



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12: 20-33

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Unless a Seed...”

I didn't know the true story of Harvey Milk's life until I saw the film that bears his last name. What a surprise – the story of a gay man didn't make it to the locker rooms of Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the 1970's. Harvey Milk was a crusader for gay rights in the 1970's. As a San Francisco City Supervisor, he was the first openly gay man to win a political office in America. Sean Penn is a tour de force in capturing the spirit of this man. He portrays Harvey as funny, brilliant, vulnerable and uncompromising in his passion to bring America face to face with its homophobic shadow.

In the mid 1970, when Harvey moved to San Francisco and began his campaign, I would have been 18 or 19. I remember clearly being of the opinion that gays should be lined up and shot. My hatred was irrational. I had never been hurt, threatened, or even propositioned by a gay man. I, was, however, deeply invested in being perceived as a “real” man. And part of being a real man in jock culture involves feeling strong. Gays were soft, weren't they? Part of being a real man was being athletic. Gays, we all “knew”, didn't play football or hockey – did they? Part of being a real man was strutting yourself before women. Gays, by definition, were not even in the game! Hating gays was part of what it meant, in Winnipeg jock culture, to

be man. And young boys and young men are still defining themselves by what they are not: playground taunts still include, “You're so gay”. Insecure young men still go to gay bars in downtown Vancouver with hatred in their hearts, looking for a gay victim.

A man not unlike me in my late teens assassinated Harvey Milk in 1978. Dan White served with Harvey on the city's board of supervisor's, and then he pumped five bullets into Harvey Milk. He was deeply confused, drawn by Harvey's passion and wit on the one hand, and yet irrationally disgusted by his openness about his gay lifestyle. In terms of the Scripture reading this morning, he is a portrait of one possible outcome for a person who refuses to die to himself in order that that a new self can be born. If you think Harvey Milk's battle is over, think again. The State of California, where Harvey fought his battles, has only recently revoked the right of gays and lesbians to marry. We have made some progress, unquestionably. But when you expand the conversation beyond North America and parts of Europe, homophobia is the rule, not the exception. The Anglican Church worldwide is being torn asunder by this human rights issue, as Anglican churches in Africa and elsewhere worldwide discriminate against homosexual lifestyles.

This brings me to the first Scripture reading this morning – Jeremiah’s articulation of a new covenant that will be written on the hearts of all those who love God. Nobody will need to be taught the ways of God, because in knowing God, they will just know God’s ways. It is a lofty vision that must be accompanied by a cautionary note. Let me tell you why. Who is to say whether what’s on my heart is the law of God? There was never a more faithful, convicted soul than the American Anita Bryant. She loved God with all of her heart and soul and mind. She “knew” God. So when she began to take on Harvey Milk and his cause, she did so with the full force of divine sanction. The film shows actual footage of her espousing her religious beliefs. But what most Canadians today recognize as hate – all in the name of Christ. But if you had asked her, or those she represents, she would have told you that she embodied Jeremiah’s covenant – the law of God was written on her heart.

Anita Bryant doesn’t know God. She knows the God that is available to her from her world space. You won’t be surprised to hear me say that from an evolutionary model, the laws that are written on our hearts reflect particular worldviews and cultural values. Mrs. Bryant espoused the shadow side of a Blue, Traditionalist Christ. If you want to know more about these stages of consciousness, it’s all in my book. What was written on her heart was the law of right and wrong, and black and

white. There is a Truth, with a capital “T” that is unchanging, and you’ll find that truth on the pages of the Bible. If a biblical letter ascribed to Paul says that homosexuality is aberrant behavior then it is – end of discussion.

Similarly, as a 19 year old, I was reflecting this world space, but not attaching it to religious belief. It’s an ethnocentric value system. If you are not like me, you are by definition, an outsider. If you’re not from my tribe, you are suspect. Difference is threatening. Adherence to cultural norms is what keeps the world going ‘round. Neither I, nor Anita Bryant, were aware that we weren’t reflecting truth, but rather the only truth that was available to us from our level of consciousness. We evolve, or rather we may choose to evolve, to more nuanced and comprehensive perspectives. As we do, we discover that the “law of God written on our hearts” changes.

And here’s the challenging piece about this evolutionary perspective. You can only be where you are. Willpower won’t get you there. To be honest, meditation and prayer won’t, by themselves, move you through these stages of consciousness. Genpo Roshi, a lineage Zen Master woke up to this truth in the mid-1990’s. He’d been meditating for 20 years, for hours every day. He was “enlightened”. He knew all about satori and unitive consciousness. But he realized that there is not only “state” enlightenment, that have to do with states of consciousness – bliss, satori, etc.; there is also “stage”

enlightenment. Our worldviews need to evolve from egocentric, to ethnocentric, to worldcentric, to planetcentric, to cosmocentric. He looked around at his Zen master teachers and realized that most of them were still homophobic, sexist, authoritarian – they were at an ethnocentric level of development. They were only partially enlightened.

To reiterate, stage enlightenment cannot be willed into existence; book knowledge can help, but that's not enough either; meditation can help, but only if you have an awareness of stage development – otherwise meditation can actually keep you stuck at a level.

Stage enlightenment requires being broken open. This is why the twin symbols of the seed and the cross are so important. We find both in John's gospel this morning.

“Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

In this passage, it's possible to take this on two levels, the literal and the metaphorical. On the literal level, the writer of John's gospel was referring to Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus, Harvey Milk, Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others literally died for their causes, and in doing so they bore the fruits of justice and compassion. By their sacrifice, entire cultures saw the world in a new way – saw that the social, political, and economic systems that perpetuated

injustice were not inevitable and were not intransigent. These systems were not divinely ordained and they could and must be changed in order to reflect the enlarged perspective that these men and women gave to the world. Each of these people were literally broken open, like a seed, and their own brokenness in turn broke open entire cultures, worldviews, and hearts. They acted as agents of stage enlightenment. We all saw the world through an enlarged and more compassionate perspective as a result of their sacrifice. When we break the bread at communion services, we say: “the body of Christ, broken open”. And when we receive the bread we are participating in the new life that God offers when this seed is planted in our hearts.

This, says the writer of John's gospel, is why the cross was, ironically, also the glorification of Jesus, the Christ. When he was lifted up, a way of being, a pattern of existence, a deep secret about the authentic spiritual path was revealed: in order to grow we must be broken open. And when we follow this path, we too are glorified with Christ.

When we take the cross and the seed on a more metaphorical level, it describes the same reality. Not all of us are called to literally die for a cause. It's also possible to live for a cause. But the pattern is exactly the same. We are broken open so that the new life of Christ can rise up within us. We are all confronted by opportunities to be broken open that our own lives can bear more fruit. The decision to parent

is a decision to be broken open. The hard shell of who we thought we were is cracked wide open when our first child arrives. We rediscover who we are when we live for someone other than ourselves.

I take “bearing more fruit” to mean that as a result of being cracked open like a seed, we orient our lives more closely to the latent potential of reality within ourselves; we grow into broader perspectives; our capacity for compassion greens; our capacity for freedom and fullness of life finds its full measure, like the branches of a mature tree that have been given enough space to grow; we love God more fully and are more willing to see ourselves as servants – if we are Christians, we evolve in our identity as disciples of Christ.

When I was studying for the ministry, I became friends with Alan, a colleague in ministry. We would have weekly lunches; we’d go to workshops together. On one occasion Alan and I talked about going to a conference together and sharing a room. He called me up and told me that we needed to talk. It turned out that he was gay and he wanted to be up front about it. I was broken open in the process of deepening our friendship. This is what is meant by going to the cross with Christ: dying to old assumptions, beliefs, values and waiting for Spirit to fashion a resurrection in our souls. And when this happens, we look back at our old self and realize that it’s now

just a part of us – it no longer defines the totality of who we are.

This is what evolutionary enlightenment is all about – it’s a prayerful attitude that we bring to God or Spirit: “Break me open. Remake me. Fashion, from the vestiges of who I thought I was, a new creation. Break through my idolatrous commitment to this form of myself being the final form. “Root and rise in me, O Holy One.” (Lucy Shaw) For in this dying and growing alone do I taste eternal life.

It’s not only Christ or Harvey Milk who are thus “glorified”. We ourselves are glorified. All that is meant by being glorified here is that the light of God may shine through us if this is our prayerful attitude. This is how we know that we are disciples of Christ. We share in his “glory” to the degree that we have entered into this willingness to be broken open, like a seed – so that all that life God has put there, all the fire and passion of this glorious universe, may awaken.

The structural dynamic of the film involves scenes in which Harvey records his will on tape in 1977. At one point Harvey anticipates the possibility of his own assassination: “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door”. In this Harvey Milk follows in the tradition of those who lost their fear of living for God – even if it means dying for humanity.