it inspired a transformation.

Indeed, as Aelred told the stories of sinners' encounters with mercy, one imagines the transformed sinners beginning their new life bursting with joy. They seem unable to keep both feet on the ground, dancing and leaping and praising God; or as if completely lifted up from the earth, with newly grown wings, soaring like eagles.

For Aelred, mercy was not restricted to Christ's days on earth. It is the steadfast love of God which continues to visit and console humans. It is the way God always first approaches humans. Mercy comes first because it can pierce through humans' hardened hearts and

5. "In die pasche," *Sermones Inediti*, 98.

6. *Speculum caritatis* 3.5.13. English translation from *Mirror of Charity*, trans. Elizabeth Connor, O.C.S.O., intro. Charles Dumont, O.C.S.O., Cistercian Fathers Series, no. 17 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990).

closed minds. Through its unexpected kindness it restores hope and gives the strength to change. "By its force of penetration, cutting through all the doors of the mind that have been locked with the bolts of vice, it imprints some kiss of its sweetness on lips still unclean and by its ineffable pleasantness coaxes the straying back, draws the hesitant close, and gives new life to the hopeless."⁷

When Aelred referenced his own conversion, he noted that he too was visited first by God's mercy. He was never very clear about the nature of his sins and did not dwell on the details of his life before he entered Rievaulx. Yet by piecing together comments from his own writings, we know that he was living at a king's court, surrounded by some of the best things that type of life can offer: a circle of worldly friends, physical comforts, prestige. (The same things many Americans so fervently seek for happiness.) Nevertheless, in several of his works he wrote of this period as one of filled with inner suffering:

Very deep within me was my wound, crucifying, terrifying, and corrupting everything within me with an intolerable stench. Had you not quickly stretched out your hand to me, O Lord, unable to endure myself I might perhaps have resorted to the worst remedy of despair.⁸

Habits of sensual pleasure oppressed [me]. But you who "hear the groans of the prisoners and free the children of the slain," broke my chains asunder. You who offer your paradise to harlots and publicans turned me, the worst of them all, back to yourself.⁹

How generous was his grace in following me when I fled, in allaying my fears, restoring me to hope as often as I was in despair, overwhelming my ingratitude with his kindness? I had grown accustomed to filthy pleasures and he drew me to himself and led me on by the taste of interior sweetness. He struck off the unbreakable shackles of bad habit. He rescued me from the world and welcomed me with kindness. I say nothing of the many and great works of his mercy towards me, lest any of the glory which belongs wholly to it should be deflected on to me.¹⁰

7. *Ibid.*, 2.11.26.

8. *Ibid.*, 1.28.79.

9. *Ibid.*, 1.28.82.

10. *De institutione inclusarum* 32. English translation from *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*, vol. I, *Treatises, Pastoral Prayer*, Cistercian Fathers Series, no. 2 (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1971).

Up to this point, I have been focussing on Aelred's praise of God's mercy toward humans, including himself. Aelred also believed firmly that humans who were filled with Christ's spirit would be inspired to similar acts of mercy toward others. When divine mercy flows through one human toward other humans, it is no longer the case of a perfect being loving the imperfect, but rather an imperfect human loving another imperfect human, one who has received mercy offering mercy to another; one who continues to need mercy loving another who will also always need mercy.

Aelred described the initial experience of God's mercy as a delightful sweetness that allowed a sinner to release his or her grip on all other sources of pleasure. Through mercy God draws the sinner to himself in a comforting embrace. In mercy, God also draws those who are delighting in such an embrace to give up this consolation in order to serve others. Mercy compels those caught up in the joys of contemplation to "come down" and take on the griefs of others. Thus a pastor who is lingering in the consolations of prayer may be upbraided by God's spirit for neglecting those who need his or her correction, counsel, words of mercy, and encouragement. If tempted to complain about having to abandon the sweetness of prayer, Aelred counseled the soul to recall that "Christ died in order that he who lives may not live for himself." Furthermore, this movement toward others can be done joyfully because the soul is not really being pulled away from God: the merciful God travels with those who serve.¹¹

The beatitudes promise that those who show mercy will later receive mercy. Aelred, however, noticed that the reverse is also true: those who have received merciful love are often those who most generously bestow it on others. In this way mercy spreads and multiplies itself. St. Paul was a favorite of Aelred's, for in Paul he saw most clearly the mirroring of God's forgiving and merciful love. Why did Aelred think Paul loved so well? Because Paul was forgiven so much. Indeed Aelred believed God forgave Paul's many sins not because Paul already loved much but so that Paul would be able to love much. The immense love God poured upon Paul transformed him so that he not only loved God deeply, but loved others deeply. Paul, more than all the other apostles, was most animated by Christ's self-emptying and suffering love. Paul did not restrict his love to his fellow Jews. Instead

11. *Jesu puero duodenni* 30-31. Translation from *Works of Aelred I*.

he reached out to all: Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, the wise and the foolish. While his holiness raised him above all, his humility made him the servant of all.¹²

In contrast to Peter, who used his sword against Jesus' enemies in the garden, Paul more fully understood and imitated Christ's love which restored the ear Peter cut off. Peter had been impatient, without hope, seeing the enemies of Christ as incorrigible. Paul in contrast had hope for these enemies. He had been one of them. Through earnest prayer Paul served those who persecuted, scourged, and stoned him. He maintained an ardent and undying hope for their salvation. Because of this, Aelred argued that Paul could even be called charity itself:

Oh soul higher than the heavens, more splendid than the sun, more fervent than fire. What is that most sacred breast, if not a resting place for kindness, a vestibule of mercy, a throne of charity? There indeed love resides on its judgement seat, having Paul's body for its tool and his voice as its instrument. Paul accomplished nothing in himself except through participation in God. As it is said of God that he is love, so it is said of Paul that he is love by participation in love.¹³

Through God's mercy, Paul had been transformed from a wolf seeking to devour Christ's sheep to a good shepherd who gave his life for Christ's sheep.¹⁴

Throughout his hagiographies and histories, Aelred told other stories of the power of mercy. He narrated several accounts of St. Ninian imitating divine goodness by returning evil with kindness, hate with love. Ninian was said to be always overflowing with mercy. When one of Ninian's enemies was blinded, Ninian approached him with humility and affection, gently corrected and then healed him.¹⁵ In another account several thieves tried to steal the animals Ninian was raising for his own brothers, as well as for the poor and pilgrims. During the attempted robbery one of the thieves was gored by the bull. Ninian,

12. "In natale apostolorum Petri et Pauli," *Sermones inediti*, 135.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Sermo 1 "In Adventu Domini"* 37, CCCM 2A.

15. *Vita Niniani* 4. An English translation is in "Lives of St. Ninian and St. Kentigen," *Historians of Scotland*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1974) 137-57.

"moved by mercy," wept and begged God to restore the thief to life. His prayers were answered.¹⁶

Aelred told similar stories of King Edward the Confessor. Once when Edward was trying to take a nap he observed a poor lad who had noticed that the chest which kept the royal treasury had inadvertently been left open. Edward watched curiously as the small boy searched about for a container, found a small bowl, filled it with large coins from the treasury, hid the bowl in his clothes and crept out. The boy returned, refilled the bowl, and snuck out again. During the boy's third trip Edward realized that the royal steward was approaching. The king broke his silence in order to protect his young thief, warning him to run quickly lest the treasurer find him. The steward cried out in anger when he realized that the treasure had been plundered. Edward, as Aelred retells the story, told him, "Be quiet, perhaps he that took it needed it more than we do. Let him have it."¹⁷

The particular strength of mercy is that it can hold another in deep affection and actively serve him or her without having been loved first. Driven by its own nature, it flows out toward those who have done nothing to deserve love and those who otherwise may be unlovable: those who are steeped in sin; those who are vain, obnoxious, fickle, argumentative, and deceitful; those whose are opposed to everything one holds dear. In other words, mercy loves those who have none of the prerequisites for a spiritual friendship.

Yet, as already noted, mercy can also transform. God's mercy inspires hope and virtue where there was previously despair and sin. God's mercy inspires those who have been touched deeply by it to, in turn, show mercy toward others. Moreover, mercy can also create a return of affectionate love toward the one who first showed mercy. Thus, in some of Aelred's stories, sinners who received a saint's mercy become friends of the saint: the mercy not only inspired a change in life and a change of heart, it inspired a reciprocal affection. Aelred noted that Ninian's enemy not only repented and stopped persecuting Ninian after he was healed, but cherished the saint with the deepest affection. Similarly, Aelred told how King Malcolm made a friend out of a traitor by showing mercy. The king had learned that one of his officers

16. *Ibid.*, 8.

17. *Vita Edwardi, Patrologia Latina, Cursus Completus*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 195, col. 746B-D.

was intent on killing him. Rather than punishing the traitor, he arranged to be alone with the man during a hunt and confronted him: "If you are able, if you dare, if you have the heart, fulfill what you intended, render to my enemies what you promised." When the would-be traitor falls trembling at Malcolm's feet the king assures him, "Be not afraid; you will suffer no evil from me." Instead of pursuing his original aim to kill the king, the man now promises fidelity and becomes a friend.¹⁸

Aelred, too, was known for his affection and mercy toward all types of people. In *De spiritali amicitia* he explained that while only a few of his monks were capable of spiritual friendship, he nevertheless loved and felt loved by each of them.¹⁹ It should be noted that these monks were not a homogenous group of cultured men. Twelfth-century England was rough and violent. In his writings Aelred repeated tales of grotesque brutalities in war, of murders, and of mutilations. Aelred's monks grew up in this environment. In an Advent sermon Aelred indicated that some of those at Rievaulx had previously lived the proud life of those born into wealth, others had been notorious for their cruelty, and still others had lived off of plunder, deception, and fraud.²⁰ In another sermon he revealed the multitude of faults still present among those at Rievaulx: there were monks who complained and quarreled; monks who loved their own will more than God's; those who were slow to work and quick to rest; those who were vain; those who failed to follow the guidelines of the order; those who spoke imprudently and others whose silence simply masked an inner bitterness; those who readily accused others of injuring them; and finally, those who were unable to tolerate others' faults.²¹

Aelred encouraged his monks to show mercy toward each other and himself. He begged those who were "spiritual and perfect" (and one must wonder if any of his monks dared to consider themselves such) to carry those who were crippled by faults and sins. The strong should sustain the weak by their counsels, consolations, exhortations, corrections, and prayers. In this way the maturer monks could be like Peter when he healed the cripple at the temple. With the help of such

18. *Genealogia regum anglorum*, PL 195, 735A-D.

19. *De spiritali amicitia* 3.82-83.

20. *Sermo 1 "In Adventu Domini"* 38, CCCM 2A.

21. "In sollemnitate apostolorum Petri et Pauli de tribus portis et tribus templis," *Sermones inediti*, 128-29.

love the crippled brothers would be able to leap up, praise God, and walk cheerfully along with the strong. Moreover, Aelred told his monks that he was as one crippled in both legs, needing especially to be carried by those who were strong.²²

In an attempt to explain the rapid growth of Rievaulx under Aelred, Walter Daniel (who lived under Aelred at Rievaulx for seven-teen years) stressed its reputation for mercy:

When was anyone, feeble in body and character, ever expelled from that house, unless his iniquity was an offense to the community or had destroyed all hope of his salvation? Hence it was that monks in need of mercy and compassion flocked to Rievaulx from foreign peoples and from the far ends of the earth. . . . And so those wanderers in the world to whom no house of religion gave entrance, came to Rievaulx, the mother of mercy, and found the gates open and entered by them freely. . . . If one of them in later days had taken it upon himself to reprove in angry commotion some silly behavior, Aelred would say, "Do not, brother, do not kill the soul for which Christ died, do not drive away our glory from this house." . . . [I]t is the singular and supreme glory of the house of Rievaulx that above all else it teaches tolerance of the infirm and compassion with others in their necessities.²³

The last passage I will use from Aelred is a long excerpt from his pastoral prayer. Written during the final year of his life, it beautifully reveals Aelred's own spirituality of mercy: a spirituality which blends his knowledge of Christ's mercy with a desire to show merciful love toward his monks. The prayer illustrates a hope-filled humility, a self-forgetful desire to be with and for others, and a mercy which can create mutual love between those who initially had nothing in common:

You know my heart, Lord; you know that my will is that whatever you have given your servant should be devoted wholly to their service, and spent for them in its entirety; and I myself, moreover, would be freely spent for them. So may it be, O Lord, so may it be. My powers of perception and of speech, my work time and my leisure, my doings and my thinking, the times when things

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Walter Daniel's Life of Aelred of Rievaulx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950) 37.

go well with me, the times when they go ill, my life, my death, my good health and my weakness, each single thing that makes me what I am, the fact that I exist and think and judge, let all be used, let all be spent for those for whom you did deign to be spent yourself. . . . Give me, by your unutterable grace, the power to bear with their shortcomings patiently, to share their griefs in loving sympathy, and to afford them help according to their needs. Taught by your Spirit may I learn to comfort the sorrowful, confirm the weak and raise the fallen; to be myself one with them in their weakness, one with them when they burn at causes of offense, one in all things with them, all things to all of them, that I may gain them all (1 Cor 9:22). Give me the power to speak the truth straightforwardly, and yet acceptably; so that they all may be built up in faith and hope and love, in chastity and lowliness, in patience and obedience, in spiritual fervor and submissiveness of mind. And since you have appointed this blind guide to lead them, this untaught man to teach, this ignorant one to rule them, for their sakes Lord, if not mine, teach him whom you have made to be their teacher, lead him whom you have bidden to lead them, rule him who is their ruler. . . . Teach me to suit myself to everyone according to his nature, character and disposition, according to his power of understanding or his lack of it, as time and place require in each case, as you would have me do.²⁴

According to Walter Daniel's accounts of Aelred's relationships with his monks, such prayers were mightily answered.

A Living Example of Mercy at the Juncture

Because mercy does not depend on any previous virtue, similarity, or likeness to attract it, it can initiate and sustain a love relationship between any two persons. If mercy can pierce the shut doors of hardened hearts and minds, we can hope that it could also overcome impassés in dialogue, pierce through ideological differences and melt walls created to defend interest-group ghettos. We may also hope that mercy has the strength to reconcile quarrels and help fragile love relationships grow stronger. Developing a spirituality of mercy, fostering hearts and minds of mercy, seems to be the place to start in the post-modern world. Such a spirituality is simple. Yet lest it also appear hope-

24. *Oratio pastoralis* 7. *Works of Aelred I.*

lessly idealistic, as a foolish dream, I would like to close with the story of a man who is living this spirituality today. It may well be one of those charming acts of God's grace that I met this man during that same summer at Chicago. He is an amazing man who gave me hope when I was disillusioned by the biting criticisms among the Latin scholars and despairing over the apparently unstoppable inner city violence.

Bill Tomes grew up in the white middle-class Chicago suburbs where his classmates considered him a "nerd."²⁵ In 1980 he stopped into a church to pray. At the time Tomes was in his mid-forties, unsuccessful in attempts to find a wife, and unsure about his career. His fiancée had married someone else when he was out of town. He had already tried two careers which did not quite work and was in the process of trying to discern a third. While praying, he heard the directive, "Love. You are forbidden to do anything other than that." When he asked how he was supposed to love, he was told, "by loving." When he asked what specifically he was supposed to do, he heard only, "I'll lead. You follow."

I met Tomes through my uncle who is a psychiatrist in the Chicago area. Tomes had arranged to meet with my uncle professionally because he was hearing these voices. He feared that he might be hearing God and hoped my uncle would simply determine that he was crazy. Instead my uncle tended to support Tomes' fears. It took Tomes several years before he understood exactly what God was asking. Now, after having given away all his possessions, this graying, white-skinned suburbanite is working in the Chicago housing projects, loving the members of rival gangs. Over the last decade he has come to know thousands of the youth who belong to 125 gangs in Chicago. He also knows each gang's trademarks and special handshakes. He lives by a few simple rules "Love. Don't be afraid. Don't defend yourself. Forgive everyone for everything."

For his work, Tomes is given a modest stipend from Catholic Charities. He enters the projects in early afternoon and rarely leaves before 1:00 a.m. He spends his time with the youth in the apartment hallways, basketball courts, hospitals, jails, and gravesites. His goal is to stop the killing, and when that is impossible he consoles the friends

25. In the following account, personal recollections are supplemented by background information from Jill Boughton, "The Remarkable Story of Bill Tomes," *New Heaven/New Earth* 9 (July 1991) 6-8.

of the victims and speaks at their funerals. The local Catholic cardinal and several at Notre Dame University praise his work. Notre Dame's football team has even allowed him to bring some of the youth down to meet the players and watch practices.

My uncle reasons that the gangs have not killed Tomes yet because he has such deep humility and simplicity, if not even a bit of foolishness about him. His vulnerability seems to elicit a certain compassion and pity in the youth. Tomes explained it more bluntly: "I'm dumb shit. I am no better than them and they know it."

His unconditional love for each person is often reciprocated. In an environment from which few escape and in which many expect to die young, funerals become an odd final glory, a time for a gathering of loyal friends. A ten-year-old assured Tomes that he is so well loved that everyone plans on attending his funeral. Bill has asked that if he is killed, his funeral be ecumenical and on neutral turf so rival gang members can attend. "The guy who kills me," he explains, "is still my brother and should be loved more than anybody else."

In contrast with some others who work with these youth, Bill does not dwell on the rewards of being so appreciated. He is not there for self-aggrandizement or to attain a sense of self-worth. Instead his love for these young men weighs heavily on him. If he was not compelled by the God who is love itself to be with the inner city youth, he told me that he would have quit the work long ago. Why? Because he hates having to see those he loves so much die. The ten-year-old, assuming he would not live long, had also asked Tomes, "Will you come to my funeral?" A merciful love has led Tomes to be with and suffer with these gangs.

When I asked him when he felt closest to God, he responded "When the shooting starts. Then I hear Christ say, 'I am walking. I want you walking.'" Tomes explained that this means he is to walk into the midst of the shooting and toward the one who is firing the gun. It is at these times that he has the most striking sense of Christ besides him (and sometimes hears a whispered "duck right" or "duck left" to help him dodge a bullet). The merciful God travels with those who go out in mercy.

Tomes' love for these gang members is blazing and unambiguous. They have nick-named him "Brother Love." They know he would still love them even if they did not change. While he does not approve of their destructive behavior and longs to see them change, he is not

among them to judge them as a representative of the law. Nevertheless, as a testimony to the miraculous power of mercy, his love has inspired some transformations. Some have become Christians, including a few shooting victims whom Bill baptized as they were dying. Others have given up their drugs and gangs in order to find real jobs. Still others have applied to colleges. They have done so in spite of the death-sentence imposed by the gangs on those who leave. Perhaps the most amazing result of Tomes' love is a peace treaty negotiated between rival gangs that has lasted five years. Mercy can multiply and spread itself, creating peace where previously there was only enmity.

A spirituality of mercy thus seems to be the place to begin at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity. Mercy can begin to fulfill the hunger to love and be loved when great diversity, lack of trust and hope, and continuous quarrels seemed to have paralyzed all other types of love. After mercy has softened hearts, recreated trust, and re-enchanted hope, then other forms of love can arise. Such mercy is more than social work. It is a spirituality because it is inspired and animated by the Spirit who chose to be incarnated as merciful love. Some of those steeped in an agnostic and violent world have even found reason to believe in God because of it.