

Ruth 1:15-18; Mark 12:28-34a

## Camp EDS

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January 13, 2011

I loved summer camp. As a youth, I spent many a summer at Cutter Scout Reservation in the beautiful Santa Cruz mountains of Northern California. I loved it all – canoeing, archery, community meals at Harkness Lodge, outdoor services at the A-framed chapel, watching funny skits around a campfire at night, and even performing silly dances like “Father Abraham” and “Heads, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.”

Towards the end of my Boy Scout days, I became a counselor at Camp Cutter. During the course of a summer, I formed deep friendships with my fellow counselors as well as the campers, and it was often hard to say goodbye at the end of the summer.

As you all know, this is my very first January term at EDS, and – despite all the snow around us – it feels a lot like summer camp to me, especially as these two weeks draw to a close. Dare I call this Camp EDS? There’s no canoeing or archery, but there certainly are community meals in the refectory, chapel services, gathering around a glowing TV for Glee Night, and even country-western line dancing! January term brings back memories of my camp staff days – meeting a lot of new faces and reconnecting with old friends for an intensive period of work and fun – and then it all comes to an end.

This really hit home for me as I listened to the testimony of the graduating DL students on Tuesday night. I was really moved to see and hear about the close friendships that Booth, Candy, Carol, Ellen, and Joshua have made with each other, and all of us at EDS, over the last four years. For me, they really embodied today’s gospel message of loving God and loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. Their description of living communally in sometimes “rustic” student dorm settings – Ruth’s solemn promise to Naomi of “Where you lodge, I will lodge” from today’s first reading comes to mind – also reminded me of summer camp. At least they didn’t have to deal with latrines!

Today we celebrate the feast day of St. Aelred of Rievaulx, the 12<sup>th</sup> century abbot, who, probably more than any other figure in Christian history, is known for his writings about the importance of friendship in living out the Christian life. I think Aelred would have appreciated the many embodied friendships that are formed here at EDS during January term. Sure, each of us might have dozens – or even hundreds – of Facebook friends, or chat for hours with our friends on our cell phones, Skype, or Adobe Connect, but there is simply no substitute for physically gathering together with friends in the flesh.

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As a professor of historical theology, I also like Aelred because he is the closest thing we have to an out, proud LGBT person from the Middle Ages. According to John Boswell, the late great openly-gay history professor at Yale, there was “little doubt” that Aelred was erotically attracted to other men and that his sexuality was a “dominant force” in his life. Although he was celibate, Aelred was not afraid of same-sex relationships. As an abbot, he allowed his monks to hold hands while walking in the monastery. He wrote about falling passionately in love with another monk, Simon, and grieved deeply at his friend’s death. Aelred even took icy baths to keep his libido in check when he served as the novice master to handsome young monastic novices!

For Aelred, embodied friendship was at the center of his theology and his understanding of God. As Jesus teaches us in today’s gospel, we are not only called to love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, but we are also called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Listen to Aelred’s voice, which, amazingly, still resonates with us across many centuries:

“It is in fact a great consolation in this life to have someone with whom you can unite in the intimate embrace of the most sacred love . . . . A [person] who can weep with you in your worries, be happy with you when things go well, wonder with you in doubt . . . . with whom you can rest, just the two of you in the sleep of peace, away from the noise of the world, in the embrace of love, in the kiss of unity, with the sweetness of the Spirit flowing between you, to whom you so join and unite yourself that soul mingles with soul and two become one.”

Not bad for a celibate Christian monk from 900 years ago, right? For Aelred, to abide in friendship *is* to abide in God.

In fact, many contemporary lesbian and feminist theologians, including Mary Hunt and Elizabeth Stuart, have also written extensively about friendship. They have argued that friendship should be *the* central Christian relationship and not marriage. Just because two people are married does not mean that they actually treat each other with love, respect, or even friendship. Very often, the exact opposite thing happens – familiarity breeds contempt. As such, a singular focus on marriage to the exclusion of other kinds of relationships can actually diminish the true relationality to which all of us Christians are called.

Hunt and Stuart argue that *friendship*, whether or not involving sexual expression, should be the ethical baseline for *all* of our relationships. Don’t believe what the religious right tells you. We Christians *are* called to be promiscuous – promiscuous with our love! Like Ruth and Naomi – and like our DL cohorts – we are called to go where our neighbors go, through thick and thin, through good times and bad.

I’d like to close with some really cute hymn lyrics that Integrity, the Episcopal LGBT organization, wrote to honor St. Aelred’s day:

All praise for Abbot Aelred,  
Our patron saint and gay,  
Who found through joyful friendship,  
The path to Jesus lay.  
Like Aelred, may we mirror  
Love, human and divine  
And clasping hands together,  
God's blest communion find.

As January term draws to a close – and you pack up your backpacks, roll up your sleeping bags, and take down your tents – remember the “joyful friendships” and “blessed communion” that you have experienced here during these past two weeks. Be sure to take those friendships back with you to your home communities. And, even though you may not return to Cambridge for some time, don't forget to write. We can't wait to see you back again at Camp EDS!

+Amen.