

Witchy Ways

October 26, 2025

Every year, when I hand out Halloween candy on the church steps, I dress up like a witch. I do so in part because it's easy. In part because it's funny. But the biggest reason I do is because of the spiritual lineage of our congregation that traces its roots back to the Puritans and Congregationalists, the people who terrorized powerful, non-conforming women. I wear this costume both in repentance, sadness over how our beloved institutions can cause such deep and extreme pain, as well as out of hope, because, in many ways, we have "flipped the script."

Today is Reformation Sunday — that day when we look back 500 years to Martin Luther and the other reformers who insisted that the church must be willing to change, must be willing to be reformed by the Spirit of God. But if we're honest, change hasn't come easily to the church. Sometimes, we've been the ones most resistant to it. So this morning, I want to start with a story from our own spiritual family tree — one that reminds us how far we've come... and how far we still have to go.

A Hard Story from Our Family Tree

In 1647, in Windsor, Connecticut, a woman named Alse Young was executed for witchcraft. She was the first person in the American colonies to be put to death in this way.

We don't know exactly what she was accused of doing — the records were sparse back then — but it was a time of epidemic illness and social fear. One hypothesis is that a deadly influenza outbreak in the community may have made her an easy scapegoat. And when people are afraid, they often look for someone to blame.

A few years later, another woman from the same town, Lydia Gilbert, was accused of being a witch as well. A man had been killed when a musket misfired during a militia drill. Even though the shooter was fined and held accountable for what he did, years later, the town decided the gun must have been bewitched, and they pointed their finger at Lydia. She was convicted and executed.

These weren't isolated incidents. Dozens of people, most of them women, were accused and punished in Puritan New England — by churches that are, in a very real sense, our ancestors. The same Congregational tradition that gave birth to what would later become the United Church of Christ also gave rise to that world of religious fear and control. That's part of our story.

Our Heritage, Both the Holy and the Harmful

It's sobering, isn't it, to realize that people who were trying so hard to be faithful, to create a godly society, could also do something so cruel in the name of God? But then again, maybe it's not so hard to imagine, given the current state of affairs...

That's exactly why Reformation Sunday still matters. Because the Reformation wasn't just about getting theology right — it was about remembering that the church itself is always in need of reform.

Our ancestors in faith thought they were defending holiness. They thought they were protecting their community from evil. But in trying to be "righteous," they became blind not only to mercy, they became blind to reality.

And isn't that exactly what Jesus was warning against in today's Gospel?

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Jesus tells a story about two people praying in the temple. One, a Pharisee — a respected religious leader — stands tall and thanks God that he's not like other people. He tithes, he fasts, he does everything right. He's confident that he's earned God's approval.

The other, a tax collector — despised, mistrusted — stands far off, eyes down, barely able to speak. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," he says. And Jesus says, it's that one — the humble one — who goes home justified. Because God isn't impressed with spiritual perfection. God is moved by relationship.

How We Flip the Script

All too often, people of faith play the role of that Pharisee. We think we have the right answers, the right doctrines, the right rules. We use our certainty to judge others — and in doing so, we miss the heart of the gospel.

But the good news is that the church can change; people of faith can change. And we do. Sometimes.

Today, the same broad tradition that once condemned women like Alse Young and Lydia Gilbert has now — hundreds of years later — repented. Just last year, the Connecticut legislature passed a resolution formally exonerating all those convicted of witchcraft in the 1600s. And in Windsor, the town where those two trials I mentioned earlier happened, the local UCC church laid bricks with their names — a physical act of repentance and remembrance. Our own United Church of Christ, descended from that very Puritan tradition, now stands for inclusion, for freedom of conscience, for the belief that revelation is ongoing and faith must evolve.

That is Reformation. That is what it looks like to flip the script.

What Needs Reforming Now?

So, the question for us this Reformation Sunday isn't whether the church has changed — it's whether we're still willing to. It's whether we're willing to step outside of our rigidly held understandings of righteousness to stand with the Holy Spirit as it is doing something new.

Because there are still "witch hunts" in our world. They just take different forms. People are still scapegoated because of who they are — queer, trans, migrant, Muslim, Black, Jewish, poor, undocumented. We still draw lines between "righteous" and "unrighteous," "us" and "them."

And maybe Jesus is still standing in the temple, looking at all of us, saying, "The ones who go home right with God are the ones humble enough to admit we still have a lot to learn." A lot to learn about what God expects of us. A lot to learn about who God loves and how God wants us to treat one another.

Let me bring us forward to today. We live in times when authority — including religious authority, political authority — is being wielded with a heavy hand. And in the midst of today's witch trials, we see people showing up in creative, absurd, humorous costumes to protest. They

turn up with frog costumes, unicorn bubble-guns, dancing wiener dogs. They mock the rigidity of authority with joy, absurdity, imagination.

There is a kinship between that absurdity and the spiritual imagination Jesus invites: the unexpected, the upside-down kingdom, the foolishness that confounds power. Non-violence plus humor. They're "flipping the fascist aesthetic under a disco ball," transforming the ridiculous into resistance.

In our own congregation, as people who care about justice and mercy, we are heirs to both the failures of the past and of the possibility of reform. Our challenge: how can we repent of inherited injustices (racism, exclusion, colonialism, harm), even those we didn't personally do, and turn them into opportunities to make things sacred again? To memorialize, to confess, to change policy, to re-shape how we witness to love?"

Here's something for us to consider together:

- Are there practices / traditions in our lives, our congregation, the systems we inhabit, that might echo enforcement instead of inclusion?
- Are there ways we still lean on moral certainty instead of humility?

Because Reformation isn't just "back then." It's an ongoing invitation to flip the script."

A Reformed and Reforming Church

One of the mottos of the United Church of Christ is "God is still speaking." That means revelation didn't stop in 324 when the Bible as we know it today was codified. It didn't stop in the 1600s with the Reformation. It didn't stop in 1957 when the UCC was formed. It hasn't stopped yet.

Our job isn't to defend the faith as it was. It's to live the faith as it's becoming. To listen for God's voice in new places, to repent where we've done harm, to keep opening the circle wider. It's to walk with Jesus and the Spirit into a world that does right by little Alse Young in 1647 Windsor, Connecticut, but even more by little Alice Lundgren who we'll baptize shortly.

Closing

Friends, I think about Alse Young and Lydia Gilbert, and I wonder what they'd say if they could see us now — this quirky, open, justice-loving UCC congregation, singing about God's extravagant welcome, blessing Pride flags, raising money for goats and bees and clean water through Heifer International. I imagine Alse and Lydia looking at us — a church descended from the same people who executed them — and saying:

- "You've changed — and because you have, so has the world."
- "I would have been welcome here."
- "I would have been safe." "I could have spoken my truth, and you would have listened."

Maybe, if we listen closely, we'll hear them saying:

- "You've changed. You no longer call us witches — you call us sisters."
- "You've learned that holiness isn't about purity, but about love."

- “You’ve stood up for those the world still tries to burn — with its words, its laws, its silence.”

And then maybe they’d lean in and whisper, “Don’t stop now. Who will you stand up for next?” Because that’s what the Reformation really is — not a one-time event, but a lifelong posture. A way of standing before God not in triumph, but in humility, saying: “God, be merciful to us. Teach us. Reform us again.”

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 4:1-5
October 26, 2025