

The Feat of St. Aelred (Transferred)
Integrity Vermont Eucharist
February 13, 2011 - Holy Trinity, Swanton
Stannard Baker, Cathedral Deacon – Cathedral Church of St. Paul

Ruth 1:15-18
Psalm 36: 5-10
Philippians 2: 1-4
Mark 12: 28 – 34a

Choose Love

In the name of God the Creator of Love, God the Beloved, and God the Spirit of Love –

From our Gospel reading this afternoon: *Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.* This exhortation from Jesus is not a choice; it is a commandment, and we have huge latitude in how we choose to follow this mandate; we have a choice to make. My mind and heart were deeply touched by two things in preparing for this afternoon. One, the life of St. Aelred and his determination to invoke the power and possibility of love; the other - the life and brutal murder of David Kato of Uganda on January 26 of this year.

St. Aelred believed that friendship and love were inseparable. He taught that there were four qualities of friendship: loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience. Aelred wrote: *Right intention seeks for nothing other than God and natural good. Discretion brings understanding of what is done on a friend’s behalf, and ability to know when to correct faults. Patience enables one to be justly rebuked, or to bear adversity on another’s behalf. Loyalty guards and protects friendship, in good or bitter times.* In the new book of the lives of the saints from The Episcopal Church, *Holy Women, Holy Men* we read: *Friendship, Aelred teaches, is both a gift from God and a creation of human effort. While love is universal, freely give to all; friendship is a particular love between individuals, of which the example is Jesus and John the Beloved Disciple. As abbot, Aelred allowed his monks to hold hands and give other expressions of friendship.*

God gives both a choice and a responsibility in our friendship and love. We must choose when to love and how to love; in addition we are obligated to protect our right to love. David Kato Kisule did just this. He died protecting the right of all LGBT people in Uganda to love freely and openly. He was a small, thin man who spoke quickly and with determination. He was an Anglican. He was bludgeoned to death in his own home after a Ugandan tabloid published the photos and names of 100 Ugandan homosexuals with a banner under the pictures saying “hang them.” The atmosphere of virulent hate in Uganda was fired up by a visit last year from American Scott Lively, a holocaust denier along with two leaders of the “ex-gay” movement in the US. When he left Uganda, Lively said, “I’ve delivered the nuclear bomb against the gay agenda in Uganda.”

The closest I can come to imagining this kind of hate, driven by a religious zealot who twists Christianity into something grotesque, was when Peter and I, during the Civil Union struggle of 1997 - 2000, had our names and pictures featured on the website of *God Hates Fags.com* the organ of Westboro Baptist Church demagogue, Fred Phelps. We were the only ones pictured, and under our photo were the words, *Vermont Fag Beasts*. This attempt to make us – and all homosexuals - appear less than human was similar to what happened in Uganda. If those who are perceived as “other” - people of color, Jews, people with disabilities, or people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered are made less than human, then bigots feel that their abuse of them is justified and their hate can spread quickly and dangerously to the larger community. Fortunately for Peter and me and for our Civil Union fight, we live in Vermont and were surrounded by a strong faith community that understood the truth of love.

Unfortunately, such was not the case for David Kato in Uganda. His friend and Ugandan lesbian activist, Val Kalende, wrote in a moving obituary: *For those who still doubt the impact of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, the murder of David should make us think again. David's death warrant was signed and stamped the day the Family Life Network of Uganda hosted American revisionist Scott Lively and his entourage of self-confessed [ex-]gay men. Lively's time bomb has finally exploded and it's David's body on the altar of hate. Lively's four-hour behind closed doors meeting with Ugandan Members of Parliament has finally culminated in Uganda's worst hate crime against LGBT people. The series of hate crimes since the Lively hate-spitting delegation left Uganda are undeniable. Some of David's interviews indicate that he anticipated that the worst was going to happen. It was only a matter of time.* To add insult to injury the lay reader sent by the Anglican Church of Uganda to “preach” at David’s funeral began spewing anti-gay hate. Villagers refused to give access to the cemetery for his body.

About this incident, journalist Wayne Besen wrote: *The lack of empathy, human compassion, and respect for Kato's body is astonishing. Only a spiritual cesspool with “religious” teachings ranging from vacuous-to-vaudeville-to-violent could produce such monsters. Is this really what religion has been reduced to in Uganda? Ironically, the one figure that emerges as Christ-like is Kato.* Besen then quotes Val Kalende who wrote: *David lived his life for his friends, even defending those he hardly knew. David was always concerned for the safety of others. Many times, he put himself out of the way for the sake of others. He fed, dressed, comforted, and housed many members of the community who were homeless.* David Kato’s life was a powerful example of two of Aelred’s definitions of love and friendship: patience and loyalty: patience enabled David to, *bear adversity on another’s behalf* and loyalty gave him the resolve to *guard and protect friendship, in good or bitter times.* We can do the same thing! The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, Integrity Vermont, those of us sitting here – this afternoon – have the opportunity to be the antidote to hate and the emissaries of love. We are powerful examples of what Jesus’ words really mean – of what a faith community can and should be. We can and will model true Christianity, not a religion that twists Christ’s commandment to love into a twisted dogma of hate. We must not let them steal our religion or hijack our Bible. We know the truth of God’s love; we live the truth of God’s love!

Val Kalende ended her obituary with these words, *Goodbye my friend. Goodbye brave son of LGBT Africa.* Their friendship modeled St. Aelred’s elements of friendship

and love – loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience. We can honor David Kato’s memory – and Val Kalende’s moving good-bye - by saying hello to our mission and charge as Integrity Vermont. Listen to Bishop of Vermont, Tom Ely’s, words from his statement on February 1 (printed on the back of your service bulletin) for his exhortation to the Diocese of Vermont and to us. *Our good fortune could easily lead to complacency, but I believe it is instead a charge—almost a command—to stand in solidarity with those in Uganda and all parts of the world whose lives are endangered and diminished for who they are as LGBT human beings. It is a charge to speak out and call upon our political and religious leaders to do all in their power to bring an end to the climate of hate and fear that affects so many of our sisters and brothers around the world.*

St. Aelred and Integrity USA and the Diocese of Vermont remind us what love truly means. We are charged with being champions of human rights. We know that love is not a privilege or something to be earned. It is a basic human right - as basic as food and water. Making the choice to be protectors and champions of love is crucial – perhaps it is our destiny. Today as we celebrate Aelred, let us also celebrate and summon the power of love in our own lives and in our faith community. Let us be like Ruth in making the choice to invoke the power of love by refusing to let another human be excluded, isolated or dehumanized because of their difference or “otherness.” Let us - and Integrity Vermont 2.0 be ambassadors – even evangelists if you will - for the truth of love and abiding friendship as modeled by our own lives as individuals and as a group. When Jesus asks us what is most important, I charge us to be like the scribe when we have our chance to answer Jesus. I hope we will be able to say: *You are right, Teacher... ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ - this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.* When we answer Jesus in this way, I am convinced that his response to us will be, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

AMEN