

# Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Right Rev. Gene Robinson, Bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire  
Feast of Saint Aelred, Monday, January 12, 2009  
Ruth 1:15-18; Philippians 2:1-4; John 15:9-17

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## A Particular Love

Lord, take my lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think with them. Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

St. Aelred was one weird dude. I was doing a little reading about St. Aelred and was wondering why he was chosen as the patron saint of Integrity. There are some good reasons, but let us just say that he had a bit of a checkered history. He wrote about having been madly in love with one boyhood friend after another. And perhaps he wound up going into a monastery, as some do, thinking that if they take a vow of celibacy this troublesome sexuality thing will go away. Apparently it didn't work any better for him than it did for a lot of us. Apparently he had a concealed, hidden bathtub that he would fill with cold, cold water: the 12<sup>th</sup> Century version of taking a cold shower. And when his passions would nearly overtake him he would submerge himself in the cold water until they passed. Not exactly a happy life.

But there is one major contribution that Aelred made to the theology of his day. It is quite specific. It was the custom of the time to say that certainly monks, but possibly other model Christians, would do best to love everyone in general and no one in particular. Indeed monks were often sort of circulated. That is to say when they got their one hour of recreation a day, when apparently they would be marched around two by two around the monastery grounds, they would be carefully put with a different person every day, so that no particular friendships would develop. Some

monasteries even cautioned against having a favorite food or a favorite drink, because we were to love the world, all of the world. So, his contribution was to make the argument theologically that indeed particular love, particular friendships, particular closeness was not only alright, but might even be a key to learning how to love the whole world.

Jesus was no stranger to this type of particularity. Indeed some would have probably said it was scandalous how particular he was in his love. It is said that he loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus. And of course, we worship a Savior who had one disciple who was known as the one whom Jesus loved.

Now don't go out of here and say the Bishop of New Hampshire claimed that Jesus was gay. I am not. I have been through that more than once. I don't need to go through it again. Rush Limbaugh talked about it for two days on one of his programs. I am not saying that Jesus was gay. What I am saying is that Jesus seemed to have this idea that loving someone especially, loving someone closely, and intimately having that kind of deep friendship was how one learned to have a compassion and honest love for the whole world. He was no stranger to particularity.

In the Gospel that is read on St. Aelred's day, we have in some ways, the astounding climax to the incarnation: when God put meat on himself. Right? That's where incarn-ate comes from. The C-A-R-N is the same C-A-R-N in Chili con Carne. Right. When God en-fleshed God's self. I mean,

how much more particular could God be than to be incarnate in a particular man in a particular third-rate town in a bottom of the ladder country of the Roman Empire? You don't get more particular than that. And here at the Last Supper when we read these words from John's Gospel we almost have the climax, the ultimate, in particularity. When Jesus says to these men and women gathered around him, "I call you servant no longer. A servant doesn't know what his master is about. But, I call you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I have heard from my father." It is that moment when Jesus says, "I have given you everything you need." God has laid all of God's cards on the table.

I have told you how much God loves you. And like the prodigal son, when you make your way back home, God won't be interested in your apology. God will put a cloak around your shoulders and a ring on your finger and throw a big party because you are back. How silly of God to lay all of God's cards on the table that way. Why, none of us would ever be motivated to be good again. Except, of course, that is the only thing that motivates us to be better, isn't it, to know that we are loved first. Doesn't that make you want to try that much harder? I think so. It is that miracle of particularity.

This was not the only way in which Jesus turned notions of God on their heads. I mean no God worth his weight would want to be human. Humans wanted to be God, but gods did not want to be human. This was a scandal. No god worth anything would want to be like us. And yet, that is precisely what we claim when we celebrate that wonderful Christmas story. That indeed God did want to become one of us. I think, in a way that might at first sound heretical, in some way maybe God needed to experience what we were like from the inside. We know from the book of Genesis that God didn't know everything there was to know about being human. You will remember that the very first thing that happens to Adam is that he is

lonely. It is the first problem in paradise. He is lonely and God doesn't know what will make him happy. He tries animals. He brings the animals to Adam one after another after another. And Adam is like, "Well you know, I like armadillos, but... it just doesn't do it for me. And then, of course, God says, "Oh, I know." And when woman is brought to the A-dam he says, "Bingo! That's it, that's it."

So in some ways God made us so free that even God did not maybe even know in which direction we would go in. It is an amazing act of vulnerability on God's part to create us that free, that able to choose our destiny. So God is all about particularity. About what you will choose and about what I will choose. And of course the reason for all this, Jesus says in today's Gospel, is not to make us good, but to make us joyful. "I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete." What a different message than John the Baptist-eh?

Yesterday we heard about John the Baptizer. John the Baptizer, who was more in the line of, the creation is bad and you, humankind, are the worst of the lot. And if you don't change your ways, then God is gonna get you. Years later we would hear Jonathan Edwards preach about "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." And he would have them rolling and screaming in the aisles. Describing how we were each held by a tiny, spider-web thin, line dangling us over the flames of hell. Pretty darn scary, but not a great motivator: fear. Jesus comes along and changes that. Because with Jesus we are still sinners, but we are sinners in the hand of a loving God. This God loves each and every one of us in particular.

One of my favorite sayings is, "Jesus loves you, but I am his favorite." And the miracle is, each one of you is God's favorite. Each one of us is God's favorite in particular. One of my favorite stories in all the New Testament is in the chapter of Acts. You will remember that Peter and John were

teaching in the temple in Jerusalem and there was a man there every morning that everyone knew to be lame from birth. And because of his infirmity, everyone understood that he was unworthy to come into the temple. And they all knew that he was impaired because of his own sin or that of his parents. Each day he was brought to the beautiful gate and laid at the door of the temple, but he could come no further. He would sit there and beg for alms. He calls out to get Peter and John's attention. Peter sort of takes control of the situation and he says, "Look at us. I have no money, but what I have I give. In the name of Jesus Christ stand up and walk." And this man not only stands up, but begins to walk and run and leap and dance right into the temple where deep in his heart he knew he belonged all the time.

Now as gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered people we know what that feels like don't we? We know what it is like to be told that there is something about us that is so unworthy to come into the temple. The best we can do is sit at the door and look in like children looking into a candy shop. We know what it is like for Jesus Christ, through someone else usually to reach out and touch us and to say, "Stand up and walk." You are worthy because you have been made worthy by the one who loves you beyond your wildest imaginings. We are beginning to learn, aren't we, what it is like to not only to walk, but to run and leap and dance for joy right into the temple where we belong all the time. And so with our relationships, it is not about being celibate, although there are a few of us called to that noble calling, but it is about loving someone in particular. And rejecting the notion that somehow our relationships are wrong, our relationships are impaired, they are lame because they are with a person of the same gender. It is about Jesus reaching out and touching us and saying, "Stand up and walk and run and leap and dance." Because when you love someone in particular, God is there. And in loving

someone in particular you will learn to love the whole world.

So, St. Aelred might not be a bad patron saint at all. It was the 12<sup>th</sup> Century after all and he might not have been as open with himself as he might have benefited from, but he got the notion that in our particular loving of one another we learn to love the whole world.

When I was growing up in Kentucky, in the hottest month of the year in August, right in the middle of the season when we were cutting tobacco, we would have a two-week revival in the little country church that I grew up in, in the Disciples of Christ denomination. We would go every night for two weeks and listen to preachers preach and preach. I think some nights people gave themselves to Christ just to get home. And because those nights were so insufferably hot, we would fan ourselves with the fans given to us by the funeral home. Almost always it would have that icky sweet picture of Jesus standing in front of a heart shaped door knocking. I probably first knew I was a gay man when I found that so tacky. But here is the thing. I have come to believe that it is absolutely true. I have come to believe that it is exactly true that God loves each one of you particularly and stands at the door of your heart ready to come in. But, he will only come in if invited. I went back and did some research on those fans. Did you know that there isn't a handle on the outside of that door? Only on the inside. This is a God who loves and respects us so much that he will not barge in, but waits to be invited. God is standing at your particular heart's door, wanting a deeper relationship with you and me if we will but invite him in.

Jesus loves you.  
And you're his favorite.  
Amen