

"The Salem Witch Trials"
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of
Wayne County, Ohio
September 22, 2019
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Inez Bird, Worship Associate

First Reading "First they Came..." by Martin Niemoller

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the sick, the so-called incurables.
And I did not speak out, because I was not a so-called incurable.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me— And there was no one left to speak out for me."

Second Reading "Pain Comes out as Anger," by the Rev. Bruce T. Marshall

"After a hospital visit with a family whose baby had died, I found myself embroiled in a dispute about clergy parking privileges. Usually someone at the front desk stamps the parking slip, and I sail out of the lot without having to pay. Not this time. I was shuffled from one desk to another desk to another desk and finally to an office, each in a different part of the labyrinth that is this hospital. The problem had something to do with my Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association card not having my picture on it. Couldn't they tell I'm a minister just by looking? How about my black coat? My beatific expression? My aura? By the end of this adventure, I wasn't a nice person anymore.

"Driving home, I composed long angry letters in my head to whomever might be in charge. 'Why is your time valuable but mine isn't? Why do you employ dragons as desk clerks?' As my letter [in my head] became more eloquent, a quotation flashed through my mind, 'Pain comes out as anger.' I don't know where I heard that, but I wrote it down once, and now it came back to me. *Of course*. This wasn't about parking. It was about pain. It was about that visit with a family that was suffering. My pain didn't have any place to go. It came out as anger.

“When I am angry, it often comes from pain. And when I’m in the path of someone else’s anger, it helps to recognize that somewhere in that anger may be pain-- pain with no other way to be expressed. That realization makes anger a little easier to deal with, a little easier to bear. For somewhere inside, driving those threatening gestures and that loud voice, is probably pain. Pain like each of us has. Pain that joins us together as one human family.”

*Hymn #151 I Wish I Knew How it would Feel to be Free

Sermon “Trials and Reconciliation in Salem”

(Rev. Jennie)

We are all still trying to make sense of the Presidential election that was almost three years ago. It left our country severely divided and discordant. So this morning I wanted to look at some of the ways a community can become its own worst enemy. And I wanted us to hear about a religious community that came through its turbulent times, ending up healthier and more sustainable on the other side of its earlier troubles. If I asked us to come up with our nation’s most famous example of a community that imploded, a worst case scenario, if you will, at the top of the list would be the Salem Witch Trials. Yet you may not know that the end of that true story holds reconciliation, healing, charity, and hope, including a healthy and caring relationship with a new settled minister. So let’s step back in time, and see what we might learn from the Puritans of Salem, Massachusetts...

There were these two prominent families– back there in Salem– back then in the late sixteen hundreds– The Putnams and the Porters. We now know that our labels “Red State” and “Blue State” are stereotypes– We know that any geographic area in our nation is mixed in its population’s backgrounds and values and shouldn’t be called one-dimensionally “Red” or “Blue.” But, even so, back in Salem in the 1690s, the Putnams and the Porters probably would have felt pleased and proud to don the labels “Red Puritan” and “Blue Puritan,” respectively– The Putnams’ deeply-held commitment was to the pastoral Salem Village, and its agrarian way of life, and its conservatively Calvinistic minister, Samuel Parris, and to trying to keep everything the same as it had been in the old days– a quiet country farming life, isolated from new people, new ideas, and new enterprises; a way of life in which everyone knew their place and stayed put in it; a way of life that was, above all else, stable and predictable. Those were the Putnams’ values (and I can understand some of the appeal of that ideal).

The Porters, on the other hand, were committed to, not the pastoral Salem Village, but to Salem Town, with its new industries, its easy access to the peoples

and commerce of other countries, and its rapid fluctuations of status and fortunes. And the Porter family profited greatly from all these things— sometimes just because they were in the right place at the right time— sometimes just because of random luck. The Porter family's religious and social allegiance was to the church in Salem Town, not the one in Salem Village. The Porters became more prosperous, powerful, and satisfied with life. Simultaneously, the Putnams became less prosperous— With each generation, the family land was divided up into smaller parcels for more and more of the descendants, and farming was less cost-effective. And the Putnam family patriarch re-married and had a child much younger than the original Putnam siblings. That patriarch left most of his fortune to his second wife and their child, Joseph. Those original siblings felt angry and bitter. Yet they did not resolve their dispute directly with their step-mother and step-brother. If they had been able to do so, the Salem Witch Trials may never have occurred. But it can be very hard for a person to bring their concerns directly to someone to whom they are close-knit. It takes being brave and realistic, responsible and mature, and willing to admit that there are aspects of the conflict you'll just have to let go of.

Instead, the Putnam family found a scapegoat. That was easier— Perhaps it really was the best they could do given who they were, the strident and uncompromising times in which they lived, and the utter lack of legal and professional assistance from outside the sphere of Salem during that crucial period. The Putnams found a scapegoat, and then another, and then another, until 150 women and men were accused of the practice of witchcraft, a crime punishable by death in seventeenth century New England. Nineteen women and men were hanged, one man was pressed to death, several others died in prison, and the lives of many were irreversibly changed.

On reflection, I think that people's tendency to scapegoat is what the Salem Witch Trials has the most to teach us about this strident time we are in in the wake of the 2016 Presidential Election. One of the best scholars in our Unitarian Universalist ministry is the Rev. Tom Schade. I have loved his blog called, "The Lively Tradition." In his blog post entitled, "Re-Imagining UUism: Part 3: Rene Girard (written on May 22, 2013), Rev. Schade summarized the view of human violence of Rene Girard, a French literary critic, anthropologist, philosopher, and Christian apologist. Rev. Schade writes:

"Girard says that people operate by mimesis or imitation. We want what other people want; we imitate their desire. Basically, we don't really see the value of anything or anyone until we observe someone else valuing it, and then we imitate their desire. It's why kids surrounded by toys, will want the same one. It

is why fashion works. It is why we think Brad Pitt is handsome. It means that everyone is both a model and a rival: a model because we are copying what they want, and a rival because now we are competing for the same object of desire. Mimetic rivalry leads to conflict, because each member of a group wants the same thing. Conflict leads to scapegoating. Not only do we imitate each other's desires, we imitate each other's rejections and condemnation. In a situation of great conflict, suddenly everyone unites against one, who now seems to be the cause of all the conflict in the system. Scapegoating creates unity, as the group is united, the many against the one. It also creates sacrificial violence, as the scapegoat is expelled or killed. Up to now, this is not hard to understand, although it is a bleak view of human nature. And it is more mythic than research-based as anthropology. But here is where Girard has his most profound insight. Sacrificial violence, the killing of the scapegoat, produces myths, or more bluntly, lies. A story must be told that justifies the violence of the many against the one. What emerges is a set of lies about the victim and another set of lies about the group. The victim was extraordinarily evil, and we, well, we were extraordinarily brave when we turned on him or her. You might even say that we were acting for a divine power. We see this at work even today." [End of quote. I thank Rev. Schade for his scholarship.]

This view of human nature does not, however, end in bleakness. We also have the ability to discern reality from myths, fact from fiction, truth from lies, and innocence from hysterical cries labeling individuals or groups as evil. So, in this highly emotional time in our nation, the most important thing we can do – whatever we are hearing and reading– is to insist that the sources of those statements are revealed. During the Salem Witch Trials, it was the reliance on statements that were second-hand, and based on emotions, including fear, rather than concrete evidence, that spurred their community to violence and injustice. And in our nation's political arena, many statements are heard, read, believed, and spread, that are untrue, and aimed to persecute individuals and groups unjustly. Now is the time for us to strengthen our connection to, and renew our faith in, the elements of our nature which are reasoned, empathetic, compassionate, and fair. Now is the time for us to strengthen our connection to, and renew our faith in, the forces in the universe which are seeking, and achieving, justice, equity, and loving kindness.

[This basic summary of the facts is from the Salem Witch Museum's pamphlet, "Miscellany:"]

"To understand the events of the Salem witch trials, it is necessary to examine the times in which accusations of witchcraft occurred. A strong belief in

the devil, factions among Salem Village families and rivalry with nearby Salem Town combined with a recent smallpox epidemic and the threat of attack by warring tribes created fertile ground for fear and suspicion.” “In 1689, [the governor] had been overthrown and the charter between Massachusetts Bay Colony and the crown had been revoked. Salem, politically unstable, was unable to form a court to try those accused of witchcraft until the new charter and governor were installed in May of 1692.” The court that heard the cases during the Salem Witch Trials entertained “spectral” or invisible evidence. “This belief in the power of the accused to use their invisible shapes or spectres to torture their victims had sealed the fates of those tried by [that make-shift court]. The Superior Court of Judicature, formed to replace the ‘witchcraft court,’ did not allow spectral or invisible evidence. The new court released those awaiting trial, and the governor pardoned those awaiting execution. In effect, the Salem witch trials were over.”

In addition to all those elements that contributed to Salem’s witch hysteria, the minister of Salem Village, Samuel Parris, was a significant factor. There were things he did and said, as well as a divisive spirit he perpetuated in his home, in the church, and in Salem Village. Parris was a bitter, even self-contemptuous man. He had been unsuccessful in his other careers before becoming the minister in Salem. He arrived there with a sense of entitlement and he felt great deference was due to him. He had continual squabbles with some of the church members about compensation, including firewood, real estate he felt he deserved, and the details of his contract. The two “afflicted girls” [as they are called] who initially became mysteriously ill and seemed to be possessed by evil spirits were Parris’s daughter and niece. Parris, the Putnam family who were his supporters, and the family doctor, William Griggs, in their scapegoating fashion, tried to locate those “evil spirits” somewhere outside of Parris, his home, the church he served, and the heart of their beloved Salem Village. Eventually, Parris had to admit, through his sermons, that any and all of us have the potential to act in manipulative or corrupt ways. Parris felt second-rate when he compared himself to other men who had more money, property, and status than he did. Parris’s supporters in Salem Village felt second-rate when they compared themselves to the more prosperous, worldly, and powerful residents of Salem Town. Parris and his parishioners in Salem Village were in a pity party together in which they kept egging each other on, in which the scope of other people they blamed for their lot in life got increasingly larger.

My personal interest in the Salem Witch Trials is that I’d always heard that the accused women tended to be independent-minded and book-loving; creative, imaginative, and sharp-tongued; and managed their own household and finances.

In addition to all those things, for eighteen years, I had a cat named Sidney, and I have talked about him as if he is a person. So, yes, from time to time, it occurs to me that, in another century, I probably would have been hanged as a witch. And it is my empathy with the people harmed and murdered as witches in Salem –my empathy for them as individuals, each with their own inherent dignity and worth–that is the answer to the tragedy of the Salem Witch Trials. Empathy comes from understanding, which comes from knowledge of the true facts and circumstances–knowledge of others as well as knowledge of oneself.

Years ago, as research and recreation, I went to Salem– What a charming little city! The ocean, the shops with souvenirs and curios, the bookstores, the lovely architecture– I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Yet everywhere you turn, you’re faced with reminders of the horrible events of 1692. Yet the people who live and work there were all so friendly and cheerful toward me– merry, even! I think the two are connected. If a community has intentionally looked at the violations of its past, and continues to acknowledge them out in the open air, they are then able to be more authentic, open, and caring. And they are free to keep progressing, learning new things, and meeting new people, unencumbered by festering shame.

The minister who helped the Puritans of Salem process their tragedy, grief, and shame was the Rev. Joseph Green. That work took many years. More healing was still needed into the eighteenth century. But Rev. Green was the perfect minister for the job. He was not strident in his ideology nor confused and conflicted in his theology. He was a happy, centered, helpful person, able to differentiate himself from squabbles of individuals, groups, and the wider community. He loved rainbows, frogs, insects, and bird songs! [And he was also financially independent, so he did not have reason to clash with parishioners about his compensation.] Very shortly after he arrived in Salem, he began helping accusers and accused reconcile with one another, and he also pacified conflict between Salem Village and Salem Town. He helped the congregation build a new meeting house. Then, as the authors of the book, *Salem Possessed*, [Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum,] wrote:

“[Rev.] Green turned his attention to devising civic projects to which no reasonable person could well object. He proposed to the Village meeting the building of a school and the hiring of a person ‘to teach their children to read and write and cypher and everything that is good.’ Another of his projects had to do with the Village poor. Under his leadership, the Villagers began to collect an annual Thanksgiving offering for distribution to the needy. With these two strokes –the founding of the school and the systematization of charity– Green had moved to bring under institutional control two groups whose ill-defined status had

contributed so significantly to the breakdown of 1692: young people and indigents. Joseph Green also played a strategic role in helping reshape the Village's response to the world beyond. The minister himself accepted wholeheartedly the emerging world of eighteenth century Boston and Salem – urbane, commercial, secular- and he helped the farmers of Salem Village accept that world as well."

The villagers of old Salem felt the threat of war, political turmoil, and historical change too rapid to fully comprehend. We, here, this morning, feel those looming threats, too. The lesson from those villagers to us is exquisitely simple: we must not make rivals of one another. For if we each have, within us, the littleness to get stuck in blaming, then we each also have, within us, the nobleness to strengthen our neighbor in need– that none need perish in the storms of changing times.

*Closing Hymn #162 Gonna Lay Down my Sword and Shield

*Parting Words: from, "We will not be able to post, nor advertise this Award," by the Rev. Bruce T. Marshall

"...the real issue is that we live in a time when the peoples of the world are more and more divided. I would hope that religious communities could help bridge these differences and bring us together... This... [reaffirms] the importance of our Unitarian Universalist mission: to show that love is not restricted to those who are 'theologically correct,' to demonstrate that what unites us is more important than what keeps us apart, [and] to offer the possibility of building a community in which we can come together in peace and with compassion and justice, even though we may have differences. This is a simple message, and it's not exactly new. But it still needs to be proclaimed; it still needs to be heard."