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**Opinion: Worthy of Love**



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Few topics stir emotions like gay pride. And many stem from religious roots.

Protestant Christians, in particular, are deeply divided. While some churches welcome LGBTQ+ members and clergy, many more fundamental denominations strictly denounce lifestyles outside the bounds of traditional gender identification, roles, and practices.

Yet, all claim to believe in Jesus and the Bible. Non-religious Americans also fall across a wide range on the opinion spectrum. There seems no bridge wide enough to carry us all.

Well, maybe. Recently I saw a scene from the movie “Come Sunday” that caused me to wonder. The movie tells the story of the downfall of evangelical megastar Bishop Carlton Pearson who once was a Republican activist in the Bush Sr. White House, a guest on The 700 Club, host of a national TV show, and a jet setter who traveled the world lecturing to fundamentalist gatherings.

His downfall? Not an affair, embezzlement, or corrupt activity. No, his heretical crime was he stopped believing in hell and in God as the inventor of this customized torture chamber into which billions of people would be thrown simply because they’d rejected him, perhaps loved him through a different religion, or hadn’t been saved.

Yes, this was the God whose message he’d long preached but it’d all come undone watching a story on the evening news about the Hutus and Tutsis returning from Rwanda to Uganda. Simply, he couldn’t reconcile the starving mothers and children, with flies in the corners of their eyes and mouths, being sentenced to hell at their deaths — forever. It was a seminal moment and there was no going back.

In a final scene, Pearson comes face to face with a young man who’d long followed him on the well-trodden road to Christian salvation, one who’d struggled, and tried again and again, to make himself different so that maybe, just maybe, he could get saved.

Reggie was a gay Black man, who’d been diagnosed with lymphoma and was dying. He’d bought the warning of the torture chamber and was begging Bishop Pearson to give it one last try, to try and save him. Yet, his impassioned plea was inextricably woven with a clear sense of who he was.

“You know, I figured something out, bishop. You know how you used to tell me, ‘Reggie, just stay strong, that doing gay and being gay is two different things.’ That was bullshit. I’m gay. It ain’t no choice. It just is. It is what I am. It’s who I am. And now God’s going to send me to hell for it . . . God’s gonna punish me for it all. I try so hard to get saved. Different people tried and it just never worked. But you could get me saved, right? I mean if anybody could do it you could do it. Will you do it? Will you? Cause God’s going to send me to hell.”

Bishop Pearson tries to tell Reggie he doesn’t need to get saved, and that, “When the time comes, you’ll be with Him.” But Reggie isn’t convinced.

Then, something happens. Pearson leaves behind explanations and ministerial posturing. It seems, perhaps, in that decisive moment he remembered the new commandment Jesus gave in John 13:34, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

So, sitting close, face to face, with Reggie’s voice now cracking, he simply begins to sing softly, “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong.”

And then Reggie, choking back tears, joins in. “Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so . . .” And it felt to me that this pure, unmitigated, expression of love might just be the only thing capable of rescuing Reggie from the fear of hell.

Most of us, whether we consider ourselves religious, spiritual but not religious, or have long left the whole thing behind, have either experienced or witnessed the power of love. Maybe someone saw, affirmed, something beautiful, worthy, in us that we couldn’t quite get to ourselves. Maybe there was someone who showed us the kind of love that could reach beyond those we get, like, agree with, live like, or love like. If so, we know we were the lucky ones.

Yes, it’s decidedly more difficult when looking at those we’ve come to believe are so vile or evil they deserve scorn, alienation, or even eternity in hell. But it makes me wonder how our national conversation might shift if more of us could start with the basic premise that each of us, regardless of who we are, is worthy of love.

Who knows? Perhaps, together, we could build that bridge after all.

For the complete story, see the 2005 interview “Transcript 304: Heretics” from This American Life, and Pearson’s book, “The Gospel of Inclusion, Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self.”