

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
by. Rev. T. Michael Rock
Sunday, March 30, 2008

Scripture Readings: Luke 6:32-38

Sermon Title: The Character of God

(open with prayer)

Welcome to the beginning of this four-part sermon series called, Will God Save Everyone? When I was interviewing here at Robbinsdale United Church of Christ and a few other places about a year and a half ago, there were some wise Search Committee members who asked what I was reading recently that I could recommend. The book that leapt to mind as my central source during my search process was a book by Phil Gulley and James Mulholland entitled, If Grace is True. This book is the foundation of our journey for the next four weeks, and it has been a companion to me in my own spiritual reflections and writings for the past couple of years. In the book, these two pastors grapple with the historical Christian doctrines of salvation for some or all. I share their conclusion as a part of my personal faith story as well. I do believe that God will save everyone. No exceptions. I can't read the breadth of the scripture and search the depth of my soul without coming to this conclusion even as it lies in stark disagreement with traditional Christian doctrine. In my desire to have all of us learn how to share our faith and talk about our faith with others, its going to take a these four weeks to make the case that God will save everyone.

I didn't start in this place in my faith journey. I started with an idea that God was much more complex and that God had somehow evolved and changed over time. I had read in the Hebrew Scriptures about a God who declared destruction over the enemies of Israel, swept them from the book of life, and left none alive, not even the children. The armies of God were following decrees from God to leave no survivors. The God of these stories clearly has favorites, some are on the path to destruction and others on the path to salvation. One could only hope to be on the side of the history writers, because they are the ones that usually won. These stories are plentiful and are even read aloud in contemporary culture to justify this view of God.

What Gulley and Mulholland do in their book is ask the reader to weigh scripture. Some scripture simply "weighs" more than others. The same technique goes into the making laws in this county. When one court disagrees with another, the judge and jury are asked to "weigh" the contradiction with other pieces of law in order to seek a greater

consistency and hopefully a clearer understanding of justice. So we have those scriptures that describe a God of destruction and death, and we also have the Apostle Paul saying, "The entire law is summed up by saying, Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14) Even Jesus, when asked the greatest commandment, he skips over the 10 that Moses brought down and goes right to love of God, self and neighbor. Jesus even says that, "all the law and the prophets hang on these commandments." (Matthew 22). So we weigh the importance of the stories of conquest of Canaan with Paul's, "entire law" statement, and God in flesh, Jesus, proclaiming the greatest commandment. Not just a story, but an answer to a direct question. On the scales of scripture it would be hard to argue against the primacy of a love ethic in our holy book. It is repeated over and over again as the most important thing to remember.

So, I can dismiss the stories of God murdering and condemning entire races of people. God would not ask me to love my neighbor and then ask me to destroy them. It simply is not in God's character. In fact, I don't think some of the early writers of scripture understood the true character of God, or there wouldn't be those stories. Does this make part of the Bible wrong? Yes, I believe this book of faith has flaws and mistakes, just like we all do. When we weigh the evidence it is hard to comprehend a God who would kill the children of Israel's enemies. When the Psalmists repeat over and over again that God's steadfast love endures forever, it is easy to determine that God is about loving us and loving everyone.

The easiest way I found to understand this was to look at the way God is described most often in scripture and in the Christian tradition. That descriptor is God the Father. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray he used the most radical personal way of describing God to a crowd that knew it mustn't ever call God by name, Jesus prayed to pray to "Abba", not the Seventies disco band, but Abba, meaning "daddy," the parent who loves intimately and unconditionally. This prayer opening was surely ridiculed by the temple priests, because it describes a relationship with God that was thought to be too distant for any, but the most orthodox of followers. Jesus tells a crowd that God is close and the God cares about you. I don't think I fully appreciated this statement myself until I became a father. I don't think that I could ever reject or condemn my child, no matter what he or she did. Even in the darkest possibilities, I believe I would still love them and desire them to be whole. After all, I'm their Dad, and my job is simply be there. That is how Jesus describes the character of God, a Dad, present for the soccer games and choir concerts, present for the breakups and breakdowns. This descriptor is about the quality of relationship, it is not distant, judgmental, authoritative Father, but it is the permission giving, forgiving, accepting, and loving, "Dad", that doesn't give up on us even when we give up on ourselves.

So the biggest barrier to this possible image of God lies in the punishment. I think the statement that follows, I believe God will Save Everyone, is There is no such place as Hell. Despite all the cartoons and B movie descriptions, punishment from a God of love has no place for eternal damnation. Instead God seeks restoration, healing. God, the daddy, wants us to learn from our mistakes and then begin living again. A God of love wants us to come home. All of us. Second chances are important to us. A central piece of our liturgy is the Confession and Assurance. This is second chance theology from the very character of God, who searches us knows us, and forgives us again and again. Does this sound like a God who would judge someone to hell for all eternity? Hell no. Our God of restoration challenges us to understand the truth of grace. We will always be forgiven. Grace will always be given. Even to those who we don't think deserve it. Grace is free, forgiveness is free. The challenge for us, as Christian people then is not to just love those who love us, that's easy. We are called to love our enemies, and to do good expecting nothing in return. We are called to have the same mercy on others as God has on them and on us. The character of God compels us to be generous with others and to cast aside all judgment and prejudice.

For me, the prayer that matters most, is: God teach me to love . . . I can't find anything redeemable about that person, but I know that you love them, and that I have to learn how to love them as well. When I first walked into the Adult Correctional Institution to do prison ministry, I didn't know that I would be teaching and preaching with sex offenders, rapists, and child molesters. But, here I was in this Medium Security facility with these middle aged white men who gave me the willies. I had no idea how I was supposed to act with integrity around them, so I asked God to help. I prayed for them, and to my surprise, they prayed for me. In our joined prayers and worship and studying scripture, I discovered that I was grateful that these men were in prison, but I was also assured that they were loved by God. No walls or wire could separate them from God's grace. Their honesty about their brokenness and the pain they had caused others seemed to clear a pathway for grace. The greatest challenge for me was when they were released. It was safer to love them when they were separated from society. Suddenly, all of my fear and prejudice flooded back when I knew they were outside. I'm sure that I wasn't alone in my fear, and when one asked if they could join my church I evaded the phone calls for several weeks hoping that my prejudice would just go away. But, the character of God does not go away. God's steadfast love endures forever and I was caught in my discomfort and sin at living separately from God's love. So, I returned the next call and met Jeffrey for coffee. My avoidance caused no ill will, and he was grateful to meet me for coffee and conversation. I sat there and listened to his story and struggle about his release from prison. His monitor bracelet was an

ever present reminder of his punishment and crime. When he asked about my church and the God is Still Speaking comma and the proclamation that, "whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," I had to respond from my truth that he was welcome as long as I and my congregation could become a little more Christ-like, he would experience the loving character of God in the pews at my church. I didn't promise him our love, but on that day, in the midst of our prayers and our coffee I could assure him that nothing could separate him from the love of God and restorative powers of Christ Jesus. It is who God is and I am sure that God wanted to save him and me from ourselves. AMEN.