

Last Saturday the radio program “This American Life” re-aired its story about the Rev. Carlton Pearson, a successful Pentecostal pastor in Tulsa Oklahoma who stopped believing in hell and lost his church. He had been a protégé of Oral Roberts, wildly successful in the Pentecostal world, but one day in the 1990s as he was watching the news with his baby daughter, he saw video footage of Rwandan refugees suffering from malnutrition. Comparing the starving children with his own chubby-cheeked daughter, he began an internal conversation with God about these children dying before they could hear the good news of Jesus and be saved from hell, where they were surely headed. God told him, essentially, I didn’t make hell. *You* human beings make hell, in many places, in many ways. There is no hell but what you make.

At that time, Carlton Pearson was pastoring a church of 5000 members, with eight associate pastors. When he told his congregation that Jesus had saved everybody, and there was no hell in the afterlife, they were appalled. The congregation dwindled to a couple of hundred, and he lost everything. One bright spot, though—he’s free of this:

The guilt of not witnessing to every single person you meet-- I'd get on an airplane-- having preached my brains out, stayed up all night, worked the altar, then ate with the preaches, and got up early in the morning to get a flight. I get on the plane. I need to go to sleep.

But I should witness to the guy next to me. Somehow, I have to figure out a way to open up a conversation. So I need to put my Bible on my lap so he can ask me about the Lord, or wear my cross, or something to open up the door. Or either, I have to basically confront him and say, well, how are you doing, sir?

Do you know where you're going to spend eternity? You're probably going to hell, but I can help you. Then I have to talk for two hours on a plane and either tick the person off, or be insulted by the person, or insult the person.

It's horrible, guys.

I think we can all agree with Carlton Pearce that that's horrible. And yet it was what Luke is telling us to do, in one way or another, in the story of Paul at the Areopagus. Much has been written about Paul's cleverness in this speech. He speaks to the Athenians in a way they will find appealing, affirming them for their thoroughness in setting up a shrine even to an unknown god. He quotes two Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus, showing that he's an educated person who knows what they know. But he winds up with a thoroughly Jewish apocalyptic closer: "God commands all people everywhere to repent, *because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged*. These people have no tradition of a messiah and no apocalyptic expectations, but that's what Paul brings: they must recognize the God they have intuited and repent, because he is going to judge the world very soon.

Luke tells us that Paul had decent success. Some people scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this," and some of them joined him and became believers. So there was something in that message that resonated with them, foreign as it was. Carlton Pearson grew up in the Pentecostal tradition, poor, with pastors who were not formally educated, where everyone believed in hell. That wouldn't have been the default Athenian belief, but somehow the idea of a final judgment stuck, so maybe it was just the human sense of justice, that life has to add up to something and we should reap what we sow.

What I'm dancing around is, what, if anything, do we proclaim if not hellfire and damnation? What is the impetus to evangelize? Because trust me, that's what this story is here for. It's to give you and me a model for presenting the good news

of Jesus Christ in ways that are accessible and meaningful to our audiences. And I'll tell you another thing, one of the reasons that so-called mainline churches are on the decline is that we don't tell people they'll go to hell if they're not careful.

Steve Palmer, a youth pastor with Carlton Pearson's church, says,

The approach was, let's see. What's the best way that we can get the kids' attention? I know. We'll scare them. We'll say, do you like to burn? No. Do you want to spend forever in darkness? No. Well, then you better turn. And that's how most of us got saved was we chose because the alternative was just scary.

He talks about finding himself alone periodically, and figuring out whom to call, to see if the Rapture had happened and left him behind. He had an aunt who'd been a missionary, and if she answered the phone, he knew it wasn't the Rapture because she was definitely going on the first round.

Well, what do we have to compete with that? Better food? Okay, we don't want to compete, that's not why we come here and that's not what we think is so great about church. It's worth asking, what makes it so great to be on this particular faith journey, and why do we want to share it? Here's what I think.

Earlier in Paul's speech, he tells the Athenians that what they worship as unknown is actually the God he now proclaims. This is the Lord of heaven and earth, who "made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, . . . [who] allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, **so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.**" We come together because we are groping for God and it's better to search together, and to have epiphanies together. We come together to pay attention, to each other and to God. The poet Wendell

Berry says, "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." We come together to recognize what is sacred and what has been desecrated.

We've all seen Fritz Eichenberg's woodcut, "Christ of the Breadlines." It helps us remember that we see God every day in sisters and brothers who are down and out. But I saw God, too, in friends of my friend Randy who died in December, who reached out to us so that we could become friends in Randy's memory. And having done that, they hired my boy X to clean Randy's house, and recommended him to another friend of Randy's, who has him do yard work and has recommended him to all of *his* neighbors, all of whom seem to want to reach out to their undocumented sisters and brothers and make life better. What was it but the hand of God that caused a *phalanx* of gay men to reach out with exactly what my young, impoverished, gay charge is looking for, paid work and a living example of being both gay and okay? That was totally God, people. That was the hand of God. That is *exactly* what it looks like.

Last Tuesday I stood with 200 protesters in the lobby of the hotel where the shareholders of Wells Fargo were meeting, and I read aloud the words of the prophet Amos:

The strong hate the one who reproves in the gate (or the lobby),
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.
Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—

you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

There was a roar of recognition as that motley crowd heard the word of God, and understood that God feels their pain and frustration. I do not enjoy confrontation, but people need to know that God is in all places, wherever they are, and especially wherever they are hurting.

A student of mine recently complained that his home church is having second thoughts about some missionaries to Honduras that they sponsor. It seems that these missionaries are spending too much time on medical and food relief, at the expense of saving souls. My student used the expression, “too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good,” and I think it was apt. Our witness needs to be to the presence of God here and now, embodied, physical, the way Jesus presented it. That, I think, is what people truly are hungry for, and truly need: opportunities to see the presence of God right here and right now. And that is not something people know how to find all by themselves; nothing in our culture cultivates that level of sensitivity.

Our world is hungry for witness to God. We can each bring what we know to these situations, and together we will show our sisters and brothers the amazing, healing, life-giving presence of God.

Let us pray: Holy Spirit, give us the vision and the power to be the kingdom, at least in moments, until the fullness of your kingdom comes. Amen.