

*"The Horror of Hate"*  
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*First Church in Boston*  
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Here we are in the "spooky season" of October. Personally, I am *not* a fan of horror. Not of horror films that will dominate the charts this month, nor of the haunted houses that will pop-up. Are you? Yet, in exploring the theme of Story this year, it seemed important to address the genre of monster stories—and when better to do so than in October? From those October "slasher" movies to the fairy tales we learned as children, stories of monsters pepper our culture.

Perhaps there are so many monster stories because we crave the assurance that the monsters we fear will be defeated. Or maybe we tell monster stories to convey who or what to fear. To help us define who or what is not "us", but the scary "other." This is dangerous stuff. Because often the moral of monster stories seems to be "kill the monster." Defining someone or something as monstrous frequently aims to justify violence against the monster. Monsters are dangerous. So is declaring someone to be a monster.

In a sense, I understand our reading today from John 8:1-11 in the Christian Bible as a monster story.

In the story, the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. The text says they bring her to "test" Jesus and whether or not he will follow the Law and support her stoning.

As religious liberals, we are generally skeptical of strict adherence to laws recorded in ancient texts—not to mention such violent punishments as stoning. And so, you may be quick to dismiss this story as irrelevant to you—especially if you are not committed to Christian teachings. And yet, the Christian Bible, as with so many other ancient religious texts, captures dynamics of the human spirit that seem to be timeless.

In this case, I notice in the story how a group of men present a woman as a monstrous sinner deserving of fatal punishment. Notably, given the charge of adultery, there is no man who is also brought forth as a sinner. *She*, alone and unnamed, is held up as the "monster" to be stoned to death. A pawn in the Pharisees game.

This will not be the first nor the last time a woman is publicly charged, damned, and threatened with violence. Nor will it be the first or last time an individual is surrounded by

an accusing group eager to do harm. A horrific throughline of such violence runs from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Salem witch trials to the 19<sup>th</sup> century lynching of black men to 21<sup>st</sup> century attacks on transgender and nonbinary folxs.

Attacking monsters is an ancient trope.

But who or what are the monsters? And who gets to answer that question?

Are immigrants monsters?

Are Republicans? Democrats? Fascists? Socialists?

Are Israelis monsters? Hamas?

Calling a person or a group of persons “monsters” is strong and harsh language. It is language that dehumanizes. Defining someone as a monster diminishes them to the status of a dangerous creature. Their very presence is seen as a threat that justifies violence against them. Kill the monsters.

And yet, sometimes monsters turn out to be other than what we thought. We saw this in the book Ebonié read to us earlier, [\*Imagine a Wolf\* by Lucky Platt](#). In the story, we are invited to imagine a wolf. However, rather than a fanged danger, we are confronted with a cuddly, friendly wolf with yarn and knitting needles.

Or perhaps you have seen the movie *Shrek*? In this 2001 movie, a cartoon ogre, Shrek, is forced to undertake a quest to protect his swamp. When his traveling companion Donkey asks him why he’s so anti-social, [\*Shrek empathically declares\*](#).

“It’s the world that seems to have a problem with me. People take one look at me and go ‘ah, help, run! A big, stupid, ugly ogre!’ They judge me before they even know me. That’s why I’m better off alone.”

Sometimes we just see an ogre, a monster, an outsider and assume danger. We flee or we fight without ever trying to understand.

Could it be that the monster is themselves hurting? As author Neil Gaiman writes in the novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, “Oh, monsters are scared,” said Lettie. “That’s why they’re monsters.”

Fear, I think, is a part of all of us.

When the Pharisees brought an adulterous woman to “test” Jesus, I think they were afraid that this teacher would challenge the Law and their way of understanding the world. They

questioned Jesus if he agreed with the Law that the woman—this monstrous sinner—should be stoned. In response, Jesus cryptically begins to write with his finger on the ground.

Why!? For centuries people have debated what he wrote and *why*. His unexpected action certainly distressed the Pharisees who continued to question him. So, Jesus stood and suggested that anyone who had not also sinned could throw the first stone. Returning to his sandy scribbling in the dusty ground, the Pharisees left one by one until all were gone. Rising, Jesus told the woman neither would he condemn her.

It's a short, powerful story that reminds us that we have all sinned, which is to say that we have all fallen short, harmed others or ourselves. I think it's also a story that cautions us against a simplistic division of the world into monsters and those who righteously destroy monsters. Rather, we are left wondering about the capacity in each of us to act wrongly, perhaps even monstrously.

Here is where I am going to get a bit theological. But not for too long and for good purpose.

A key area of Christian theology explores the nature of humanity. In short, theologians ask, just how screwed up are we!? The Puritans who founded this church in 1630 were among those who thought we were entirely sinful. The only goodness in us was granted to us by God's grace. Our own human nature was totally depraved. This view was based on the idea of "original sin"—a notion that we are the natural and moral descendants of the first person, Adam, whose act of disobeying God fundamentally changed human nature to be sinful.

While theological language of "total depravity" might seem foreign, I suspect that on our worst days, some of us may have felt we are just entirely screwed up. Perhaps we sometimes despair over repeated efforts to change that part of us we hate . . . or feel that we have made a choice which makes us forever a "bad" person. Or, maybe when we read headlines of monstrous acts of violence—like the mass shooting of children or depriving an entire people of food, water, and healthcare—we do wonder if humans (or at least some humans) *are* fully corrupted.

For the Puritans and others who followed the Calvinist theology of total depravity, hope lay not in human effort, but in God's goodness to mercifully elect some of our sin-drenched humanity to be forgiven. However, those who were not chosen could only expect damnation—including innocent babies.

Fortunately, this did not sit well with everyone—including the Rev. Charles Chauncy, minister here at First Church for sixty years during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Chauncy and others began to accept and preach another view of human nature. While continuing to acknowledge that people are very much capable of doing wrong, they also began to affirm human capacity to do *good*.

What do you think? Are all humans capable of good *and* bad? Are any humans so extraordinarily good that they at least *seem* perfect? If so, are they born that way or do they become so? Conversely, are some humans totally depraved and only do evil—if so, are *they* born that way or do they become so? In other words, are some people “monsters” or are they people who have done monstrous acts?

I fear that the moment we are in tempts us to fall into tropes of seeing our enemies as monsters. Certainly, there are plenty of examples of dehumanizing rhetoric directed at immigrants, trans folx, and political opponents being slung around in the media these days. There also monstrous acts of violence occurring. In just this past week, headlines included the deadly attack on a [Manchester synagogue](#) on Yom Kippur as well as a late-night federal raid on a Chicago apartment building in which residents, including children, were pulled from bed and forced outside—some even naked. These particular events arise within larger patterns of anti-Semitism and of violent surveillance of immigrants and dark-skinned people. These events emerge within a context of stories that would have us believe that such violence is justified—“*they*” need to be stopped. Kill the monsters.

But who are the monsters? The Anti-semitic attackers? Jews? Immigrants? Federal Agents? Who decides which are the monsters?

I fear dehumanizing tropes of monsters. I fear a world in which we all throw stones at one another. I fear a world entirely eclipsed by hatred, horror, and violence. *And*, in this moment of so many monstrous acts that chill my moral sensibilities, I am also left wondering if there is a place for legitimate hatred?

Neuroscientist and philosopher Berit Brogaard explores whether hate is ever justified in a book entitled, *Hatred: Understanding our Most Dangerous Emotion*. For Brogaard, hate has a *dual* focus—the malevolent character of a person *and* a sense that the person has or will cause harm to you or someone in your circle of concern. This raises a question: if hate is targeted towards a person’s malevolent character and harm they may or did cause, then could it be possible to hate a person who “deserves” it?

In her answer, Brogaard distinguishes between *dehumanizing* hatred which fails to see a person and *critical* hatred. *Critical* hate does not dehumanize its target, but with clear eyes evaluates a person's actions as falling far short of social norms *and* their character as malevolent or evil. For such hatred to remain rational and morally justified, however, Brogaard argues that such critical hate must be aimed at a particular person—not groups—and be open to revision if new evidence suggests you were wrong about the person or their actions.

Such hatred of a person does not dehumanize another as a “monster.” Rather, such hatred critically assesses a particular person's character and the harm they have or *will* cause to you or someone in your circle of care. Such hatred, I think, also recognizes our shared human capacity to harm others and to act wrongly. In other words, like Charles Chauncy, I believe we all have the capacity to do good or to do evil. This dual capacity makes us human.

In these divisive times, I hope that we resist dehumanizing people as monsters—even our enemies, even when our enemies dehumanize us. However, I also recognize that some people are malevolent and choose monstrous acts of cruelty and evil. As our hatred rises for such acts, may we resist defining whole groups of people as monsters. Rather, may we remain open to new information—perhaps even learning that the “monster” turns out to be other than what we thought. And may we remain humbly aware that we too have acted in ways that have harmed others and ourselves.

In this “spooky season,” may we acknowledge our fears, but may we not allow danger or evil to eclipse our commitments to service, to love, to seeking truth. May we continue to rise each day choosing, to the best of our human capacity, to act with love and to do good.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.