

“What Zombies, Vampires, and Werewolves Taught Me about Generosity”

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As Halloween draws closer, I find myself thinking of all the scary characters of our imagination: zombies, vampires, and werewolves. But in church, at this same time, we talk about stewardship and pledging. Which makes me wonder: what do the creatures of fright teach me about generosity?

I first encountered zombies in high school. Up late, we watched the “Living Dead” movies. Zombies came in hordes, hungry for brains, as hapless humans retreated behind barricades, safe until they realized one among them got bitten and transformed into a living dead person.

Only much later did I start to wonder about the meaning of these movies and how the fright factor of the zombie spoke to real social anxieties. While vampires and werewolves haunted us for centuries, zombies rose only very recently, in the 1960s.

The 1968 classic “Night of the Living Dead” defined the genre. In that film, an unlikely assortment of people hide out in a farmhouse as a zombie horde attacks. Filmmaker George Romero created the movie in 1967, against the backdrop of race riots in Newark and Detroit. The hordes of zombies were meant to remind viewers of rioters upending the established order. Zombies speak just one word: brains. They want to take our brains, the thing we can’t give without losing ourselves. They threaten our very essence. In all these ways, the panic of zombies served as an analogy of white panic.

But zombies don’t just speak to racist fears. Remember the news of Charlottesville; a horde stumbling through a city at night, men shouting “blood and soil,” like a group of zombies, people who’d lost their souls, mindless in their hatred, an alt-contagion that might infect us all; Night of the Living Fascists.

And it’s this ability of zombies to represent our fears of the “other” that makes them so compelling: zombies represent whatever we think doesn’t belong in our community, a horde threatening our identity.

Zombies might be the most popular monster on our screens, but I find I resonate more with the older fright creatures: vampires and werewolves. Vampires, who first appeared in the sixteenth century, represented European fears about Jews. Why else would vampires fear the cross? Or, echoing some of the ugliest anti-Semitism, why else would they want to drink blood? More recently, vampires took on our worries about sexuality, coming across as both dangerously and provocatively pansexual. After all, as Naomi Alderman said, “They’ll bite anyone.”

Contemporary lore pictures vampires and werewolves as enemies. But I’m more struck by what these creatures share: both can pass. Werewolves, at least in the recent tellings of their stories, particularly struggle with what it means to pass. They seem so human, except on full moons, almost like us, but not. And so they suffer with what it means to pass: Will someone find out my secret? Discover the beast hiding inside of me? Would they accept me if they knew?

These questions make vampires and werewolves much more complex characters than zombies. Brad Pitt as Louis in “Interview with a Vampire” struggles with his identity and the burden of his desire, becoming a sort of self-hating vampire who kills other vampires and tries to live on animal blood; vampire on the downlow. In a similar way, the series “Teen Wolf” explored the coming-of-age struggles of erstwhile werewolf Scott McCall in high school.

As a gay youth, I lived those fears in high school: what happens if people find out? Anyone with a shame too heavy, a hurt too deep, or a hope too tender yet to share can find themselves acting like a fraud because they worry, “If you knew, then I wouldn’t belong.”

While zombies speak to our fears of the dangerous other, vampires and werewolves speak to our fears about ourselves: our own secrets, our own fearful identities. Zombies represent all those we don’t think belong; vampires and werewolves our fears that we don’t belong.

The frightful creatures of our imagination speak to our continual anxieties about belonging. Do they belong? Do I belong?

These questions do more than keep us up at night. Because these are fundamentally spiritual questions. Many of us think of the differences among churches as differences on social questions: this church welcomes gays, that one doesn’t; this church believes in reproductive choice, that one doesn’t; this church advocates undocumented people, that one doesn’t. But the real debate in Christianity concerns belonging: how we answer the question of who belongs and who doesn’t. The struggle to define who belongs runs through the history of the earliest church in Jerusalem and through every church today. Belonging is the theological question we continue to debate. And that’s because, as the great preacher Howard Thurman said, “In the great huddle we are desolate, lonely, and afraid. Our shoulders touch but our hearts cry out.” With Covid, we learned our hearts cry out even more when our shoulders can’t touch.

The pandemic accelerated questions of belonging. Conflicts and tensions rose in communities. People moved, changed jobs, or quit the workforce altogether. All while packing themselves into even more partisan relationships. Socially distant indeed: we sorted ourselves into ever more partisan and divided groups that make clear, even if only implicitly, who belongs and who doesn’t.

If zombies, vampires, and werewolves express our fears about belonging, then a hope comes to us in our morning Psalm, “the Lord is my shepherd.” Because this Psalm fundamentally speaks of belonging. It names the way God’s generosity engenders community. And thus helps us to imagine the kind of community God desires us to create by our generosity.

We so often read the Psalm in the midst of memorial services that we might forget that it speaks primarily of the living, constructing in everyday ways the care and protection of God, who feeds and shelters and leads. The very structure of the Psalm suggests the way God surrounds us. We translate the Hebrew word for Yahweh as God in our text, but the more personal name for the divine in Hebrew begins and ends the Psalm, so that even as we wonder if we belong, Yahweh enfolds us, behind and

before. And in-between, the Psalm turns to speak even more personally to God: you, you anoint my head.

But instead of speaking of this Psalm generally, I want to look in a very close way at one particular verse that speaks to me about belonging. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

While I've often puzzled over this verse, my recitation of the Psalm often rushed from one familiar line - "the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" - to familiar line - "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." But, when I think of belonging, I can imagine this verse with all its visceral tension. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of all those who think I don't belong."

I can't help but hear this as a gay man. Everyone knows the phrase "to come out." Tomorrow is National Coming Out Day. LGBT people have long used this phrase to describe that moment of sharing your secret, revealing one's identity. Many LGBT people can tell dramatic coming out stories. But the real drama isn't in coming out, it's in the coming home. For often it's easier to come out than to come home. My grandmother's greatest fear when I came out was that I would be like her brother Greg: who came out in the 1960s, moved to San Francisco, and never came back. She worried I'd come out but not come home. And that fear of not belonging - that if we were really known we wouldn't belong - is really the fear that if we came out, we couldn't come home.

Which makes this verse a healing balm: you prepare a table for me. When we wonder if we belong, God prepares a table; even if no one will sit with us, God prepares a table where our deepest self belongs. Vampires and werewolves at the table.

This invitation comes in the presence of enemies. It certainly makes the act of showing up into an act of bravery. But I think it also challenges our attempts to create barriers and walls, to divide the world of insider and outsider, friend and foe. God prepares the table with the zombies in the room; and even greater horror, wants us to dine with zombies beside us.

In doing this, God challenges our standard attempt to deal with our need for belonging. Because I think we try to create divisions of insider and outsider out of an attempt to create a sense of belonging, to define a community where we belong, to base our belonging on a communal act of exclusion.

And yet, like people hiding in a farmhouse from zombies, having a common enemy does not engender a real sense of belonging. As scary as the zombies may be, hatred doesn't make us feel like we belong. Fear may push our shoulders together, but our hearts still cry out.

Which makes God's action revolutionary, seating us in the presence of our enemies, pulling us out of our bunkers and beyond our walls. God wants us to see our connection to all other humans, to know ourselves not just as God's child but as part of a huge family of God's children.

Indigenous leaders like Robin Wall Kimmerer share this insight in the phrase "all my relations." Kimmerer speaks of the ground, the forest, and people with whom she disagrees as all her relations. The commitment to everyone belonging to the same community shapes the way she lives in the world, leading her to embrace gratitude and reciprocity. Her cup overflows.

Horror movies and fright shows use zombies, vampires, and werewolves to name our existential fears: Do they belong? Do I belong? But God, our generous shepherd, moves through the story of our lives; or, as Martin Luther King, said, “The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history.” He’s right; God our good shepherd makes clear, “No matter what, you belong.” And God challenges us, “No matter what, they belong too.”

Church - this church, Union Congregational - can take up that challenge to make clear that all our relations belong. Especially now, when the pandemic left us ever more divided and divisive, we can help our neighbors know they belong. Through your generosity to the Church, through your leadership and service, through your commitment, because of all that you do, Union can ensure all know they belong. This place can be where God prepares the table for all your neighbors, no exceptions.

For when we feel the fear of the zombies - they don’t belong - or feel the anxiety of the werewolf - do I belong - know this: God, our shepherd, prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. God says you belong. God says they belong. And for the promise and challenge of that generosity, I say, “alleluia and amen.”

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