

Saint Jeanette: Forgiveness and apology

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

The letter was addressed to the pastor and congregation of Providence United Methodist Church. My friend George Thompson, pastor at the time, noted that each word had been carefully chosen. And he noted the question that began the letter: “Who is a Christian?”

The author was a man named Orelander Love, and Love went on to answer his own question. “Who is a Christian? One who follows Christ Jesus.” He explained that although he knew about Christians and had heard stories about Jesus for many years, he did not believe in the gospel because he had never met a Christian—that is, “until I met Ms. Jeanette D. Aldred.”

Love met Aldred under unusual circumstances—he was robbing her home. Aldred was 88 at the time, and Love thought the house was empty. But when he discovered Aldred in bed, he panicked and hit her over the head. She responded with words of forgiveness and offered him a blessing. That enraged Love even more.

As Love tells it, Aldred “did what Jesus did under the worst circumstance, under the threat of life and limb. She said to me, ‘Jesus loves you. I forgive you. God bless you.’ She said these things even as I beat her, kicked, robbed and cursed her. She did not deserve it, but she did as Christ did.”

The next day, having successfully gotten away, Love found himself haunted by Aldred’s words “I forgive you.” Still, he went back to work, robbing two more houses before he was arrested. The police investigators asked if he had been involved in other burglaries in that neighborhood. When they mentioned Jeanette Aldred’s name, Love began to cry.

He offered to confess to that crime, but only if he could talk directly to either Aldred or a member of her family. He was allowed to speak to Aldred’s son, and asked him if she was all right. “No,” the son said, “she’s not. She’s 88, and she is hurt.” Love

responded by saying, “I’m sorry . . . sorry.”

Love was sentenced to a prison term, and found himself still thinking about Aldred and her words, “I forgive you.” As he wrote in his letter, “I was not saved from prison. She saved me from hell. After that dark criminal night in Ms. Aldred’s home on Providence Road, I have never been the same.

“God punished me spiritually beyond anything man could do, with weeping day and night in jail with such pain you cannot imagine, until I begged for forgiveness.

“I do not now care about the years I will spend in prison or the media or the church screaming for vengeance. It was God with the rod that I feared. Ms. Aldred wanted no vengeance. She wanted me saved. Well . . . I have been saved for six years. Her words, ‘Jesus loves you, I forgive, I’ll pray for you,’ never left my heart. I go to church regularly. I do Bible study. I praise God to every inmate who will hear. I thank God for Ms. Aldred.”

Orelander Love wrote the letter to the church out of his sadness after reading her obituary. She had died at the age of 95. Love had hoped someday to be able to speak to her and tell her how much she had changed his life. Now he wouldn’t have that opportunity. So he wrote a letter to the church instead.

George Thompson has had experience in prison ministry, and is well aware of the ways in which some inmates will use religion and conversion to try to get their sentences reduced or to get released on parole. So he did some research on Love’s behavior over the years he had been in prison. He discovered that Love has become a model prisoner. His earliest scheduled release is 2018, so the letter was not a preface to a parole appeal. The chaplain at Orelander’s correctional facility told Thompson that Love’s letter is an honest confession, not simply a plea for sympathy.

What could have led Jeanette Aldred to respond with words of forgiveness, blessing and love even as she was being robbed? I suspect it was a lifetime of faithful Christian living, the slow and often imperceptible development of habits of feeling, thinking and living shaped by the love of Christ.

Aldred’s faithfulness was similar to that of Lloyd LeBlanc, one of the fathers described in Sister Helen Prejean’s *Dead Man Walking*. When LeBlanc came upon his son’s dead body, he promptly prayed the Lord’s Prayer. He did not equivocate or stop when he came to the words of forgiveness, saying, “Whoever did this, I forgive

them.” He knew it would be a struggle to do so, and he acknowledged that he struggled with feelings of bitterness every day. But his life as a faithful Catholic man shaped dispositions that led him to respond with costly grace.

So also with Jeanette Aldred. She struggled with the effects of the beating. But she also hoped that Love’s apology was genuine and would lead to a change in his life.

To be sure, we must be cautious. Sometimes words of forgiveness can perpetuate cycles of violence, especially in situations of domestic abuse. And we shouldn’t rush to judge those who do not react as Lloyd LeBlanc or Jeanette Aldred did. Yet we should celebrate the ways in which deep habits of faithfulness can and do manifest Christ’s love in the most difficult situations.

In his letter, Love concludes by saying, “I won’t be released from this prison on earth anytime soon. But I’ll be with Jesus and Ms. Aldred in heaven, and we’re going to sing and dance together.”