

In 1994, Bishop Carlton Pearson was riding an incredible wave of success as a Pentecostal preacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He led the 5000 member Higher Dimensions Family Church, large even by mega-church standards. Higher Dimensions was unusual with its integrated staff and congregation. It's said that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America. He had been invited to the White House. He hosted a popular TV show on Trinity Broadcasting Network. He led an annual Pentecostal conference attended by 50,000. He had much to lose.¹

Bishop Carlton Pearson experiences a "dark night of the soul," when two events, in quick succession, cause him to question the foundations on which he had built his faith. Early in the movie portraying these events, *Come Sunday*, Bishop Pearson travels from Tulsa, OK, to San Diego to visit his 70-year old uncle, who is in prison. His uncle has been denied parole. Some drugs have been found in his room, which he tells Pearson were not his. He pleads with Pearson to write a letter on his behalf; surely a letter from a man of the cloth, of such renown, would win him parole. Pearson questions his uncle and determines, despite their earlier conversations, that his uncle has not accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Without this conversion, he does not feel it is appropriate to write the requested letter. They part with his uncle leaving the visiting room, shoulders slumped. Pearson learns a couple weeks later that his uncle has taken his life, unable to endure living out his life behind bars.

The second event is the one that Merrily recounted. In the movie, Pearson is up late one night, walking his sleepless child. The TV is on and he sees footage of the horrible plight of people in Rwanda during the genocide of 1994.

Bishop Pearson's theology was built on the reality of hell and that belief that only those who have confessed that Jesus is Lord are saved from eternal damnation. He wonders how untold millions of people who have never been exposed to the Word of Christ can be damned by God. He wonders how his uncle, who rejected that Word, can be damned for eternity. He is shaken to the core. He goes to see his mentor, Oral Roberts, the President of his alma mater, Oral Roberts University. Roberts directs him to pray on Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10, verse 9: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Pearson goes into solitary retreat. During his meditation and prayer vigil hears the voice of God. The next Sunday he begins to preach a message contrary to everything his people were used to hearing. As people in his packed 5000 seat church begin heading for the doors, Pearson draws their attention to another letter in the New Testament, 1 John 2.1-2: "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." As in many places in the Bible, these passages contradict each other. Romans says clearly that if you accept Jesus Christ as Lord, you will be saved. 1 John says that God has saved the entire world through Jesus. Pearson believes that God spoke to him, and that God revealed that He is loving and inclusive. Oral Roberts suggests that it was likely the devil whom Pearson heard.

Over the next months and years Pearson loses his church, his friends and colleagues, his mentor and all the perks of being a highly successful Pentecostal preacher. He is excommunicated by his fellow African American Pentecostal preachers. He eventually loses even his will to preach. He has truly entered a dark night of the soul.

Pearson's story is not a new one, however. In many ways, his story retraces the stories of early Universalists in this country, our forebears. The early Universalists typically experienced some sort of conversion experience. They often came from the ranks of the Protestant evangelicals, such as Jonathan Edwards, whom Merrily mentioned, who envisioned sinners being held over the fiery flames by God, who then cut the strings, letting them fall to eternal damnation.

John Murray's case is illustrative. Murray was born in England in 1741 and was raised as a strict Calvinist. Remember that Calvinists preached a message of predestination; only a select few were saved, determined by God at the beginning. Everyone else was damned for eternity. He later described his psychological torment, originating in his fear of eternal damnation. As a young man he read the universalist writings of James Rely, who wrote in his 1759 book *Union*, that "all humanity actually achieved union with Christ in his death and had therefore already paid the price for sin."ⁱⁱⁱ Murray also was able to hear Rely preach, and Rely's universalist thinking took hold and grew in Murray. He began to preach a universalist theology. That cost Murray friends and social standing, leading to

economic difficulties. In the midst of these trials, his wife and son died and he was thrown in debtor's prison. He chose to emigrate to the colonies, thinking he would never preach again.

The ship on which Murray had booked passage ran aground at Cranberry Inlet, New Jersey in 1770, near the property of one Thomas Potter. Potter had built a meeting house on his property and was waiting for God to deliver a preacher. He was convinced that Murray was the man.ⁱⁱⁱ Murray was reluctant, but agreed to preach on the following Sunday if there was not a favorable wind before then. There was not, and Murray preached. He considered this a sign from God and thus began a lengthy preaching career in what would soon become the United States. His message was not popular here, either, among the religious establishment, even the Unitarians, but that may have had more to do with class than with theology. He was, however, a popular preacher and Universalism, as it eventually came to be known, spread quickly.^{iv}

Back to Bishop Pearson. His thinking around Christianity and God's love continued to evolve. As traditionally preached, Christianity, even among mainline Protestant denominations, has been exclusionary. Even if all were saved by the love of God, as some of them preached, there were still many who were not welcome within the church. I think now of the LGBTQ communities. So, too, with Bishop Pearson. His growth here is triggered by his friendship and caring for his gay organist. He finally comes to realize that his friend is who he is, and is still loved by God. And because he is loved by God, he can enter as a full member the house of Christ.

Here the movie took a very interesting personal twist. While Pearson is journeying through his dark night, unable to preach, he is invited by Bishop Flunder to Oakland to preach to her flock at the City of Refuge Church of Christ, a member of the United Church of Christ. Bishop Flunder has built her ministry around working with marginalized communities, beginning during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980's. She is the presiding bishop of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. I had the opportunity to hear Bishop Flunder while I was in seminary at Starr King. While I don't recall the exact content of the message, I vividly remember her powerful preaching. I am also happy to say that while I was a

student, Bishop Flunder was offered, and accepted, a seat on the Board of Directors of Starr King.

So Bishop Pearson flies to Oakland to preach to a room full of gay and lesbian and transgender and queer persons, people whom he had formerly regarded as sinners. What does he have to say to them, outcasts? They are fully aware of his pedigree as a Pentecostal phenomenon. He begins tentatively, casting himself also as an outcast. Slowly he warms to his preaching and the congregation warms to him.

He speaks of how his entire faith had been built on the construct of an angry God, a God of retribution, a God to whom one had to swear allegiance in a particular way in order to be saved from eternal damnation, an exclusive God. He wonders about how, if we understand God as loving unconditionally, that means we are called to love one another unconditionally. This is more difficult. A lot more difficult. We need to be inclusive, not exclusive. He concludes his message by asking the congregation to sing with him.

So, too, did our universalist thinking evolve from a message that all are saved to one of inclusion. It is still evolving. Our "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign affirmed "unconditional, universal love as a foundation and grounding for our actions in the world." This from the Unitarian Universalist Association website. The name was recently changed to "Side with Love" to be more inclusive as we learn about how the language we commonly use can be exclusionary can be exclusionary and hurtful.

Here in this community of Chico there is much work to be done to spread the message of inclusion. This is work for which we are uniquely, but not solely qualified. We have kin in our socially liberal churches and other places of worship, and there are a handful. I'm thinking of First Christian and Faith Lutheran and First Baptist and other members of the Chico Area Interfaith Council. Some of these pastors and denominations have recently experienced their own dark nights of the soul as they came to understand and change their exclusionary thinking and messages.

For Chico, the message of inclusion that seems front and center is that of homelessness. It is a complex problem. The dominant paradigm is one of

managing homelessness but not addressing root causes. I wonder if this has to do with the predominance of theologically and socially conservative Christian churches in Chico? I do know that, despite repeated invitations, none are represented on the Interfaith Council.

The multifaceted problem of homelessness and housing insecurity is one in which this congregation expressed overwhelming interest in our recent survey to determine where we should donate fifty percent of our cash offering every Sunday. We purchase, prepare and serve one meal every month at the Torres Shelter. In our recent fund-raising auction we bid \$2100 to be given to the Chico Housing Action Team to advance Simplicity Village, a housing first option for addressing homelessness in this community.

But there is more we could do. I challenge us to consider what it means to be radically inclusive, the call of our Universalist heritage. Let this inform how we become, even more, a voice speaking for the marginalized in our beloved community.

May it be so.

ⁱ Paul Prather. Accessed 5/5/2018. <http://www.kentucky.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/article209611304.html>

ⁱⁱ David Robinson. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT. 1985. P 297.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*. Meadville Lombard Theological School Press, Chicago, 2000. 146-47.