

Pagan Sunday – 4/26/15

Who are we and what do we believe?

reading #683

Today we are celebrating Earth Day in Stockton, at Victory Park. Our church has a booth there, so come out this afternoon and celebrate with us. Today I have been asked to talk about Paganism.

Why me?...I was raised in a Baptist home, straight from the Christian hospital to the church nursery. I did all the usual things, was a leader in youth groups, young adult groups, taught Sunday School, served on the Boards of churches and one foreign missionary organization. I helped found Scottsdale Christian Academy, what is now a large K-12 school in Phoenix.

I did a lot of reading, but mostly became convinced that the religion I was taught no longer made much sense to me and didn't help me live the kind of life expected of me. So I left and decided never to darken the door of a church again. You can see how well that worked for me. So here I am in a pulpit....again.

Along the way, I met a lot of interesting folk, and some of them were Pagans. I realized I was deeply connected to the Earth and began to call myself a pagan before I knew what it really meant. I joined some pagan groups, attended some festivals, fell in love... or lust... with some lovely pagan goddesses. This felt right for me. I learned some new things about this new, to me, religion.

The Earth is very special to Pagans. Pagan means people of the earth. Another term that is used for us is Heathen, usually as a very derogatory term. But heathen means people of the heather, farmers and woodsmen, workers of the earth. What is bad about that? I think it is wonderful.

Pagans are also called Wiccans, and what is Wicca? The word is the Old English root of the modern term Witchcraft and many of us call ourselves Witches or Wiccans. There is no gender attached to Witch, who can be male, female or whatever we find ourselves to be.

It is also called the Old Religion.... Since very few modern folk, like me, were raised in this old religion, it is to US a new faith, a new belief system regardless of the history of this old religious belief system. As in almost all religions, it is an

attempt to understand the meaning of life and our connection to each other and to the unknown, and to find a way to live our lives according to our understanding. We are not a religion of a single “book” or set of detailed rules or official hierarchy, it is up to each of us to determine how we will behave.

However, we tend to have some things in common with other pagans. We believe in some form of reality that is beyond ourselves and our complete understanding. We honor this Divinity, not as a creator with rules, but as part of the creation. We do not attempt to define the infinite, only to understand the sacred within ourselves and around us. We have a huge collection of poems, songs, symbols and writings to draw from. More importantly, we seek to find within ourselves the truth of our lives. We believe that if you cannot find what you need within yourself, you will not find it outside of yourself.

Pagans tend to be polytheists, because our religious imaginations are many and varied. In order to relate to the sacred, humans need to stick faces on our gods, so we give them names and roles in our lives. Pagans come up with a high level of diversity, many male, female and animal gods with many jobs to do for us. Most of us were raised in a mono-theistic culture, a male god, sort of an old guy with a white beard. In my background we have added two other versions of this god but it is very male and very exclusive... “my way or the highway.” Pagans or heathen are often accused of devil worship. Please understand that the devil is part of the Judeo-Christian pantheon. We have no model of pure evil, just as our gods and goddesses are never perfect.

We do not define ourselves as the opposite or any inversion of the dominate religions of our society. Instead we seek what is within ourselves. Generally wiccans offer primary devotion to Mother Earth, our Goddess. We are born of mother earth, nourished by her bounty and return to her at the end of our lives. She has a consort, the wild and free god of animal life, often called Pan. We celebrate the feminine with the cycles of the moon, the daughter of the sun.

We look at the cycle of life as a wheel, and use the symbology of the wheel of the year to help our understanding of the wholeness of life. We map the seasons, and stages of human development, and many other things to the wheel. Look at the cover of the order of service. There are four quarters, we see them as seasons of the year, and four cross quarters for a total of 8 parts of the wheel of the year. This is the pulse of the cycles of life. These 8 festivals, or Sabbats, represent stages of life. The four quarters are more earth related, mapped to the seasons in

the northern hemisphere. The cross quarters are celebrations of life events. We are now at Beltane, celebrating fertility as it is the beginning of the growing season. Beltane rituals often have a very sexual flavor.

We also celebrate the cycles of the Moon and its representation of fertility. Full moon rituals are more personal, more intimate, more focused on inner work. I mentioned ritual, we are in one right now. We are very used to ritual in our lives, being here in church on Sunday is one of our regular (or almost regular) rituals. Rituals bring comfort to our lives.

We also recognize 5 basic elements, Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit. We often call them in our rituals from the 4 corners of the compass and Spirit in the center. Then we invite the Goddess and maybe some God to join us. We believe in having fun with our religion, so we have silly ideas like sharing Cheez-its and singing "What a friend we have in Cheez-its." We consider sharing water important since it is so basic to life. Water shared is life shared.

Pagans often speak of magick, with a k. We believe that the inner work we do thru magick often results in outer world changes. Our rituals include kitchen magick, healing magick, job magick and other attempts to influence the world around us. How does this differ from the belief in prayer?

Wicca has a code of ethics, behavioral guidance that is a part of all religions, some sort of Golden Rule. We call ours the Wiccan Rede: "An it harm none, do what you will." It is simple, powerful and radically free. There are no absolute or arbitrary restrictions, no Thou Shalt, or Thou Shalt Not. We are each responsible for our actions and our response to the actions of others. We are not responsible for the behavior of others (except maybe our small children). We must think and feel our way through the complexities of life, weighing the possible results of our choices. We have no authority figure to direct us, no orthodox rules on marriage, sexuality, divorce or separation, military service, assisted death, and so on. We must all take responsibility for our actions and experience the outcomes. Sometimes this is called Karma, or "What goes around comes around." We reap the rewards and bear the consequences of our behavior.

To expand on the Wiccan Rede:

1. Do no harm. This is really important!
2. Tolerate no restrictions except on behavior demonstrably harmful.

3. When you see harm done, do what you can to heal and protect while respecting the free will of others.

Thus, maximum freedom, full responsibility, little guidance.

We live in community, that complex web of human relationships. Most pagans work together in small groups, often called covens, or nests, and sometimes called UU churches. For example, The Gaia Community is an earth-based, pagan Unitarian Universalist congregation meeting in the Manheim Park neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri. We conduct rites, help each other, etc. Not unlike covenant groups or support teams, or UUThursdays as we find in this church. We also sometimes live as solitary witches we are at choice. What we do not have is a pyramidal power structure telling us what to do, how to do it, and asking us to pay for it. There are some institutional support organizations to help with education and legal issues, and so on.

I am a member of a pagan organization called the Church of All Worlds. It was founded in the 60s based on a science fiction book by Robert Heinlein titled "Stranger in a Strange Land." In this story, the idea is presented that we are all Gods and Goddesses. (The book is much more complicated than that but I cannot go into that today.) The focus is on honoring and loving each other freely, and building a sharing society that honors the Earth. I hosted a "nest" of CAW members and seekers for several years in Stockton, called the "Delta Dragon Nest" of CAW. All of our former members have moved on with their lives to other locations.

I have also been a member of "CUUPS" (spell out) the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. We had a chapter in this church years ago, but it didn't last, as often happens in small groups. I taught some pagan adult classes from a UU curriculum, one was Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and I led a ritual class. Back in the 90's our group did a full ritual on a Sunday morning. At this point I do not know who else in our church considers themselves pagan, but I would appreciate hearing from you. Please talk to me during coffee hour.

Part of our UU principles include the respect for the earth and its creatures. This is basic to the Pagan belief system. Today Pagans and many others are speaking out at Victory Park for the earth. Modern industrial society is devouring its own body, destroying and contaminating the Earth, our Mother. Climate change is very real, in spite of what our government says. The governor of Florida has forbidden the

officials in their environmental division to even use the term in any context. Our Congress is so controlled by large businesses that it cannot act in any real way to protect us. We refuse as a people to vote for legislators who would protect us from climate change. Here in California we see no real effort to deal with the water crisis. We just approved bonds for more dams and levees to protect from floods and allow more construction of homes in flood plains. Very little money for desalination plants, the only way to actually produce more water.

If we think our reservoirs are shrinking, on the Mongolian Plateau the number of lakes with an area larger than one square kilometer dropped from 785 in the late 1980's to 577 in 2010 and total lake surface area dropped 30%. Only 2 of the 10 largest of these lakes increased in size. Coal mines in Inner Mongolia increased from 156 in 2000 to 865 in 2010. Irrigated crop land increased from 6600 square kilometers in the late 1970's to over 30,000 in 2010. Dirty air from China is arriving in the western US on a regular basis.

Arctic winter sea ice coverage has been dropping for years and March 2015 was the lowest in the record of satellite observations. Glaciers are receding in many parts of the world. Huge icebergs are calving off the Antarctic coast. Does this say something about Global Warming?

This is ONE world, not just 190 plus countries. We must work together.

This is a life threatening crisis, all of life depends on Mother Earth. Who speaks out for Mother Earth? Pagans and UUs Do!

Join me in our closing hymn and then the Unorthodoxy printed in the order of service.