

Wicked

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Readings: 2 Samuel 12:1-7a

Several years ago, a friend of mine sent me the recording of the soundtrack of the Broadway musical, *Wicked*. It's a retelling of that classic story, *The Wizard of Oz*, which has become an American icon. This new version is based on the more recent (1995) novel by Gregory Maguire, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, turns the story on its head.

Born with green skin and huge teeth, like a dragon, the free-spirited Elphaba grows up to be an anti-totalitarian agitator, an animal rights activist, a nun, then a nurse who tends the dying—and ultimately, the headstrong Wicked Witch of the West in the land of Oz.

She is raised by a giddy alcoholic mother, who is embarrassed and repulsed by her, and a hermitlike minister father who transmits to her his habits of self-loathing and self-hatred.

At college, she experiences disapproval and rejection by her roommate, Glinda, a silly girl interested only in clothes, money, and popularity. Elphaba is a serious and inquisitive student, and when she learns that the Wizard of Oz is politically corrupt and causing economic ruin, Elphaba sets out to stop him and restore harmony and prosperity to the land.

Eventually, the good, respectable Glynda was finally able to appreciate Elphaba and see her more fully. And they would sing how each had been changed for the better by each other.

Elphaba is labeled “wicked” because she was different, and later by the powerful because she was a threat to that power, turning the public against her. And so after she dies, the citizens of Oz sing:

*Good news!
She's dead!
The Witch of the West is dead!
The wickedest witch there ever was
the enemy of all of us here in Oz
is dead!
Good news!*

And later they sing:

*No one mourns the wicked
Now at last, she's dead and gone
now at last, there's joy throughout the land
And goodness knows
We know what goodness is
Goodness knows
The wicked die alone*

People who are regarded as “wicked” serve several functions in societies, imaginary and real. One of them is this: It distracts us from facing the evil within ourselves. When we focus exclusively on some “evil doers” or some “evil empire,” then we can often get away with murder. “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”

If we focus on those who are wicked we feel good and pure and righteous about ourselves. The wicked function as a diversion. The citizens of Oz sing:

*Ev'ry day more wicked!
Ev'ry day the terror grows!
All of Oz is ever on alert!*

And later the witch hunters chant:

*Wickedness must be punished
Evil effectively e-minated
Wickedness must be punished
Kill the witch!*

The sad fact is that there really have been witch hunts in our own land. The setting for Arthur Miller’s great play, *The Crucible*, was in Massachusetts in 1692.

The Rev. Parris sees his niece and other girls dancing in the woods. He suspects them of witchcraft because his daughter, Betty, is sick. Dr. Griggs believes this. The Putnams, who have had seven of their children die as infants, believe there is witchcraft afoot, as well. Not only does Abigail deny that she is a witch, she starts accusing others—distraction, diversion.

Even though there was no real proof any of these people were witches, they were arrested, tried, and found guilty. The ones that confessed were allowed to live, but the ones that refused to confess were hung.

When Abigail accuses Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft, her husband, John, goes to the judge and tells him that Abigail accused Elizabeth of this crime because Abigail had discovered that he and Elizabeth were having an affair. The judge has Abigail brought to the courthouse, and he asks her if her husband had been unfaithful. She doesn’t know John has admitted to this, and she lies in order to protect him. So then John is accused of being a witch and is arrested.

Now one of the things that Miller was trying to show was that each generation has its own wicked witches that it hunts and pursues. In the 1950’s, Miller was thinking about the witch hunts of McCarthyism, chasing all those who were Communists or their “sympathizers.” And the thing about witch hunts is that you don’t need proof—the label is all you need. And by the way, this is something that only the decision makers can do. Only those in power have the ability to label and declare who is wicked.

One of the themes of Miller’s play is that people find absolution by confessing the sins of others. (Whether or not these sins are even true.) “If those people are wicked, then I must be O.K. I must be righteous, since I am not wicked.” Distraction, diversion.

This is also a biblical theme. I am reminded of the great passage of Nathan telling King David the story of the rich man who took the poor man's lamb. And it was safe for David to act with self-righteousness in hearing the story. "Of course that man is wicked! Hunt him down! Kill him!"

And then you have one of the greatest punch lines of all time—you have Nathan speaking the truth to power, which is what being a prophet is really about. He says to David, "*You* are the man!"

This would be akin to saying to Joe McCarthy, "You are the one who is un-American. You are undermining this free and democratic society." It's like that great line that one of those threatened with blacklisting said, "Senator, have you no shame?"

The similarity ends there. David repented. McCarthy did not.

Right now, in this political season, we are seeing a rising tide of fear and nationalism again. And those who dare question policies are viewed as wicked and threatening. Courageous whistleblowers who pull back the curtain have been prosecuted with a vengeance.

We have a President who still wants to build a giant wall to keep out migrant families seeking refuge and a better way of life, calling them criminals, gang members and dangerous. Wicked.

Black lives protesters are cast as socialists, as rioters, lawless and dangerous. Wicked.

Muslims have been banned from entry, viewed as potential terrorists, dangerous. Wicked.

Athletes who kneel in protest before games, called unpatriotic, disrespectful. Wicked.

Scientist, public health doctors and journalists are called nasty, alarmist, fake, enemies of our freedom. Wicked.

Mayors, governors, entire cities are labeled as the enemy. Wicked.

Transgender people are dangerous. Wicked.

Jesus would not allow those in power to label and reject others as unclean or impure or wicked. And so he made a special point of associating and sympathizing with the lepers, the prostitutes, the Samaritans, the aliens, the stranger and sojourners in the land, and on and on.

Like Nathan he spoke the truth to power. With his words and deeds, he challenged a system that justified itself by demonizing others—distraction and diversion. And perhaps this is why Jesus, himself, was labeled "wicked" and killed. The chief priests and those in power whipped up the crowd against Jesus, labeled a traitor, heretic, threat and wicked. They chanted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And this is why Jesus would oppose this labeling of any group of people as "wicked." He would see this for what it is: distraction and diversion, an attempt by those in power to locate wickedness *outside themselves*, in other people.

I'm reminded of something that Augustine once said,

Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside yourself.

It's important for us to remember this. Evil isn't something that is totally outside us.

It's also important for those in positions of privilege who want to protect their power to remember.

Because this labeling, scapegoating and blaming hurts others and damages lives.

Because we fail to see the good—the divine image—within the other.

And because we get distracted from the evil within us and within the status quo, in which we all participate.

So like Nathan, like Jesus,
we need to say, “no,”
and take sides
with those who are called “wicked.”