

## A Sermon: Spilt Milk

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### Luke 4: 16-20

**Today.** Not yesterday. Not tomorrow or next week or when things are a little calmer or when people aren't so upset or when we are all ready. Today. "Today" is the Jesus' first spoken word of his own in the gospel of Luke after he has begun his public ministry. Luke says Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. We have no idea what he has done before then as an adult. What he did for a living, if he had ever been in love...no idea. But then, that does not matter to the writer of Luke. That is in the past. What matters is "today."

**Jesus has come through the temptation in the desert.** He has begun teaching and preaching to great acclaim. Then he returns to his home to Nazareth, he observes the Sabbath and attends synagogue as was usual for him, faithful Jew that he was.. He is passed a scroll of Isaiah, he finds the servant song and reads it:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to:

Bring good news to the poor,

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

And recovery of sight to the blind

To let the oppressed go free

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

**Today, we are looking at the movie *Milk*, biopic about Harvey Milk.** Its framework consists of interspersed scenes of Harvey dictating his will into a tape recorder. His human rights work has been successful and he is therefore under constant death threats and he has been having premonitions about his death. He wants to record his story. The movie begins with actual archival footage of the day to day reality that gay men lived within up until the very late 1970's. It was a time, when it was criminal to be in a gay bar, criminal to have sex with a person of the same gender, criminal to love someone who was not of the opposite sex. To do so was to risk becoming a captive in the justice system.

*Clip: 00:32 – 3:35* (Archival footage of gay men being rounded up by police)

**Harvey Milk does not want to be an activist.** He is a kind of accidental activist. He has been an insurance worker for many years and on his fortieth birthday ends up having a sexual encounter with a man whom he falls in love with and who challenges him to do something with his life that “matters.” He and his partner Scott Smith move to San Francisco where they hope they can openly and freely love one another. There, things are better, but not much better. Something happens that makes Harvey realize that if the captives are to be released, the blind made to see and the oppressed made free, he may have to be one to do it.

*Clip 15:55 – 19:36* (Harvey giving first aid to Scott Smith and his first campaign speech)

**The gay community has waited under the yoke of persecution long enough.** Milk decides to answer the call to release the prisoners: then and there, now. Like Jesus, Harvey gathers around himself a motley crew. His campaign organizers are gay, lesbian, straight, prostitutes, businessmen, young, old, multicultural. They work hard. Harvey made two runs for supervisor

and a run for the legislature but it was not until an opponent told him that he would never win until he was *for* something. It was not enough to say that the captives are captive, that the blind are blind, that the oppressed are bound. A more important question is; what does the year of the Lord's favour look like? What is the good news? When he finally gets that, things change. Harvey is finally elected in 1977 as Supervisor in San Francisco. He is the first openly gay man in the US to hold such a prominent public office.

**However, there are always those for whom so called good news seems like bad news to them.** How the message is received that the oppressed will go free, depends on whether you are oppressed or an oppressor; that the captives are released on whether you are the prisoner or the jailer. Rejoicing in eyes being opened, depends on whether you want to see what is on the other side of those eyelids. Does it confirm your view of reality or not? If not, there will be trouble.

**Proposition 6 was a piece of legislation making its way through the United States.** Those invoking God's name and claiming to be God's spokespersons, ex-Musketeer and orange juice spokeswoman and State Legislator John Briggs claimed that God wanted Proposition 6 to go forward. This piece of legislation would repeal protection from persecution of gay and lesbians with regard to employment and housing. It would allow the firing of homosexuals from any educational environment and the firing of anyone who knew someone was homosexual and did not report it. These so-called spokespeople for God, claimed that God requires the oppressed be more oppressed, that more and more be imprisoned and that the suffering and humanity of their homosexual brothers and sisters be hidden from view. Harvey Milk needed to stop Proposition 6 from entering San Francisco.

**Clip: 1:02:12 – 1:04:05** (The baptism scene)

**It is at the baptism of Dan White's son, Charles that we see the seeds of Harvey's death being sown.** A deal is made at the font. The men make promises to each other in front of that very same place where, as a baptized and baptizing church, we make promises to believe in God, Christ and Holy Spirit, where we declare our intention to live as faithful Disciples of Christ, where we promise to resist evil and work for justice. Baptism is a covenant between God and humans. God *will* keep God's promise to love, to suffer with, to bless the child and the community it is raised within. The church community makes promises too. It is the church community who promise to love and support the child or the adult being baptized. But is it partial promise? Do they really mean, as long as they turn out not to be homosexual? It is the promises made between human beings that tend to be broken.

**It is at the baptismal font of Supervisor White's home church that the two men promise to support each other in their various legislative interests.** They will ultimately misuse their respective power and betray those promises to one another. As Harvey Milk's work is successful, as oppression is named and captives made free, as his fame grows and laws change, he gets many more death threats. Yet, Harvey Milk gains great popular approval. White watches this progression with angst, anxiety and resentment. Harvey Milk is human. He will use his new found power heavy handedly to block White's reinstatement as Supervisor. Thanks in large part to Harvey Milk's incredible courage and tenacity, San Francisco will defeat Proposition 6, becoming a beacon of justice for the rest of the country. But Dan White will shoot Harvey Milk and then, Judas like, shoot himself.

**At the end of the movie, as a small devastated band of Harvey's friends leave a memorial service** in disgust because hardly anyone is there, they turn the corner of the street and stop dead

in their tracks. Tens of thousands of people marching on a candle lit vigil march toward them.

Humanly flawed but filled with God as he was, Harvey Milk touched millions of lives with his work of liberation. He proclaimed for his day and for our day the year of the Lord's favor.

**The good news is that the movie was made at all.** Movies are not made unless studios are confident that millions of people will pay to watch them. People do not pay to watch them unless, to some extent, what they see on the screen confirms their mental maps of the world. This means the many of us are willing to see a movie that is sympathetic toward a gay political leader and to sympathize and empathize with the very human character of Harvey Milk. Today, there is still much to do. Here we are, as a community, baptismal font in front of us, waiting for a word from God.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*, because he has anointed *us* to:

Bring good news to the poor,

He has sent *us* to proclaim release to the captives

And recovery of sight to the blind

To let the oppressed go free

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

**Today**, this scripture is being fulfilled in *our* hearing because we have gathered here.

Today *we* will receive good news.

Today *we* will be released.

Today *we* will recover our sight.

Today *we* will be freed.