

SCARIER THAN HALLOWEEN

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on All Saints Day, Sunday, November 2, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE CHURCH NEEDS A NEW REFORMATION

Recently I came across an article that totally piqued my interest, bearing the title “Scariest than Halloween,” so naturally I read it. The author is a woman by the name of Susan Thistlethwaite (Try to say that name five times fast!), a professor and past president of Chicago Theological Seminary, and I enjoyed reading what she has to say.

Along with Janet and me, as well as an increasing number of people, Thistlethwaite is one of the leaders who feel that the Church needs a major course correction. I don’t mean this particular congregation but rather the Church Universal, the Church with a capital C. So the Pentacostals, the Charismatics, the Catholics, the Orthodox, the Southern Baptists, and all the independent churches plus the Church as a whole – all need to amend their ways in a number of different situations. The Church also needs to apologize in certain matters.

To sum up, it’s about time for a new Reformation.

Bowing to the season, the author writes her criticisms in the form of scary things. I’ll follow a similar format, categorizing my own thoughts in the form of tricks (negatives) and treats (positives). Four tricks, some of them genuinely scary, are followed by four unbelievably sweet treats. The latter are not fun-size treats, which make you feel gypped. Rather, they are full-size tasty treats. *The scary things have to do with what the Church as a whole is still teaching, to the detriment of its listeners and readers.*

FOUR EXAMPLES OF “SCAREY TRICKS” THAT NEED TO BE CHANGED:

For Halloween, Hell and Damnation

1. *The first scary trick is, considering it’s the time for Halloween, you should know that the Church is still teaching hell and damnation.* The notion is that, if you don’t believe the right things or if you don’t behave in a certain way, even though you are a child of God made in the image and likeness of God, you are liable to be damned for all eternity. There is an incredible amount of scholarly literature showing the history of this kind of belief. It comes from many extraneous sources, most notably from the Zoroastrians in Persia at the time of the deportation in the Fifth Century before Christ.

Here's the scary part: If you take a poll of all the people in all of the different kinds of churches where they're being taught hell and damnation, a significant number of them don't believe it. It's insidious too: People are taught, on one hand, that we are created in the image and likeness of God, that we are made by this perfect creator, and that we're supposed to love this God of ours, who would actually condemn some people to hell and damnation.

Can you imagine being told as a child that your parents love you, but if you don't obey, something of this magnitude might happen to you. And you're still supposed to love this being, your parent? This creates a kind of schizophrenia in the mind of a child, to be the object of such a deeply mixed message.

It's absurd!

It's Scarey: Men Rule, Women Submit

2. *The second scary trick* – this has a scriptural background – *is that women should submit themselves to the authority of men.* We see all sorts of churches, the center of mass, the majority of the Church that are pretty much in agreement with the male-dominated society. You know, males should control everything.

But now I want to ask you a question about this: You get a document written by a patriarchal society, and it contains patriarchal propaganda. Then it says, "Sorry, this isn't just my opinion. God told me to say this." Should you be skeptical about that? Or just take it at face value. In the true fashion of the United Church of Christ, I'm advocating that you might want to be skeptical of that document and those words.

Now here's the scary, insidious part of it, of women submitting to the authority of men. Is it that God actually would choose one part of creation to rule over another and not love them all equally? Or not endow them all with equal gifts? Granted, there is a certain complementarity between male and female in the way in which they supplement each other, the way in which they support each other. But should one rule and the other submit? That God would actually do that, that there would exist superior races, superior classes, superior genders? That's a scary thought.

It's absurd!

The Schizophrenia of God Versus Evolution

3. *The third scary trick*, which I won't spend much time on because you've heard it all before, *is that there's a notion of God's truth and then there's scientific truth.*

There's God's teaching and then there's evolution. Oh my goodness! Now I won't go into that. You already know where I stand.

But the scary thing about it is that, in a very subtle way, this concept divides people once again with the concept of schizophrenia, which confuses you with one way of thinking that's opposed to another. Your brain gets parted down the middle. There's the Bible, and then there are your regular textbooks. There are Sunday-school lessons and regular school lessons, and this leads toward division in your own mind, thinking that maybe truth isn't unitary. There's God's truth and there's science truth, and one is left to choose between the two.

This kind of confusion leads toward anti-intellectualism, which we have seen in the Church Universal over and over again. "I don't need no fancy-pants degree! I've got faith!" And notice every time you hear that, it's recited in poor English. It creates an ignorant population.

Not stupid, but ignorant.

Does God Love Some, not Others?

4. *A fourth scary trick* in time for Halloween *is that God doesn't love you if you're gay.* The insidious part of this – and it's hard to imagine – is that there would exist children of God, made in the image and likeness of God, whom God doesn't love. Can you imagine a parent doing that? "I've got two kids. One of them is great." It's the whole thing behind "Sophie's Choice." It's that your average parent can't do that and will not do that. Would sooner die than do that. And here we've got our God, made in the image of a mentally ill parent who would actually do that to some of God's creation. "I like the majority, hum-m-m! But here's a minority who are different, and I don't like them." It's absurd!

And so we have two choices about how to understand this logically. One is that we have a god who would actually love some and not the others. The other option is that this perfect creator God actually screws up between two and ten percent of the time and gets the plumbing wrong, gets the hormone levels wrong. And the suicide rate among gay teens is just the collateral damage of a God who isn't perfect. Neither of those options is in any way tenable. *The whole thing is absurd!*

So that's four of these scary tricks. Oh my goodness! And they're actually pretty scary. The Church has taught and is still teaching all of these things: That God doesn't love you if you're gay, that women should submit to men, that you have God's truth and it's opposed to scientific truth, and there's this notion of hell and damnation if you get it wrong.

So now, here are the treats: You've got this little kid in front of you who's dressed in a super-scary way and when you open the door, you pretend to be frightened, and then you realize it's just a little kid in a costume. An innocent little kid saying, "Trick or treat," and you say, "Okay, here's a treat," and it's not just the fun size.

FOUR EXAMPLES OF "SWEET TREATS" NEEDING TO BE INSTITUTED:

Let me work backwards in discussing these treats:

It's Time to Stop It Completely!

1. *The first treat is that I believe churches are beginning to "get it" regarding discrimination.* It started off – and is still the case, of course, but I'm going to dispense with that – it started off with the notion that men are superior to women. Men can be priests; women aren't qualified to do that. Men can teach in church, but women should keep silent. All these kinds of dumb things. But actually very few people really believe that anymore, despite being taught as much by their churches.

Then there was the deal with blacks. Blacks had the mark of Cain on them. And so they're the progeny of murderers. And that was taught, particularly to justify slavery, for a long time, for centuries. And now we've got the minority of the LGBTQ population, so let's pick on them for a while. They're clearly outside of God's will.

The Church is beginning to realize this. It's like, wait a minute, there's the deal with women, and maybe we weren't right about that. And then there's the deal with blacks, and okay, maybe we weren't right about that. Here's a minority and we're beginning to see maybe that's wrong too. So should we look for a different minority to pick on? And people are beginning to realize – vast numbers of people – are beginning to realize that no, it's like this whole thing is wrong. *It's time to just stop it completely!*

After the Meteor, Life Follows Death

2. *The second treat, about science and evolution, is that the Church is beginning to understand a divinity that creates things this way.* It takes time and fills niches in an unbelievably creative way, regardless of what the circumstances are, so that as soon as the meteor hits, within a few years the grass comes back, the plants come back, the animals come back, and within a few million years, all those niches are refilled by something else.

Magnificent, the way in which life follows death. Not the other way around.

I Only Gave Her 77 Cents

3. Women should submit to men. I mentioned this argument earlier in connection with questioning. You have a patriarchal society that writes patriarchal things. You have a homophobic *society* that writes homophobic things and then *puts the imprimatur of God's will upon it and says, "Believe it because it's not I; it's God saying this."*

And it makes me angry. Makes me frustrated. Makes me sad. But this notion of women submitting has led to about three millennia or so of patriarchal leadership. Maybe it's time for women to lead. Could we perhaps consider the notion of treating people equally? Oh-h-h. How about that?

I saw a cartoon that made me laugh out loud when I first saw it: Two guys in business suits were walking down the street, and there's a beggar sitting on the curb. The person was obviously a woman. So one of the guys said to the other, "I only gave her 77 cents."

Imagine if the Church were to be open to receiving those gifts. Not just the money, but the gift of time and talent, creativity and intelligence. The love that women, gays, all people have to offer. *The Church is struggling in so many ways. Look at how rich it could be!*

Time to Let Hell and Damnation Go

4. *Finally, hell and damnation.* I grew up in a family in which I never doubted the love of my parents for me. I was never abused by my parents. I have no memory of ever even being spanked. Not once. I was not verbally abused. I was not sexually abused. I was not physically abused. Ever. And yet throughout my career, I have dealt with one person after another after another. It is a litany of tears of people who don't have the privileged history that I've had. Of people who have had all sorts of abuse. And we know that abused children often become abusers themselves.

This doctrine of hell and damnation if you don't do it my way is abusive. It harms people, and it makes them harm other people. It is time to let it go.

So those are the four tricks followed by the four treats. *Maybe it's time to celebrate unconditional love for all of God's children.* Time to celebrate the gifts of women. Time to celebrate the gifts of gay people. And time to celebrate the fantastic gift of science. Very sweet. Not scary.

Amen.