

# **Burn Her!**

October 31, 2021

## **She's a Witch**

Throughout my childhood, I remember a low-grade but regular thread of jokes this time of year about women as witches. It wasn't heavy handed, wasn't intended to be malicious, but just scratch the surface, and you knew that the jokester's intent was to say that women were other, strange, not to be trusted, and to imply that the initial consonant of witch could be easily swapped out for a different one.

As we gather as Union Congregational United Church of Christ today, Reformation Sunday, which also happens to fall on Halloween this year, I'm conscious of our church's connections not only to the Protestant reforms of Europe, but also to the Salem Witch Trials of the late 1600s, in which over two hundred people were accused of being witches, thirty were convicted, and nineteen were executed. For being witches. And while terms like "witch hunt" are now used to say that someone's motives are disingenuous and misguided, there is still a strong drive, especially in churches, to demonize the other, that which we don't understand, the unconventional, to seek purity and conformity at the expense of the strange.

In many ways, society writ large, and the United Church of Christ in particular, have reformed our notions of women and gender roles, we're still grappling with the lessons of the witch trials, which offer us a cautionary tale about the dangers of isolationism, religious extremism, false accusations, and lapses in due process.

## **"Wicked"**

Did you ever see the musical "Wicked"? It's a 2003 production that re-tells the story of the "Wizard of Oz" from the perspective of the Wicked Witch. A modern parable, in it we learn that, "in much of life, things aren't always what they seem. The green-skinned 'wicked' person actually is a conscientious activist fighting for the oppressed. The father figure of the show, the Wizard, turns out to be the evil villain, the source of the oppression, and, when Elphaba discovers it and tries to get him to stop, he neutralizes her by discounting her and labeling her 'wicked.' This works so well that people ultimately try to destroy her, and the only way to escape is for her to pretend they have succeeded." (Rev. Mike Piazza)

In re-listening to the Wicked soundtrack recently, "The anger, judgment, and self-righteousness of the masses" hit a little too close to home. "It left me wondering how often we have been utterly convinced about who and what is good and who and what is bad, and how often have we been completely wrong." And on this Reformation Sunday, it has made me wonder how often that anger, judgement, and self-righteousness has been wielded on behalf of a church more interested in controlling people than in engaging them in the divine sacred.

## **Gospel**

The intersection of Halloween and witches and the current state of the world, the intersection between isolationism and extremism and false narratives, with today's Gospel is the whole idea of "other." When Jesus tells us that we need to love our neighbor as ourselves, he was

engaging the fact that all too often, we don't honor the sacred in our neighbors, and we justify this by somehow demeaning and belittling them. Call her a witch, and then we don't have to deal with the fact that her life is freer than mine. Call him a fag, and then we don't have to deal with the fact that he's living a more authentic life. Call them aliens, and then we don't have to deal with the fact that our economy is balanced on keeping wages extremely low while billionaires travel to near space for joy rides.

Jesus says the commandment to love God and to our neighbors as ourselves is the absolute center, the absolute core of a life of faith, that EVERYTHING hangs on this. The fact that he said this tells us that people in his day struggled with it. The fact that, in the Gospel of Luke, this commandment is followed by the story of the Good Samaritan, in which among other things, Jesus points out that religiosity is often one of the things that keeps people from loving our neighbors, should turn our commemoration of Reformation Sunday into a celebration of introspection and commissioning.

### **Conclusion**

Introspection, in that we must regularly look inward and ask how our deeply held beliefs are helping us to be more compassionate, more loving, more merciful, more welcoming, more just. Brigit Anna McNeill is an herbalist and therapist, who in a different era may have been called a witch. She writes:

“Witch. The herbalists, midwives, plant women, well and spring guardians, wisdom carriers. Drowned, tortured, raped and executed. And still, so many shrink away at the word ‘witch’ because they believe the stories, the words made to make you believe the killers, abusers and torturers were good, kind people.

“To make you think that killing 16 year old women for making a nettle tea was right, to make you think that those who knew how plants healed should be drowned, that those who were guardians of sacred springs and knowledgeable birth workers should be tortured and burnt alive.

“The stories of witches are so clever that most people on this land don't even understand the awful and terrible” ways that they manipulate us into thinking that someone who is different is evil.

She goes on:

“We took on that they were devil worshippers, baby eaters, children torturers, all so the wipe out of so many women felt like a good cleansing, a necessary evil. People still now laugh, jeer and hate the witch, smirking at the handed down, hook nosed, green skinned image.”

The practice of othering is, at its core, rooted in ignorance and nourished on cruelty.

And so, as our church continues in our annual pledge campaign to celebrate how Union calls us to “Love Our Neighbor...No Exceptions,” we recommit to “making the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations” by truly assessing who we have made into scapegoats and tropes, who we have diminished in order to further our own narratives.

And, we are commissioned. To love. To break down barriers. To constantly re-form our ways. To draw the circle ever wider. To treat the stranger as if they are God in our midst. To question and set aside and even smash our received notions that demean or divide.

And this doesn't just go for the other, the neighbor, the stranger. Remember, the commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The commission, then, is to be re-forming the ways we treat ourselves as well, to be more loving, more compassionate, more merciful, more just.

Friends, loving our neighbors, especially those who the wider culture labels as strange or weird or scary or dangerous, is Union's super power, and while it may not be “Popular,” I guarantee you that, in stretching and re-forming the ways that we love our neighbors, we will be changed “For Good.”

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**Mark 12:28-34, Psalm 146**  
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