

First and Center

Pastor's Blog

October 15, 2019

In 1642, a law was passed in this part of Connecticut which allowed for the execution of someone condemned as a “witch.” The first person so accused in New England was executed by hanging not in Salem, but in Wethersfield. Also Young was her name. She was the first of eleven people executed for witchcraft in Connecticut in the 17th century, including three (or possibly four -- the records are vague) executed by hanging in Hartford. Clergy and members of Center Church took part in these proceedings. Five other people were charged and either fled the area or were released. Although laws concerning witchcraft remained on the books in Connecticut into the 18th century, few trials and no executions were held after the late 17th century.



For a short period of time, about fifty years in New England, some people became obsessed with finding signs of the devil working in human beings, and torturing or killing those human beings in an effort to thwart evil. In 1662, Hartford experienced what historians call a Witchcraft Panic. It's one of those times when hysteria takes hold and is manipulated by people for various reasons, usually resulting in damage or death for innocent victims.

I believe we need to remember how this happens, because it has continued to happen in various ways throughout history. We know that Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* was actually not about the Salem witches as much as it was about the Communist agent panic that led to the House Un-American Activities Committee in Congress. Today, I believe, one of the groups of people that folk would like to whip us into a panic about is undocumented immigrants. The things that some politicians and others say about these people are shocking and often completely untrue. We need to constantly look for the facts and not the hysteria.

On October 26, at 10:30am in our Meeting House, a presentation will be given about the witchcraft panic in Hartford in the 1600s, followed by a brief memorial service for those whose lives were ended or damaged by what happened here. I hope many of you will attend, and that as we remember the past, we also take care not to be caught up in the kind of hysteria that uses labels to destroy lives in the present.

~ The Rev. Shelly Stackhouse,
Transitional Minister