

***The Man Who Lost Everything***  
**A Sermon Given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, October 8, 2017**  
**The Reverend Cyndi Simpson**

This month's worship and community theme is **COURAGE**. Last week, I spoke of what courage is in general and what it takes for us to be courageous as individuals and in community. Next week, I'll be speaking of The Courage of Our Convictions as Unitarian Universalists. And on October 22, I will be leading another White Supremacy Teach-In, at the request of the Black Lives of UU organization. For that, I will be bringing back to you your answers to the questions I posed at the last White Supremacy Teach-In in May.

Today, I'm telling the story of Bishop Carlton Pearson. Some of you might have read about his story in our national magazine – the UU World – back in 2009. His story is a powerful story of courage.

Bishop Carlton Pearson grew up in San Diego in an all-African-American neighborhood. His family were strict Pentecostals: no smoking, no drinking, no cursing, no dancing. But everybody went to church and that was where, as Carlton Pearson said: *they got wild!* People spoke in tongues, got slain by the Holy Spirit, and they definitely believed in Hell to the point where even the faithful could get possessed by the devil or by demons. Carlton's father and grandfather were ministers, and at an early age, he followed in their footsteps.

About this, Carlton said: ***The devil was as present and as large as God. He had most of the people. He was ultimately going to get most of the people. Demons were all over: in the church, in the schools, in the neighborhoods. Everything was a devil. So, if you believe it, you experience it.***

***And so we were trying to fit into a big, broad world that we didn't understand, that we felt was basically hell-bound. And we were to reach them, but we couldn't relate to them. They couldn't relate to us, so my world was getting smaller, and the world was getting larger, and I was smothering. But I had to find a way to get out of that world and still go to heaven, and Oral Roberts University offered that to me in a sanctified way.***

Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, OK, was founded by the Pentecostal Holiness minister Oral Roberts, who died in 2009. Carlton had seen Oral Roberts' television show. Roberts really was the first televangelist. Carlton went to Oral Roberts University in 1971, the first member of his family to attend college. He was a gifted singer and joined the University's World Action Singers, a touring gospel choir. They sang on the Johnny Carson show and with other celebrities. It was a whole new world for Carlton. Carlton also became close to Oral Roberts himself. So close, that Roberts referred to Carlton as *his black son*.

After graduating from Oral Roberts University and its seminary, Carlton and his best friend and roommate, a white minister named Garry MacIntosh, started a new church in Tulsa in 1981. They named it Higher Dimensions. What was most unusual about it is that it was completely racially integrated from the start. It was in south Tulsa, which was and remains more of a white area. This integration was unheard of at the time.

Tulsa's history of racism is deep and dreadful. We will learn more about that this coming January. There is a powerful Unitarian Universalist connection to that deep and dreadful history of racism.

Carlton's sermons were known for being positive, funny and also scholarly. As Higher Dimensions grew, so did Carlton's stature among Pentecostal ministers. He traveled a lot, nationally and internationally, guest-

preaching. He was a frequent visitor and consultant to George W Bush during his Presidency. He was named to the ORU Board of Regents. In 1995, Carlton was named a Bishop in the International Communion of Charismatic Churches. And he had his own show on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, a Christian channel.

Meanwhile, by the late 1990's, Higher Dimensions had a membership of over 6,000 people, with 3,000-5,000 people present for several Sunday worship services. They were collecting \$100,000 a week during the worship services. Carlton started an annual, week-long evangelistic revival that would draw 30,000 people from around the country. Higher Dimensions owned its own ranch and was planning on building a hotel. The church had a large staff of ministers and others and dozens of programs for all ages. They did outreach to prisons and nursing homes.

So, it's the late 1990s and Carlton is at the peak of his career as a minister. But something didn't feel right. Carlton had always preached a conventional evangelical theology. Hell was a horrible place, weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth for eternity, and the only way to avoid it was to accept Jesus. But he was always reading and studying the Bible's origins, using the Greek and Hebrew he had learned in seminary. He had begun to doubt what he had been preaching, especially the concept of Hell. And it all came home to roost one evening in front of the television. It was 1996, after the Rwandan genocide.

Here's how Carlton tells the story:

*Well, my little girl, who was an infant was in my lap. I was watching the evening news. The Hutus and Tutsis were returning from Rwanda to Uganda, and Peter Jennings was doing a piece on it. I'm eating a meal, and I'm watching these little kids with swollen bellies. And it looks like their skin is stretched across their little skeletal remains. Their hair is kind of red from malnutrition. The babies, they've got flies in the corners of their eyes and of their mouths. And they reach for their mother's breast, and the mother's breast are empty, there's no milk.*

*And I, with my little fat-faced baby, and a plate of food and a big-screen television. And I said God, I don't know how you can call yourself a loving, sovereign God and allow these people to suffer this way and just suck them right into Hell, which is what was my assumption was going to happen to them.*

*And I heard a voice say within me,*

*"So that's what you think we're doing?"*

*And I remember I didn't say yes or no. I said, "That's what I've been taught."*

*The voice said: "We're sucking them into Hell?"*

*I said, "Yes."*

*"And what would change that?" said the voice.*

*"Well, I said they need to get saved."*

*"And how would that happen?" said the voice.*

*"Well, somebody needs to preach the Gospel to them and get them saved."*

*"So if you think that's the only way they're going to get saved is for somebody to preach the Gospel to them and that we're sucking them into Hell, why don't you put your little baby down, turn your big-screen television off, push your plate away, get on the first thing smoking, and go get them saved?"*

*And I remember I broke into tears. I was very upset. I remember thinking, God, don't put that guilt on me. You know I've given you the best 40 years of my life. Besides, I can't save the whole world. I'm doing the best I can. I can't save this whole world.*

*And that's where I remember, and I believe it was God saying, "Precisely. You can't save this world. That's what we did. Do 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. I'M taking them into my presence."*

*And I thought, well, I'll be. That weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Where the pain comes from. We do that to each other, and we do it to ourselves. Then I saw emergency rooms. I saw divorce court. I saw jails and prisons. I saw how we create Hell on this planet for each other. And for the first time in my life, I did not see God as the inventor of Hell.*

*The way the God of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is presented, he's a monster. The God we've been preaching is a monster. He's worse than Saddam. He's worse than Osama bin Laden. He's worse than Hitler the way we've presented Him, because Hitler burned 6 million Jews, but God is going to burn at least 6 billion people and burn them forever. He has this customized torture chamber called Hell, where he's going to torment, torture, not for a few minutes, or a few days, or a few hours, or a few weeks, but forever.*

The more Carlton thought about it, the further away from conventional Evangelical and Pentecostal teaching it led him. If there was no Hell, then you didn't need to accept Jesus to avoid Hell. And if you didn't need to accept Jesus, it didn't matter if you were a Christian. It didn't even matter if you came to church. Everyone in the world was saved already, whether they knew it or not. No one was going to Hell. Everyone was going to come into the presence of God.

As a Biblical scholar, Carlton began seeing how so much of the story of Jesus' life pointed in this direction. That Jesus had saved everyone from Hell. The whole world. It's there, in Christian Scripture. Carlton called it the Gospel of Inclusion. And it focused on a God of limitless mercy.

That's what we sang about this morning – the Wideness of God's Mercy:

***For the love of God is broader than the measure of our minds,  
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.***

Carlton named his new notion the Gospel of Inclusion. But there was already a name for it. This idea that all were saved and that no one went to Hell. Because what kind of a just, merciful and loving God, as Carlton said, would do that to people? What is that already-existing name for what Carlton was preaching?

And Carlton then started preaching his Gospel of Inclusion. First to his ministers and then to his congregation. He was so filled with the beauty and the awe of what he had learned – from divine revelation as he had experienced it – he thought everyone would just get it and agree.

There were eight ministers on the staff of Higher Dimensions, four white and four black. When Carlton shared his new ideas about Hell and salvation with them – the four white ministers quit almost immediately. Followed by about 85% of the white congregants. They left to start their own church nearby. Carlton was devastated by this. These were people he had loved and been loved by and shared life with.

Over the next several years, as the word spread of Carlton's new gospel, he was attacked in charismatic religious magazines as a heretic. Hundreds, then thousands, of people left Higher Dimensions. Oral Roberts told him privately that he still loved Carlton. But Carlton was removed from the Board of Regents of the University and banned from holding his annual conference there. People had already stopped coming to the conference.

In 2004, The Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops formally declared Carlton a heretic. And that was it. The membership of Higher Dimensions was down to 200 people from 6000. In late 2005, Carlton sold the Higher Dimensions campus to avoid foreclosure at a loss of \$3 million in equity. Those 200 people who were left, people who had seen the truth of Carlton's message of inclusion, renamed themselves New Dimensions. They held services at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday afternoons in the building of Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Tulsa.

And then, things began to get very interesting. One local minister reached out to Carlton Pearson in 2005, when his life was most bleak. That was the Reverend Marlin Lavanhar, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church. All Souls Tulsa is the largest congregation in our Unitarian Universalist faith, with over 2000 members. When Marlin saw and heard that Carlton had been declared a heretic and his congregation was torn apart, he realized that Carlton's Gospel of Inclusion was classic Universalism. Marlin and Carlton began having lunch once a month.

*Marlin was very sensitive and seemed to understand even more than I did in some ways where I was, Carlton recalls. He was probing my mind, and I his, and he was offering brotherhood. I didn't have many friends in this town.* Then Marlin invited Carlton to preach at All Souls. The church was packed. The entire offering was donated to the New Dimensions congregation. Tulsa's United Church of Christ congregations reached out to Carlton as well, and he was accepted into their ministry in 2006.

Several years passed with the New Dimensions congregation, known as New D, meeting at the Episcopal church and with Carlton preaching occasionally at All Souls.

Quoting from a story in the UU World:

*In April 2008, Marlin Lavanhar preached a sermon that got some buzz on the Internet, defending presidential candidate Barack Obama's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, by placing him in context with the Hebrew prophets and the historic black church. He showed Carlton a thankful letter Wright had sent.*

*Carlton thought out-loud, "We should have come to All Souls, because y'all really are interested in this kind of thing, racial justice. We wouldn't be like boarders or visitors. Y'all would want us there. It would mean a lot to you." So Marlin extended yet another invitation. New D could have the 11:30 a.m. Sunday service slot, free, for the summer, when All Souls went down to a single 10:00 a.m. service.*

*What caught everyone off guard was that about half the people who showed up at that service were All Souls folks. They loved the emotion, the spirit, the high they got from "bucking and shouting and getting our praise on," as Cassandra Austin, a member of Carlton's congregation since 1994, describes it.*

*Then in August, the quietest time of the church year, the question came up at a staff planning retreat: What time should they offer the New D group once the church year started up again? Marlin phoned Carlton to work it out.*

*But Carlton interrupted him. He knew he couldn't continue his ministry in Tulsa. To support his family and his church, as well as to spread his message of inclusion, he had been spending many of his weekends guest preaching in places like Chicago, Atlanta, Denver, Los Angeles.*

*"I announced to the choir last night," he told Marlin, "that I'm not going to keep doing services here. New Dimensions will dissolve. My wife and I are going to consider All Souls our spiritual home, and I encourage them to do the same."*

*And they did. "We're used to, if the man of the house has a vision, you follow it, no questions," says Nicole Ogundare, a twenty-year New D member whom All Souls hired as a ministers' assistant in 2009. "We said yes."*

*All Souls doesn't vote on new members and visitors. It just accepts them. So there were no board meetings about whether to merge the congregations, no committee about how to smooth the transition, no discussion groups about how the church would adapt to make the new members welcome, or, just as important, how to keep old members in their comfort zone. There was no time.*

There were so many changes and adjustments that have been made over the years regarding worship at All Souls. Some long-time members left, unhappy with the changes. Yet far more new people came to be part of the All Souls community, most of them young and many of them people of color.

Carlton Pearson, still known as Bishop Pearson, is an associate minister at All Souls and preaches there whenever he is in Tulsa. He also worked as a United Church of Christ minister in Chicago and then went on to create a new spiritual community in Chicago, named New Dimensions Chicago. He is a sought-after speaker and preacher, has written a number of books based on his Gospel of Inclusion. You can go to his website to learn more!

There is so much courage in this story. So much courage. First is Carlton's courage in listening to that voice that came to him as he was watching the news of Rwanda. And not only listening, but hearing the voice as the voice of God speaking to him. He listened and followed what that voice had to say.

Then there was his courage in sharing that message in his congregation and beyond. And living with the consequences of that. Some years ago, soon after the loss of his congregation and building, after being deemed a heretic, Carlton said:

*I miss ORU. I miss the Board [of Regents]. I miss being Bishop Pearson, the celebrated preacher. I miss my people that packed our place out and came by the thousands. I built that whole place for them. And I miss being able to pick up the phone and call my friends all over the country and say I'm going to be in your city in a couple of weeks, let's get together. And you know, that whole world, that's all gone. At least it appears like it is for me. I'm not celebrated among those people. They don't think about me anymore. It's like I died, and they mourned my death, and they're pretty much over it.*

But in spite of this great pain and loss and grief, Carlton refused to let go of what he had come to believe. He was open and accepting of something new and powerful that changed his life in every way.

Then there was the courage of Marlin Lavanhar reaching out to Carlton and the courage of Carlton accepting that invitation. Each reaching out to someone so different in many ways.

And there was the courage of the All Souls congregation in welcoming the New Dimensions congregation to come be part of All Souls. Not as guests, but as real and accepted members of the community. Not a separate group. And the courage of the New Dimensions congregation to go to a completely different style of congregation than they knew and join in.

That is what it means to be truly Welcoming. Not asking folks to come be like you, but to want to let them **come be who they are** with you. And allowing these new people being themselves to change you. And the congregation itself. That is a truly courageous welcome. A true welcome.

So, I have some questions for you. I invite you to talk about them in our coffee hour after church. I invite you to talk about them with your friends and family.

Let's read them together. Stand up to see them, if you need to.

**Was there ever a time in your life, where you gave up or lost something that was very important to you?**

**What was that experience like?**

**How did it change you – your life – the people around you?**

**How did you get through – what held and sustained you?**

The great poet Langston Hughes says:

*Wandering in the dusk,  
Sometimes  
You get lost in the dusk –  
And sometimes not.*

*Beating your fists  
Against the wall,  
You break your bones  
Against the wall –  
But sometimes not.*

*Walls have been known  
To fall,  
Dusk turn to dawn,  
And chains begone!*

When life calls you to live change or live loss, may you find courage within and courage around you, to go forward in hope.

Blessed be. Amen.