

Monsters

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At a family gathering over the holidays, the parlor games came out, as they always do. To tell the truth, I have never been much of a fan of parlor games. Even as child, they did nothing for me. I may be the only person in the country who as a child never played Monopoly. I realized after Hi-Ho Cherrio and Candyland that they weren't in my line. I think it's because of my temperament. I don't like to sit still.

And I particularly dislike parlor games that have to do with trivia. This is because compounding the temperament issue, I am particularly bad at trivia. I am impressed by those minds somehow enabled to store away every tidbit of information that they encounter, but mine is not one of them. At any rate, when the parlor games came out over the holidays, I headed for the door to take a walk.

I was prevented from doing so, however, by my relations. There was one game that required four players – two sets of partners – and they only had three. If I didn't play, no one could. Just my luck, it happened to be the latest trivia game. I so much didn't want to play that I was willing to allow the others to forgo the game. "I am really, really bad at trivia," I protested. "The last time I played, I didn't get a single answer right. I couldn't name a single Beverly Hills Hillbilly. I had no idea who held the all time record for homeruns. I didn't even know the capitol of Wyoming. I'm telling you I'm that bad. I will simply ruin all the fun for my partner." "Oh I don't mind," smiled my partner. "Besides, I'm good at trivia. I'll carry you." In this way, I was coerced into playing.

The first category we drew was entitled, enigmatically, “ologies.” As it turned out we had to define various studies that ended with “ology” like biology, zoology, etc... Astrology was the first one. “The study of the stars,” my partner said. “No,” I interjected, it’s actually the study of the stars *as they are believed to influence human affairs.*” She shot me a dirty look, but we got a point. The next “ology” was theology. “Got it,” I said, and proceeded, “The study of God and consequent religious and ethical practice.” We got another point. Next was archeology. “Got it,” I said again. “The study of human beginnings through material remains.” Another point. Next was philology. “Got it,” I said once again, “The study of ancient texts in order to recover their original meaning.” My partner, rather than being pleased with my efforts, lashed out at me. “I thought you were really, really bad at trivia.” “I am,” I maintained, “but by some bizarre fluke every one of these “ologies” except the first one has had to do in one way or another with the Bible.”

There was one final “ology” -- teratology. I could tell my partner was completely stumped, but I feared if I said, “Got it” again she’d reach across the table and slap me. “Do you have any idea?” she asked desperately. “Yes,” I said, “Teratology is the study of monsters.” And what does the study of monsters have to do with the Bible?” she asked, again in a tone less than friendly. “The study of monsters has nothing to do with the Bible,” I replied. “Monsters just so happen to be a special interest of mine. I actually consider myself to be something of an amateur teratologist.” “I’ve known you for over thirty years,” she charged, “and this is the first time I’ve heard you describe yourself as

an amateur teratologist,” I do not think I’ll be begged to play parlor games again.

Providence was, in an ironic way, sympathetic to my dislike of them.

But in fact monsters are a special interest of mine, and it’s not because I am a connoisseur of evil or a voyeur of freakishness. It’s more in the opposite direction. It’s because way back in college when I first read Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, something struck me about monsters. It struck me that as often as not, the monster is not the bad guy. The hunchback of Notre Dame was not the bad guy. He was born deformed, that is all, and driven deaf because in his deformity he was housed in a place no one would ever have to look at him – a bell tower. But he was a decent man -- pure, sensitive, kind, and most importantly, fully capable of giving and receiving love.

Yet the citizens of Paris for a public spectacle placed him on a torture rack in the attempt to stretch his misshapen body. And when he screamed in agony and cried that he thirsted, they were unmoved, but for their derision. The hunchback of Notre Dame wasn’t the bad guy. The bad guys were those who rendered him monstrous so they could justify *treating* him like a monster.

This early realization led me to see this phenomenon all over history. There are precious few real monsters. There is an old widow in the woods, a recluse, perhaps a bit eccentric. But no, she is a witch. She enters children’s dreams and possesses them. Her imprecations cause epidemics. There are the Jews of the Third Reich. But no, they are Satan’s minions. They even bear their master an uncanny resemblance. And they harbor

salacious desires for Aryan women. There are men of African descent in the Jim Crow South, struggling to live down their historical enslavement. But no, they are boys, incapacitated for anything but servitude and second class citizenship. The phenomenon is all over history. The monsters weren't the bad guys. The bad guys were those who rendered them monstrous so they could justify treating them like monsters.

And if the phenomenon is all over history, we may wonder whether it is still alive today. And yes, of course it is. It's bound to be. One of the biggest fallacies out there is that we've somehow succeeded history; somehow gotten beyond it. The monsters still aren't the bad guys. The bad guys are still those who render them monstrous so they can justify treating them like monsters -- immigrant peoples, gay peoples, people of different races or religions, people suffering from infectious diseases. Think of the distorted caricatures that are drawn of them all: They endanger us. They bring crime into our communities. They threaten our livelihoods. They undermine our national security. They seek to destroy our families. They erode public morality. They will infect us.

Sure, they are no longer, as a rule at least, being burned and gassed and lynched. But they're being stigmatized. They're being excluded. They're being disrespected. They're being discriminated against. In short, they're being deprived of their basic humanity.

And why? Why? It's been the same reason all along. It's because they're different. They're different, and so they're hated and feared.

I guess now that I think about it, teratology has everything to do with the Bible. I guess now that I think about it, teratology is a special interest of mine precisely because it has everything to do with the Bible.

Consider this morning's Old Testament lesson from the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is considered to be a light and lyrical tale about a loyal and dutiful daughter in law -- irenic and dulcet. In fact the book of Ruth is none of these things. The book of Ruth is radioactive. Yes, it tells the story of a loyal and dutiful daughter in law. She's even better than a loyal and dutiful daughter in law. Ruth goes far beyond the call of loyalty and duty. She's downright heroic.

Her mother in law, Naomi, at the death of her son and Ruth's husband beseeches Ruth to return to her own people where she will best fare. But Ruth disregards her own interest and commits her life to the care of her mother in law. She follows behind hired hands gleaning barley, performs manual labor from dawn to dusk, in order to supply her need. She wins the love of Naomi's kinsman and eventually provides Naomi with a grandson to love and care for. She creates for Naomi against all odds a happy ending. Forget Heroic. Ruth is a downright saint.

But Ruth is a Moabite. The people of Israel disliked the Moabites. It's more correct to say I suppose that the people of Israel despised the Moabites. Every depiction of the Moabites in the Old Testament away from the book of Ruth depicts them to be sexually dissolute in the most vile ways imaginable.

Yet the book of Ruth portrays a Moabite as a paragon of moral virtue, portrays a Moabite as embodying moral virtue the people of Israel knew well they could not hold a candle to; and that of course made them look like a bunch of ethnocentric hypocrites. How would we feel, by way of comparison, if an Iranian or a Palestinian or fill in the blank.... any of those we love to hate were portrayed in such a positive light so as to make us look bad, portrayed as being possessed of all the qualities we deem they lack and that we embody? The Bible recognizes that the Moabites weren't the bad guys. The bad guys were those who rendered them monstrous so they could justify treating them like monsters.

Or consider this morning's gospel lesson. Jewish cleanliness laws may well have arisen with the best of intentions. And indeed they arose in an attempt to preserve personal purity and holiness. And indeed they recognized that without punctilious and scrupulous effort that was built into the structure of day to day life, personal purity and holiness would likely lapse.

But as Paul knew so well, even the law was sold under sin. Jewish cleanliness laws had become means to ostracize those deemed unclean – the gentiles, the unreligious, the diseased. All of these contaminated the clean, carried with them defilement. And so in this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus tossed the Jewish cleanliness laws out. Just like that - into the sewer. Again the Bible recognizes that the unclean were not the bad guys. The bad guys were those who rendered them monstrous so they could justify treating them like monsters.

Yes, teratology has everything to do with the Bible, and if this is the case that brings God into the mix. That means *for us* that for all of our standards and respectability, when we render others monstrous, God sees them through the light of the rainbow and us in the cold light of day. God sees us as monstrous.

Friends, there are no monsters There are only children of God, children that God created, children that God redeemed through his Son; and children God called us to love “not only in word and speech, but in truth and action.” Amen.