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“I Will Draw All People To Myself”

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Words from Jesus, like these, often make me wonder, how on earth Christianity became the largest religion in the world. I mean this stuff, it's not only a bit out there, it's down right unattractive. Who wants to hate their life? Moreover, who wants to have their life taken away simply because they love it? I mean Jesus, what are you trying to get at here?

I recently heard the story of a man's life that fascinated me, especially in light of this passage. His name was Bishop Carlton Pearson. Have you ever heard of him? I never had? The story was entitled “Heretics.” It was actually on This American Life last week if you care to listen. And, if you don't, well I'm going to tell you part of his story anyways. In the 1990's Carlton Pearson was a “rising evangelical megastar, a Republican activist who prayed in the Bush Senior White House, a guest on *The 700 Club*. Host of a national TV show, traveling all over the world in chartered jets, lecturing to fundamentalist gatherings.” He was even ordained a Bishop in the African American Pentecostal tradition. But at the height of his popularity, he became involved in a “scandal.” Not the kind of scandal you typically think of in the church. Nothing nefarious (per say), nothing like embezzlement, or an illegitimate child. Nothing juicy like an affair, or a drug addiction. No, none of that. He simply stated, from the pulpit, that he no longer believed in Hell.

Now, you might wonder, either A. what's the big deal about not believing in hell? Or if you're more familiar with the pentecostal and evangelical traditions B. How (the hell) did he come to that conclusion in the first place? After being raised pentecostal, growing up in the ghettos of San Diego, and following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather who were both Pentecostal preachers, Carlton Pearson was steeped in the tradition of hell fire and brimstone. Even from an early age, hearing a call as a teenager, he led revivals in storefronts, and at 17 years old, cast out demons for three days straight, including a one who possessed his then girlfriend. While many of the pastors in his own life were, for the most part, uneducated, many of whom took on the honorable and thankless profession of janitor, Carlton was convinced that in order to preach well he had to learn more. More about the Bible and Christianity, from its historical and linguistic roots, to its traditions and theological standpoints. And with the blessing of his family, who were devoted Oral Roberts fans, Carlton was able to attend Oral Roberts University. Joining the World Action Singers, ORU's traveling choral group. No sooner gaining Carlton the attention and support of Oral Roberts himself, who would come to call Carlton his “black son.”

Our Gospel passage today comes to us at the end of Jesus' life. He has just been anointed by Mary Magdalene, with priceless nard, as she wiped his feet clean with her own hair. Right before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we will celebrate next Sunday, in our liturgy of the Palms. And now Jesus is trying to prepare his beloved disciples and friends for what is to come next. As we hear him say, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Both to highlight the kind of death he will die, but even more the kind of life he has lived. Going on to say “Now is the judgment of

this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” Indicating to them, and to us, what his eventual death, resurrection and ascension, truly mean. As they will take our entire perception and traditional understandings of the finality of death, the humiliation of crucifixion, even the authority of the power and turn them all on their heads. Because, as we all know in the end, death, humiliation, even power don’t get the last word! For in Christ all things are possible and with God nothing is impossible.

With all his work and dedication, Bishop Carlton Pearson built from the ground up a massively successful and vibrantly growing congregation, in the heart of Birmingham Alabama. He brought together Blacks and Whites every Sunday morning. And, at the height of his ministry, with a staff full of clergy, and an auditorium packed to the brim with people, Bishop Carlton, essentially threw it all away. As he recounted an evening, in which he was watching prime time news. As the Hutus and Tutsis were returning from Rwanda to Uganda, he witnessed those refugees who had been malnourished and mistreated. Kids with swollen bellies, parents with their skin stretched across their skeletal remains, with hair red from lack of nutrition, and babies full of fleas around their eyes and mouths reaching for food from mothers whose milk had run dry. Carlton says, “with my little fat-faced baby [on my lap], and a plate of food [in front of me], and a big screen television [to watch it all] -- I said, God, I don't know how you could call yourself a loving, sovereign God, and allow these people to suffer this way, and just suck them right into hell...” He says, but then he “heard a voice” say within [him], so that's what you think we're doing?... You think we're sucking them into hell? Can't you see they're already there? That's hell. You keep creating and inventing that for yourselves.” In preaching a theology without the threat of hell, and a universal salvation, Bishop Carlton quickly lost everything. He lost his mega church, his television program, his associate pastors. He lost his congregation which dwindled to a mere 200 from it’s former 5,000+. He lost his building and all that was in it, as it was soon foreclosed and auctioned off by the bank right before his eyes. He lost his prestige and eventually his ecclesiastical recognition, which was revoked by the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops during his trial and eventual sentencing as a heretic.

As Jesus tells us, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Now, to be sure, or maybe more so to be careful, I do not believe Jesus literally wants us to hate our life, nor do I believe that we will be eternally “lost” should we love our life. There is a bigger picture here, a greater message. One that matters to Jesus and I believe should matter to us! At the end of it all, Bishop Carlton Pearson, will tell you, if he had known what preaching the Gospel of Inclusion would cost him he never would have done it. And, yet, Bishop Carlton said, “now that what’s done is done, there’s no way I’m going back.” After all, when you get down to it, it's a lot easier to believe in a world without hell. Bishop Carlton’s words, not mine. For one thing, Bishop Carlton argued, “you don't have to worry about saving everybody.” You just have to worry about loving them. And that for me is what it means to lose our life, that is what it means to serve Christ, and that is what it means to glorify God. It means no longer living for ourselves alone, not for our glory, not for our desires, not even for our fears, but for our God who loved us first, and for the world that God created and loves continually, no matter what. This is the good news Jesus Christ came to share, not that we should hate our lives, but that we cannot simply put ourselves first, not our ideas or even our ideologies, not our desires or even convictions. Because when we first love God we can come to know, like Bishop Carlton, what God’s love is like, and then and only then, can we understand what Jesus meant when he said “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”