

Monsters: A Theological Reflection

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

I've been thinking about Frankenstein lately. And, not just Frankenstein — monsters of all stripes.

This is in part, I'm sure due to the fact that Halloween is just around the corner and my Netflix queue is full of horror movie suggestions. About a week ago — I stumbled upon a seven part series written by a theologian and psychologist named Richard Beck called "The Theology of Monsters."

As a child, there was a fair amount of skepticism in my home, surrounding Halloween. This came from belief that Christians should not fully engage in the holiday in an effort to avoid motifs of death and the uncanny — which my mother and other Christians would — mistakenly, I believe — liken first to the occult — and then to demonic or Satanic influences.

So, I thought before we dive into a sermon about monsters — I would offer a theological defense of the holiday. Here's why I believe Halloween is important — both culturally and for us as Christians.

On a yearly basis, Halloween gives us an opportunity to confront our physicality and work through our largely repressed fear of death. Secondly, Halloween allows us to work through our fears of the uncanny — things that go bump in the night. The world is a scary place, but Halloween allows us to collectively confront and process our fears. The ritual of trick or treat is a good example of this — children roam a night filled with monsters — only to find friends, neighbors, and candy — again, thereby confronting and processing their dark surroundings.

The word "monster" has its origins in the Latin word *monstrum*, meaning "omen" or "warning."

There's a book by an anthropologist named David Gilmore called *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* — and in it — he notes that monsters are cultural universals. All peoples have their monsters.

And, I'm fascinated by this idea — all societies have their monsters.

Gilmore's book does an analysis of monsters worldwide, across time and cultures, reveals that all monsters appear to share some common characteristics: Aggressive, Gigantic, Man-eating, Malevolent, Hybrids, Gruesome, Atavistic, Powerful, and Violent.

The characteristic I'd like to pinpoint in on this morning is hybridization.

Many monsters in ancient literature and ancient cultures are ontological mixtures, blends, composites .

It's important to note that it's not just monsters — Many mythical figures are hybrids — but they aren't necessarily monsters. Minotaurs are half human and half bull. Centaurs are half human and half horse. Fauns are half human and half goat. Mermaids are half human and half fish.

The angels described in the book of Ezekiel are hybrids:

“...and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings...Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle...”

We don't think of angels — even as they are described in Ezekial as monsters. Because, being a hybrid alone isn't enough. Monsters are a certain kind of hybrid.

In order to be a monster — the hybrid has to be viewed as somehow *transgressive*. That is, we must be offended or repulsed by the mixture found in the hybrid.

In early Christian art the Devil was often depicted with the horns of a goat and ram, goat's fur and ears, the nose and canines of a pig. These animals — the goat, ram and pig were consistently associated with the Devil — because they were understood as innately offensive — repulsive even — they were unclean.

Right now your saying to yourself — *that's interesting enough, but why does it matter?*

I think the reason it matters is that in a very real way our society still believes in monsters. And, perhaps, even worse, we create them. Anyone we fear — we other — we alienate — we label — we deem as monster — and when we do this, what we are actually doing is stripping them of their humanity.

There is a term in psychology called *infracumanization* — it refers to seeing out-group members as less than fully human. It is the process that drives Otherness. This can be accomplished by denying the out-group member some key characteristic that is possessed by the in-group. Often, the Other is seen as being less intelligent or morally inferior. For example, Others may be seen as dishonest, depraved, lazy, or lacking in self-discipline. In extreme cases, Others are seen as hostile and or intent on doing members of the in-group harm. It's why Donald Trump calls immigrants “rapists” — it's why white supremacy speaks of “white genocide.”

This is how we create monsters.

In the 1400s, Gomes de Zurara was commissioned by the king of Portugal to write a book about “Prince Henry the Navigator,” the first major slave trader to exclusively enslave and trade peoples from the continent of Africa. Zurara specifically points to Prince Henry's voyage to

sub-Saharan Africa, in which he became the first person to seize captives directly rather than purchase them from middlemen.

In the book, Zurara lumps all African people into a singular group and then dehumanizes that group by calling them animals and monsters. Specifically, he writes that African people “lived like beasts” and “had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth.”

Do you hear it? This is the language of hybridization.

Scholars point to this text as being fundamental to the invention of race and furthering the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. By the 1500s, Zurara’s manuscript had been widely distributed to the royal court, scholars, investors and captains, who in turn circulated it broadly. These racist ideas about African people quickly spread to England. British colonists were steeped in the belief that African people were not human, but animals — monsters even.

This type of dehumanization has continued to find prevalence throughout human history. The Nazi era film *The Eternal Jew*, for instance, depicted Jews as rats. During the Rwandan genocide, Tutsi’s were referred to as “cockroaches” in need of extermination by Hutu officials. Born during American slavery, the coon caricature dehumanized African Americans. And, Donald Trump has continued this long history by referring to undocumented immigrants as “animals” and “monsters.”

Perhaps the greatest defense of Halloween is this — Monsters allow us to reflect upon our notions of otherness., alienness, and strangeness. Monsters ask us to confront and analyze our fears of the Other and to determine whether or not those fears are misdirected.

David Gilmore writes, that a monster is "the demonization of the 'Other' in the image of the monster is a political device for scapegoating those whom the rules of society deem impure or unworthy--the transgressors and deviants." These deviants are considered to be "[d]eformed, amoral, [and] unsocialized to the point of inhumanness."

Let’s read that again — I don’t want you to miss it.

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We get the term scapegoating from a ritual found in Leviticus Chapter 16. It reads:

When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

The dark side of the ritual is this — something evil must be expelled by the community before the community can be declared holy and sanctified. The idea is that something must be expelled in order to purify ourselves.

Most of us still believe that by removing the monster — the other — we somehow save ourselves. The transformative power of the gospels — is that Jesus — steps into the scapegoating mechanism and sacrifices himself — by being identified as the scapegoat Jesus saves us from scapegoating. Jesus unmask the mechanism. Jesus does away with the need for monsters.

Not just in his death, though. While on Earth, Jesus sits tableside with the “unclean.” For the Pharisees, the “unclean” were a transgressive mixture, a hybrid, a “monster.” What we see in Jesus is a dismantling of those distinctions. Jesus “de-alienates” the alien — forgives those deemed unforgivable. Jesus practices a type of hospitality that is neither intuitive or easy. In fact it’s troubling, paradoxical, scary, strange, even.

But, despite this fact, it is a practice the early church continues — the early church brings the holy and unclean into contact with one another to create what it calls a “new humanity.” We see it in this morning’s text — Galatians 3.28 — “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

What’s important to remember here is how the distinction between Jew and Gentile was between the “holy” (the Jews) and the “unclean” (the Gentiles). Galatians 3 is all about dismantling the notion of who is and isn’t a monster — who is and isn’t worthy — who’s in and who’s out. Here, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, men and women — cross taboo social boundaries — disregard hierarchical systems.

Here there is no alien, no stranger, no other, no monster. We all are one in Christ Jesus.

We are all trick or treaters — navigating the night — only to find there are no monsters waiting for us around the corner — only friends and folks we’ve yet to forgive — only neighbors and those we’ve not yet welcomed — and, I suppose, if we’re lucky — a bit of candy too.

May it be so among us. Amen.