

Homily for St. Aelred's Day by The Rev. Heather O'Brien

January 12, 2013

One of the most formative moments in my spiritual journey happened when I was in my early teens. I was out to lunch with some extended family that I didn't see all that often. As teenagers often are I was totally involved in describing every little detail of my life since the last time we had seen each other and just assumed everyone was as interested in me and my friends as I was. "I'm so excited, I got an A on my history exam, I wrote my essay on..." "I got to start in the game on Tuesday and..." "I am so excited, Michael got a boyfriend. They are so adorable together..." "Swim season starts next month and practices..." And then I trailed off. The silence around the table had gone from slightly bored attentiveness to shocked hostility. I was asked in soft but strident tones in deference to the fact that we were in a public restaurant, whether I had mispoken. Confused I said no, Michael was gay. Until that point, it had never occurred to me that some people would find something wrong with that statement. My heart beat stuttered in my chest and my face burned as I was then treated to a lecture on how my friend was evil and if I didn't stop hanging out with him then he would drag me to hell with him. That God didn't love Michael and couldn't love me if I did.

I spent the next decade trying to find a God I knew had to exist – a God that could love as much as I was always told God loved. It wasn't until I got to seminary that I found people who knew the God I had been looking for. The God whose most core trait was love, not judgment.

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Aelred. Aelred was a monk who eventually ended up leading the monastery of Rievaulx. One of his most famous works is called *Spiritual Friendship*. In that work, he writes that God is not our Judge but our Lover. Judgment can only inspire change through fear. But love transforms us; changes our hearts. Aelred saw Christ as a companion for our soul, longing for union, rather than a ransom to be paid.

Aelred wrote at length about the ideal relationship of love between Jesus and his beloved disciple John. As one author describes it, Aelred portrays John as striving to hear the heartbeat of God in Jesus and Jesus showing the secrets of his heart to John.

Imagine, in the chaos surrounding thirteen men eating dinner, John quiets, leans over and presses his head to Jesus' breast. Jesus accepts the show of love and affection as John closes his eyes and allows his heartbeat to begin to echo the one beating against his ear, beating in his soul since before he was born.

God's grace and love are not forces that must twist and change us into something new and stamp out our true nature in order to re-form us. Rather God's grace and love are a reminder of a memory so old and so basic that it was a part of us before anything else was. Our hearts have forgotten in a world grown loud – like trying to remember lyrics to a favorite song when the radio is blasting music so loud you can't think.

God sent Jesus not to sit in judgment over creation but rather as a showing of God's love for creation. Through his life and death Jesus' lifeblood beat out the rhythm of God's heart beat for all to hear and remember themselves. Though we are often weighed down and may feel like we have cotton in our ears. The beat remains a clarion call to all who would remember, to all who would dance.

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

But what rhythm is that beat drumming out? What dance is the music of God's heart calling us to? What is the pulse that our inmost being shares with God?

Love.

In today's Gospel reading, we come across Jesus as he is speaking with various religious leaders in the temple. Thus far they have been trying to trip him up with questions about taxes and resurrection but he has answered with aplomb every bait thrown his way.

Then a scribe who has been listening off to the side comes forward with a question, "Which commandment is the greatest of all?"

Which commandment is the greatest of all?

I can just imagine that the bickering crowds quieted, heads turned towards Jesus and ears strained to hear over the noises of the temple.

And, Jesus answers with frightening simplicity, “Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The scribe recognizes the truth in Jesus’ words and replies with sincerity that those two things mean more to God than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Jesus, who was and is the epitome of what it means to be human and the epitome of what it means to be God shouted the beat of his heart back into a world grown loud with empty noise.

Our world is filled with empty noise, dangerous noise, hurtful noise. The shouts of bullies telling teenagers that their lives aren’t worth living because they happen to be attracted to the same gender. The insidious whispers of pretenders saying God could never love you like you are, abomination. The regular chatter of the indifferent using words like “gay” to mean bad or stupid or ugly because that’s just how people talk. The meaty smack of fist against face because someone dresses differently or walks differently or speaks differently.

This cacophany can seemingly drown out the beat of God’s heart in the world, in us, and in those around us.

But that beat is still there. Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum. Beneath it all. It is the beat that called the world into being. It is the beat that created humankind. It is the beat that thrums through all of creation. It is the core of what it means to be humans created in the image of God. Beneath the empty noise, God’s heart beats in our chests. God’s heart beats in all of our chests.

What does it mean to love in a world where the beat of God’s heart is heard only in small snatches or as notes on the wind? How do we love God and our neighbor?

These two are irrevocably entwined. If you love God, you must then love your neighbor because the most basic part of their nature is God's heartbeat. If you love your neighbor then you must also love God because God's heart beats in your neighbor's chest.

Because we are embodied, created creatures, love for God and love for neighbor, must also take on an embodied form. It will involve dirty finger nails, sweaty faces, sore muscles, and tired bodies. It will involve strained ears and eyes as you look and listen beyond the sores and scabs and bruises the world presents to the truth beneath it. It will involve utter heartbreak and ecstatic joy – as anything truly worth it must.

We must take the example Aelred and of John and listen for the heartbeat of our beloved in all things.

I once read a version of Footprints in the Sand in which when the speaker looked back, and rather than pondering the times he saw only one set of footprints, he wondered at the great swaths of rather chaotic marks. There were patterns of dots and whirls and lines that seemed to cover most of his life – good times and bad. When asked, God answered, those are the time that we danced.

Just as the dance of the trinity brought forth creation, so too we are called to dance with God to the beat of God's heartbeat and help create the kingdom in the world – through love.

Can you hear it?

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

The heart beat echoes through the being of the fetal cosmos

The word spoke a creative spark into the womb of God

The spirit blew the breathe of life into being

And God's heartbeat sent lifeblood into the universe

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

As one both hearts beat, Mother and child
Connected in creation, surrounded, filled, overwhelmed
As the womb of God births the cosmos
God's heartbeat becomes the music of the world

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

Creation dances to the beat of love through all things
Until a discordant note strikes
A cacophany of ignorance, indifference and evil
Drowns out the beat of God's heart

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

Through her heartbreak, God's heart beats on
Christ is birthed into the world, the strong beat of love
Once more resplendent - a tuning fork drawing us in,
Reminding us of our deepest being, our hearts beating in time with God's

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum

The pulse of his lifeblood an eternal example
An unending invitation to dance
To the music of God's heartbeat –
Love in the world.

Ba dum ba dum ba dum ba dum