

Pope Francis and *Wicked* teach us to defy gravity

In the Broadway musical *Wicked*, which recently played for a month in Vancouver at the QE Theatre, we learn the truth about myth. In the film and book, *The Wizard of Oz*, we met the Wicked Witch of the West. But on stage, in the musical *Wicked*, we learn how that same “witch” really was an unpopular girl, Elphaba, who was reviled at school because of her green skin.

Pope Francis is famous for reminding us of the



core concern of the Gospel about love and mercy. “Who am I to judge?” has been one of his most electrifying phrases.

“Judging others leads us to hypocrisy,” said Francis on Monday morning, June 23, in his homily at Mass in Casa Santa Marta. The inevitable outcome, as sure

as the force of gravity, is that “a person who judges gets it wrong, becomes confused, and is defeated.”

The stories hypocritical humans like to tell are invariably very confused myths about who is good and who is bad. The Catholic thinker René Girard has analyzed mythology and literature and discovered, like the Pope, a common structural hypocrisy. Humanity’s myths are deluded and self-serving because they tend to scapegoat

someone like Elphaba in order to construct social peace. Girard argues that only Jesus exposes these mythical lies and tells the truth about our mythology’s hidden victims.

Perhaps the best introduction to and summary of Girard’s ideas is an article he wrote for *First Things* magazine in April 1996, “Are the Gospels Mythical?” Unique in world history, the Gospels advocate for mercy instead of the hypocritical mythology of

scapegoating. In his essay, Girard explains how only the Gospels are unambiguously on the side of victims.

But perhaps the best artistic illustration of Girard’s point about the Gospel truth is the deconstruction in the musical *Wicked* of the famous myth about Elphaba, the so-called “Wicked Witch of the West.” In her book *The Wicked Truth*, the writer Suzanne Ross relates the musical’s illustrations of the Gospel message to Girard’s ideas about scapegoating.

Teenagers know that in high school there are cliques and various “in” crowds made up of popular people, observes Ross. Hairstyles, clothing, speech, behavior, and friendships define your identity and self-worth to such a degree that high school is frequently a painful experience. The pain comes as we experience firsthand the power of the socially constructed myths by which humans define the members of the “in” crowd.

The “energizing force” of these cliques, writes Ross, is that they show you how to define your identity by contrasting yourself with someone like Elphaba, “someone who you definitely are not.” Further, “young people whose sense of self is weak will gravitate to someone from whom they can acquire it. The leader of a clique often seems like a King or Queen who can bestow a feeling of worth with a glance,” much like Galinda’s social status at the school in *Wicked*.

The outcasts like Elphaba feel inferior and worthless whenever “they believe the lies of the clique,” which tell them “that they are evil” and that “the clique has the monopoly on goodness,” notes Ross. But

in the musical Elphaba and Galinda become friends through a shared knowledge of the truth they learn.

Wicked likewise shares this truth with the audience: “Scapegoats can wear tiaras and designer gowns as easily as ugly black hats. Those at the pinnacle of success and popularity are often aware that they are at risk of being scapegoated. They realize that they are being carefully watched for the slightest misstep that can be turned quickly into the spectacle we thrive on. There is nothing so satisfying as witnessing the fall of the high and mighty,” writes Ross. Galinda’s transformation into “Glinda the Good,” accomplished by Oz at the expense of Elphaba, is thus the musical’s supreme irony, which the audience comes to understand.

Such an artwork can also help us understand better the Gospel message warning us not to judge. What is the alternative to the wicked power of human cliques and, on a larger scale, unjust governments? “Rather than judging and condemning, Jesus advocates forgiveness and generosity. Judging and condemning are the tools of scapegoating,” explains Ross in her book. “Forgiveness and generosity are the tools of lasting peace.”

As Pope Francis reminds us, this is the only way to escape from the confusion and defeat that judgment and condemnation inevitably brings down upon ourselves. The Gospel of mercy gently awaits those still dreaming of one day defying gravity.

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. □