

Love & Friendship

The modern concept, by and large, of love is that it is a kind of “emotion” or “feeling.” This is very far from the medieval concept of love and friendship!

On a purely human level, love is not a “feeling” at all: it is an act of the will, like all acts of virtue. We don’t consider someone “brave” because they “feel” brave, but because they perform brave acts. Similarly, we do not consider someone “generous” because they claim to feel generous, but because of the generous acts that they perform. Much less, then, was love considered to be a “feeling” any more than courage or generosity.

But in what does the act of love consist? The medieval writers are almost unanimous in their answer: love is the consistent will for the good of another person, regardless of how such loving actions may make us *feel*. A parent does not always “feel” like feeding and caring for a child, but they do it anyway, motivated by a desire for the good of their offspring.

This is not to say that the medieval person always got love right. Anyone reading Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* will clearly get the picture that medieval life was as messy as our own modern life: people cheated on their spouses, many relationships were motivated out of selfish sexual desire, there were thieves, brigands, and usurpers just as there are today.

But, to use an expression of the late Dr David Williams of McGill University, the key difference between medieval people and modern people is that “the medieval person committed the same kinds of sins we commit today; but they knew what they were doing was sinful, whereas modern society proclaims these sins as objective goods.”

Reading:

Read sections 38 - 47 of Aelred's *Spiritual Friendships*. What are Alered's three kinds of friendship and what do they consist in?

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the difference between the carnal (flesh), worldly, and spiritual friendship according to Aelred?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Aelred's characterization of friendship and love? Why, or why not?
3. Is Alered's vision of friendship possible in today's world?