

Hats, Cats, and Cauldrons
Sunday, October 26, 2014

Reading: *The Enemy Within* by John Demos, p. 3

Picture a witch. What do you see? (a woman, old, ugly, peaked hat, black clothes, big pot, broomstick, cat,...) Yes – these are all the marks of a Halloween witch. We see them pictured, statued, and embodied in windows, yards, and on our doorsteps at this time of year, and all we need are a couple of these signifiers to know we are looking at a witch. But it wasn't always so – all these things that to us identify a witch were once the every-day clothes and tools of ordinary people. As I worked on this sermon, an alternate title came to mind: *Witches R Us*.

We don't worry much about witches or being victims of witches anymore, but from the Middle Ages on in Europe, and from almost – but interestingly not quite – the earliest days of this country into the 1800's, witches have been a reality - a source of help and of fear. They were the neighbor who came with herbs and teas when your child had a fever; the woman who came to deliver your child and stayed with you to care for you and the newborn during those crucial first weeks; the one who helped you in your father's final illness. They might also be the one you went to when you needed some relationship help – a love potion, a way to know if your spouse was faithful, perhaps a tincture to get your rival out of the way, but since most of the women called witches were healers, a witch willing to do harm might be harder to find. In Europe, until the Catholic church strengthened its hold on power in the Middle Ages, witches were a normal and valued part of the community. They were wise women. And they did tend to be women. While men also might have knowledge of herbs and healing, that tended to be the realm of women. As Jane Peyton, a historian and Britain's Beer Sommelier of the Year, wrote

During the medieval era when witch hunting was rife, hundreds of women were accused of witchcraft and executed. Many of those women were brewers. The visual motifs we associate with female witches date from this time. The extraordinary thing is all of them - cat, bubbling cauldron, broom, pointed hat - are also symbols associated with brewing beer. Women put their knowledge of herbs to another use: brewing beer. A cat would keep vermin at bay that would otherwise eat the malted barley; the bubbling cauldron is the vessel in which the ingredients are boiled. When the brew cools down, yeast lands on it and ferments the sugars, creating a dramatic froth. The broom was used for sweeping up but also by law, anyone selling beer was required to display an ale stake above their door as a sign that beer was on sale. An ale stake was a wooden pole with a bunch of twigs tied on the end. It doubled as a broom. ... The pointy hat was a practical way of being seen. Women with surplus beer would go to the marketplace to try and sell it.... They wore the pointed hats to make themselves prominent in a crowd.

So everything associated with a cartoon witch is actually the semiology connected with a female brewer in the middle ages.

Some scholars argue that women began to be accused of witchcraft in great numbers in the 14th a 15ndth centuries because during the 100 Years War the army needed large stores of beer for its soldiers and so others saw room for profit in beer production. Interestingly, this is the time period when beer production moved out of the home and into factories.

But jealousy over beer production is too simple a reason. The 14th and 15th centuries were a time of great change – war, plagues, the Church centralizing its hold on power and knowledge, medicine becoming a male profession. The world was scary, and when things seem out of control human beings seem conditioned to look for a reason. Why is this happening to us? Is someone causing us to be punished in this way? And the people named as witches were convenient scapegoats. First, in this time of male dominance in government, church, and home, witches were almost always women. When a man was accused – and this is true over centuries and across cultures – he was usually connected to a woman already named as a witch, her husband or son. But usually the women were widows, without a husband to protect them, and, on her own, forced to take a larger role outside the home. So she was conspicuous. Sometimes they might be wealthy widows, land-owners, calling into question society's strictures on women's powers. Sometimes they were poor, making their neighbors feel guilty for their lack of care for them. If they were healers, that angered the doctors; if they were offering wisdom on life and love, that angered the church. They tended to be assertive – the kind of woman who would stand up for herself when her property lines were crossed or her honesty impugned. Rather like many in this room! But assertiveness in women was not a virtue. And so alone, prominent, outside the natural order, they became prime candidates for attack.

As you look at the history of the witch trials of Europe and the U.S., over and over this pattern becomes clear – during times of upheaval, social, political, or ecclesiastical, witch-burnings spike. In England during the 100 Years War, in Germany during the Reformation, in the U.S. as religious intensity waned, the colonies lost their charters, and Indians attacked. As John Demos wrote of the judges, ministers, and governors of the Salem Witch trials, “Responsible, as they mostly were, for failure to stem attacks by “visible” enemies, these men welcomed the opportunity to shift responsibility to the demons of the invisible world.” When all seems out of control, it made sense in their world view to blame what they saw as God's anger on women who were transgressing from their approved spheres.

We may not blame misfortune on witches any more or even, with changing gender norms, focus our fears on women, but we do still look for answers to the question “why?” when bad things happen, and we still may try to blame others. Sometimes the witch craze rages across the nation, as it did in the 1980's and 90's with the accusations of sexual abuse and satanic ritual in daycares. Sometimes the hysteria tears apart a single town, focusing on one or two people who make others uncomfortable. As one 17th century writer put it, “every village in New England has its witch.” Who are our witches today? Whom do we hold in fear? For whom do we feel guilt turning to anger? Who is our enemy within? Let's not be fooled by the steeple hat, warty nose, or black cauldron – many of us could have been labeled as witches in centuries past. Who is being labeled that way today? What can we do to protect them and save us all in future from the tragic effects of witch hunting?

- Pamela M. Barz