

"Banned Books and the Bible: 'Fahrenheit 451'"

Jeremiah 36

"On May 10, 1933, students in 34 university towns across Germany burned over 25,000 books. As the books burned, students gave the Nazi salute.

The works of Jewish authors like Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud went up in flames alongside blacklisted American authors such as Ernest Hemingway and Helen Keller.

Newsweek called the book burnings: **"A holocaust of ideas."**

With her books slated for the bonfires, Helen Keller confronted the German students in an open letter: **"History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them. You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds."** (*PBS: American Experience: Book Burnings in Nazi Germany*)

The 19th Century German writer Heinrich Heine said: **"where one burns books, one will soon burn people."**

Book burnings were not limited to Hitler and Nazi Germany. They have long been a part of our human history. Whenever political leaders, governments, and religious leaders have felt threaten by the written word, burning books was considered an effective way to destroy dangerous ideas, attain purification, and control the 'uneducated' masses.

According to one article, the Roman Empire was ruthless and violent towards any religious dissent. The public burning of books, their authors, the printers, the book sellers and even readers was common.

The Catholic Church and Protestant Reformers, like Martin Luther, condemned and burned books and pamphlets they viewed of each other's as religiously heretical, blasphemous, immoral, obscene or seditious.

There are two places in Scripture that reference book burnings. The first is in the Bible story we read from Jeremiah 36. The other is in Acts 19.

Around 600 BC, Jeremiah gave instructions for his scribe, Baruch, to write on a scroll what he dictated. His prophetic message to the King of Judah, was a warning that his corrupt government and political oppression

would not be tolerated by God, noting that the King of Babylon would destroy the kingdom of Judah.

When Jeremiah's scroll was read to the king and important government officials, Jehoiakim methodically cut pages from the scroll, and page by page, threw them into the fire. He then ordered the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch.

This threat by the king did not silence Jeremiah. You can almost hear him say words similar to Helen Keller: "You can burn my scroll...but the words in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds."

Jeremiah gets another scroll. **"At Jeremiah's dictation Baruch, his secretary, again wrote down everything that Jehoiakim...had burned in the fire."**

Least we think that attempts at censorship by political and religious leaders have only happened in the past, think again. They have happened and are still happening here in America today, including here in Wisconsin.

In 2009, a group of citizens in West Bend, called for LGBTQ+ books to be banned and even burned. (CNN.com 2009)

"In terms of ominous signs in society that things are bad and are on their way to getting worse, local school districts have sought to censor what books libraries can have on their shelves for students to read because of content that's been recently deemed inappropriate by a small, and narrow-minded group of parents, community members, and pastors."

It has been pointed out that librarians in states like Texas and Florida are leaving their profession for fear of the hate-filled political attacks against books and their profession."

Just this past week, the small-town library in Vinton, Iowa was forced to close because a small group of community members complained about having LGBTQ+ books on their shelves. Feeling threatened and harassed by those complaining, the library staff quit.

In April of this year, "the Republican-led Tennessee state House passed a bill Wednesday that would require public school librarians to submit to the state a list of book titles for approval, as a GOP lawmaker suggested burning books that are deemed inappropriate" would be a good thing. (Washington Post)

And this past February in a suburb of Nashville, right-wing Christian extremist, Pastor Greg Locke organized a book burning at his church. His target, the Harry Potter and the Twilight series, along with other banned books, some of which we are reflecting on in our sermon series. The event drew a large crowd, and was even live-streamed on Facebook.

Just like in Nazi Germany, people threw books into the fire to be burned.

Counter-protestors who gathered, held up a copy of Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" while another threw a copy of the Bible into the flames.

As I have been saying in this sermon series, if you are going to ban and even burn certain books because some feel they are inappropriate, heretical, blasphemous, immoral, obscene or seditious, then we need to also ban and burn the Bible for those exact same reasons.

Banning and burning books is a very dangerous form of censorship.

Laurie Halse Anderson, who writes children and young adult literature has had several of her books challenged and banned because she writes about difficult real-life issues like sexual abuse and suicide. In response, she says: **"Censorship is the child of fear and the father of ignorance. Our children cannot afford to have the truth of the world withheld from them. They need us to be brave enough to give them great books so they can learn how to grow up into the men and women we want them to be."**

Ray Bradbury would echo her words and those of Hellen Keller, and did so in writing his 1953 dystopian novel "Fahrenheit 451."

Bradbury's story is set in **"a homogeneous, war obsessed futuristic America where books are outlawed, intellectualism scorned, and entire population exists in a sense of dull pleasure and sensory overload."**

Ray Bradbury wrote his dystopian classic "Fahrenheit 451" at the height of McCarthyism (named after Wisconsin Republican Senator Joe McCarthy) and the Cold War paranoia.

Televisions were also becoming more common in every American household. People read far fewer books and newspapers, choosing instead to be entertained by television shows and told what to buy from advertisers.

In Fahrenheit 451 - **"The whole of American society has descended into a zombie-like stupor of instant gratification, and books are seen as challenging and disruptive relics, which must be destroyed at any cost."**

In his futuristic American society, the job of a firemen was not to put out fires, but to start them with the purpose of burning books and destroying the lives of those who were caught hiding them.

Can you image living in a world where books are outlawed and burned? Oh wait, we do live in that world!

Prasanna Sawant, who blogs at "The Curious Reader" writes: **"It is difficult to imagine a time when books weren't our constant companions. For some, reading books is a way of life, a way to pass their time..."**

She adds: **"One of the most important things books do is stretch our imaginations. Sure, we get a myriad of different shows and films on television (some adapted from books we love) but when we read, we use our imagination to fill in the gaps and visualize it."**

Sawant adds: **"Along with stimulating the imagination, books are also credited with expanding our minds and for making us see the world from different perspectives than our own."**

Reading books can make us more compassionate, empathetic and understanding of another person's experiences in life.

Reading books like John Steinbeck's classic "The Grapes of Wrath" about the plight of the people from Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl and their migration to California or Art Spiegelman's graphic novel "Maus" which tells the chilling story of his father's experience during the Holocaust or Maia Kobabe's "Gender Queer" which is about her coming of age, self-discovery as an LGBTQ+ trans person or the experiences Angie Thomas shares of a black youth, Starr, whose childhood friend, Kahlil, is shot by a white police officer during a traffic stop in her book "The Hate U Give" can offer us an inkling into the pain, suffering and violence they have experienced in life.

All of these books have been banned and even burned because some have deemed them as being inappropriate or subversive.

I love what Prasanna Sawant writes about our human connection we make with others through reading books - especially banned books:

"...humans are social creatures, emotions and relationships form a big part of our culture. Empathy is one such emotion. When we are sensitive about other people's emotions and are empathetic towards them, we are automatically able to understand the person better, thereby becoming better human beings. If books get banned, we might not have cared enough about anyone else, their story, or their suffering. We might have been content to see things in black and white, without being eager to understand the different facets of human behavior. When we connect with people, even fictional ones, we become part of a community. If books are banned, people's stories remain unheard and we remain ignorant of them. The world dulls and remains as narrow-minded as before."

Bradbury's book is full of Biblical allusions. Allusions being a literary technique used by writers "designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; an indirect or passing reference."

Using this literary technique, Bradbury's protagonist, Guy Montag comes to the realization that "the world he prospers in is unjust and ill-mannered due to the present censorship" when he must burn the secret library of a woman, who in turn, chooses to burn herself with her books.

As the books and the woman burn, Montag reaches in and grabs a book, it is the Bible. He manages to read a few verses from it, words we used in our Call to Worship from Matthew 6 - "Consider the lilies of the field," before it burns his hand and he drops it back into the fire.

But just because the Bible is burned with all the other books, doesn't mean, as Hellen Keller said, that you can burn the words contained in them. As she said: "the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds."

Like Jeremiah and Baruch, Montag now must flee the authorities of the government.

In hiding, he discovers others who remember the power and importance of books, and have memorized the words in them.

Like Jeremiah and Baruch, they too have hopes of writing them back down again in books.

For his part, Montag takes it upon himself to memorize the books of Ecclesiastes and Revelation which he too will one day write back down in book form.

Imagine if you will, a world without books or the sacred writings like the Bible?

There are those elected officials, school board members, religious leaders and community members who would like to see that type of world. They are actively seeking to make it a reality, much like the King of Judah, burning page by page, and banning book by book, through their censorship of what students can read, teachers can teach, and you and I can enjoy based on our own choices.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God's Presence and in the Word was Life."

We believe Jesus was the Word, and the political powers sought to ban him from life, killing him on a cross.

But even they could not silence the Word, because in the Word was life, a Word that lives in each of us, and that Life was humanity's light; a Light that shines in the darkness, and no matter how often humans have tried to ban or burn the Word, it lives on - in us."

Like Montag, remember the Word in Scripture, remember the Word among us, remember the Word with in us.

Amen.