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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

The Pagans And The Christians

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene

Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Sermon

Let us eavesdrop on the conversations that went on before the events chronicled in the song "The Christians and the Pagans." Let's take Amber and Jane first, driving along in their car, filled with joy from their Solstice celebrating and being with friends.

Amber: Wasn't it just great? The ceremony, and friends we can be ourselves with, and don't have to be in the closet about our religious beliefs.

Jane: Yeah, it really was terrific. Now we have to figure out where to spend the night, since we still have a couple of days off and we don't need to return quite yet. It needs to be cheap, too-we're running low on money.

Amber: Well?. You know my Uncle Charlie? He and his family only live a few miles away.

Jane (horrified): You gotta be kidding?!?!? Aren't they Catholic? As

in, the church that burned thousands and thousands of people like us, mostly women, for practicing the old craft, and loving the earth, and honoring Nature and the seasons.

Amber: Well? yeah, they are Catholic. But my family used to spend a lot of time with them when I was young, and I always felt like I was Uncle Charlie's favorite niece or nephew. We had a lot of fun together.

Jane: Are you sure it would be OK? I've known Catholics and other Christians that I swear break out in a rash, at the mere mention of the word "witch."

Amber: Yeah, I know. But I'd really like to give it a try, and I think they'll try to rise above their prejudices. (I'm pretty sure they won't try to burn us at the stake.)

Jane: Ha ha? OK, if you insist?. The price is right?.

Now let's eavesdrop on the hastily-whispered conversation that went on when Uncle Charlie answered the phone and Amber said, "Jane and I were having Solstice, now we need a place to stay." With the phone mouthpiece covered, the following frantic conversation takes place in whispers:

Uncle Charlie: Rose, Rose!!!! It's Amber and her friend Jane, and they've been doing some kind of pagan thing, and they're in the area.. They want to stay overnight with us, and it's Christmas Eve!!!

Aunt Rose: Oh Lord, you don't suppose they've been making animal sacrifices, do you? I've even heard some of those people torture children. (Although I'm sure Amber wouldn't do that.) Would they insist on some heathen ritual on our holy day?

Uncle Charlie: I don't know, Rose. That pagan stuff really does give me the creeps. But remember what a cute little thing Amber was? And how she just loved Timmy when he was born, and took care of him,

even though she was only ten years old. I have to admit, I have a real soft spot for Amber.

Aunt Rose: Me, too, even though I think her so-called "religion" is probably blasphemous, and maybe worse. Let's give it a try, tell her to come on over.

This family just re-enacted an old drama. When Judaism and Christianity were being founded, these new religions had to replace the old, if they were ever going to flourish. Although I deplore the early Jewish and early-to-middle Christian persecution of pagans, I can put myself in their shoes well enough to see that "paganism" was seen as a very real and present threat to the newcomers' deepest beliefs.

As the centuries and millennia have rolled along, Judaism has had a lot more to worry about than pagans, but Christianity picked up the cudgel with enthusiasm. At first the church merely proselytized with vigor. Later, it persecuted with vigor. We all have heard of the many thousands of women branded as witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, non-believers horribly tortured and put to death. By that time, I hasten to point out, the church no longer had the excuse of being just born, small and struggling. It was extremely powerful, and the corruption that comes with power was very apparent. From then on, there has been pervasive teaching about the awfulness of non-believers-so very different from the teachings of Jesus, who championed those who were scorned and placed outside society's pale.

We in the Western world have inherited a vicious dichotomy. Christians, and ex-Christians-and, to some extent, almost everyone else-have been bequeathed the notion that paganism equals witchcraft which equals consorting with evil spirits. I had a conversation just the other day, with a woman who implored me not to use the word "pagan." She counsels victims of ritual abuse, and equates that terrible practice with "paganism."

Pagans, for their part, have a healthy terror of Christians. Those whose religion lies in nature-related practices such as solstice and equinox, are painfully aware that the church has hated them even unto death.

A nasty legacy, but one which touches us all, consciously or unconsciously. How did Amber and Uncle Charlie manage to rise above it?

The answer lies in deep, important truths about humans at their best, truths about this season at its best-truths about belief systems and stereotyped ideas being transcended by generous hearts. One way to move toward this transcendence-a very UU way-is to read and inquire. To read and inquire with an open mind and heart, especially those of us who have rigidly stereotyped notions about either "paganism" or "Christianity" (or both). Neither of these practices is anything like monolithic.

The word "Christianity" covers a vast multitude of beliefs, contrary to our stereotype of the fundamentalist, rigid, self-righteous, one-road-only-to-salvation approach. (Or the stereotype of the Inquisition-torture-death approach. I recommend a very radical book by John Spong, an Anglican bishop, self-named theist and Christian: *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*. He tackles original sin, God as parent, Jesus as rescuer, and much more, declaring unequivocally that such outdated notions must go. He is on the progressive edge of that diverse movement called Christianity, but you would be surprised at the modern writers who share some or most of his views. (See bibliography at end.)

The word "pagan" nowadays means any religious practice that is not part of one of the world's major religions. That does cover child-abusing Satanic rituals (which really ought to be classified as a sort of shadow or anti-Christianity, since real pagans don't believe in Satan). It also includes spirit-filled, loving, non-sermon-based rituals of passage and celebration. It includes the surprisingly-common nature-based traditions that love and celebrate the earth and the feminine principle in

religion. We hold a lovely Winter Solstice service here in this church, which we forthrightly acknowledge as pagan. It is reflective and joyous, reflecting upon the dark and all that it means, rejoicing at the return of the light. We especially hope that you who are having difficulty with the word will attend and judge for yourself..

If we are brave enough to examine your stereotypes of "paganism," we might start with books by Starhawk, counselor, political activist, and self-named witch. *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* might be a good place to start.

Words are very, very powerful, with deep emotional significance for all of us. It takes courage to acknowledge our "loaded words," to take responsibility for our reactions, rather than blaming the words. It takes courage to examine them, to acknowledge the subjectivity of our reactions to them. And it takes more generosity than most of us have, most of the time, to look at those troublesome concepts with genuine willingness to learn (not just looking for the parts that justify our prejudices.)

But what is Unitarian Universalism about, if not such open-mindedness, open-heartedness, and generosity of spirit? And what else is this season about?

Which brings us back to Amber and her Uncle Charlie, both devout believers and practitioners of historically-opposed faiths. And yet they embodied deep, important truths about humans at their best, truths about this season at its best—truths that transcend their belief systems.

Have you already managed to forget the true meaning of this season? I find myself perilously close to doing so. 'Tis not the season to be consuming and running around frantically. It is the season of dark and cold, reminding us that life is short, that we do not have time to let belief systems or anything else keep us from love, from forgiveness, from the rigorous and constant self-examination that lets us repent and atone of our sins against each other. It is the season of faith, faith that

the light will return, that a holy child will be born under a guiding star, a holy child to remind us of the best in humanity.

Uncle Charlie starts the reconciliation process well. He could have said, "You can come on one condition: that you don't say or do anything that has to do with paganism." Instead, he chose the gentler, "It's Christmas Eve, I know our life is not your style." Amber replied in like spirit. She could have said, "Where do you get off criticizing my religion?" But she said, "Christmas is like Solstice, and we miss you and it's been awhile." "We miss you," and "it's been awhile" trumped the need to be righteous about beliefs.

Can you think of times where you have either gotten self-righteous and thus defended, or have risen above your first reaction and taken the high road? All year long-in the spirit of this season-we are much more deeply warmed by kindness and respect, than by being right. I recall a Board meeting a couple of years ago, where I got in a huff about something, then got defensive, saying sarcastically things like, "Well, if you're going to do [such-and-such], you'll also have to do [so-and-so]. How much better it would have been if I had taken a deep breath, listened carefully to what was being said, and remembered that we all want the best for each other and our church. I'm a lot happier with myself when I take that second path?. This season of darkness and coming light, of goodness made flesh upon the earth, calls me to be that better self more often. All year.

The song goes on to speak, narratively, of people doing their very best to be with each other in harmony and affection: "finding faith and common ground the best that they were able." When prayers were said, hands were held, connecting the religious human beings around the table-and every one, worshipping God or gods or goddesses, longed for the peace on earth of which the angels sang on that holy night. The peace on earth we can envision as we welcome the earth's tilt that brings back light, as we rise above our petty selves to feel those tremendous forces over which we have no control. Forces in which we must have faith.

Little Timmy pipes up with an awkward question, causing his embarrassed mother to rush into the kitchen, but Jane replies affectionately about their love for trees and snow and friends-doesn't everybody love those things?-and says, "you find magic from your God, and we find magic everywhere. The poet puts in a little editorial here, "I think magic's in the learning, 'cause now when Christians sit with Pagans only pumpkin pies are burning."

Considering how incredibly stubborn we humans can be, it well may be magic when we choose to operate out of a love that reflects the oneness of all: trees, snow, babies born in barns, friends, family. And the magic is even stronger when human love leads us to transcend that terrible fear that our foundational values are at risk.

The most touching lines in the song indicate a deep shift in Uncle Charlie, a shift that shook his heart into more love, more awareness of poignant connections, more awareness of how terribly swiftly passes the span of human life.

Amber's uncle saw how Amber looked like Tim and like her father. He thought about his brother, how they hadn't spoken in a year, He though he'd call him up and say, "It's Christmas and your daughter's here."

"It's Christmas"-the season of light and and life incredibly returning from the darkness of apparent death. The season of hope and holiness in human form. "Your daughter's here"-your child, who looks like my child. Who loves my child. Who looks like you, my brother. He thought of fathers-oh, the fathers and mothers through the ages, wanting so badly to do well, wanting to love their children enough that they will grow up whole, and maybe-oh, hope of hopes-more loving and generous than we are. He thought of brothers-oh, the brothers and sisters who have fought and loved and hated and reconciled, who have lost and found each other. The brothers and sisters of the womb, and the brothers and sisters we have never seen. Siblings that the adult

Jesus, thirty-some years after that silent, holy night, reminded us to love as ourselves.

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able,
Lighting trees in darkness, learning new ways from the old, and
Making sense of history and drawing warmth out of the cold.

May it be so.

Helpful Books About Christianity And Paganism

Christianity

Borg, Marcus J. *Jesus: a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.

Breech, James. *The Silence of Jesus: the Authentic Voice of the Historical Man*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

Crossan, John Dominic. *The Essential Jesus: What Jesus Really Taught*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989.

_____. *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Harpur, Tom. *For Christ's Sake: a Former Priest Argues For a Radically New Understanding of Jesus' Message For Contemporary America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

Heyward, Isabel Carter. *The Redemption of God: a Theology of Mutual Relation*. Boston: Isabel Carter Heyward, 1982.

Spong, John Shelby. *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.

Wilson, A.N. Jesus: a Life. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992.

Paganism

Estes, Clarissa Pindola, Ph.D. Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

Sjoo, Monica, and Barbara Mor. The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

Starhawk.. Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

_____. The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.

_____. Truth or Dare: Encounters With Power, Authority, and Mystery. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.

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