

FIRST AND CENTER

Pastor's Blog

January 11, 2018



I have “liked” a couple of groups on Facebook for folk who live/work in downtown Hartford. I learn a great deal from these groups about a wide variety of things! This past week, someone commented on how they hate seeing the statue of the Rev. Samuel Stone outside the Ancient Burying Ground because of his association with persecuting women (mostly) on witchcraft charges. Samuel Stone was the associate pastor for Thomas Hooker and an influential figure not only in Hartford, but Connecticut at large.

That sent me to some research. In 1648, after a servant, Mary Johnson, had been accused of theft by her employer, then of other charges as well, Samuel Stone convinced her to admit she had been “familiar with the Devil.” He convinced her to say that the Devil helped her with household chores, that she had adulterous relationships with the Devil (she was pregnant), and other “offenses.” They delayed her execution until after she gave birth to her son, but finally she was hanged in 1650. In Connecticut between 1647 and 1697, thirty-five witchcraft trials were held, resulting in 11 executions, mostly of women. In fact, the first woman hung for witchcraft in the 13 colonies was Alse Young, and she died in Hartford, which means Rev. Stone may have played a part in that trial as well.

What to do with Rev. Stone’s statue? In the context of greater awareness of how women have been persecuted in various ways, and still are, this piece of his heritage must give us pause. Mary Johnson is a case in point as to motivations for bringing a charge of witchcraft. Who fathered her child? Certainly not the Devil, but someone else who did not want his adultery known. This charge was not uncommon.

We cannot undo the past, but as the removal of Confederate statues in the South has reminded us, we need to be honest about the past and consider carefully which figures we honor and which we do not. I am not advocating the removal of the statue, yet. But I am considering how we draw attention to this and mourn the deaths of Mary, Alse, and the nine others who died unjustly, along with the others who lived, but found themselves needing to leave their homes or losing property or reputation. We remember them, and remind ourselves to speak truth to the kind of power that still would seek to hurt or control women.

~ Rev. Shelly Stackhouse
Pastor