

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
by. Rev. T. Michael Rock
Sunday, April 20, 2008

Scripture Readings: Luke 15:1-32 and Revelations 21:3-6

Sermon Title: The Persistence of God

(open with prayer)

Will God Save Everyone? No Exceptions? Yes, I believe that God will save everyone. "Everyone in the whole world, every person who has been, is and shall be. I mean Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, New Agers, Pagans, and Christians. I mean atheists, agnostics, the apathetic and the hostile. I even mean rapists, child molesters, and terrorists. I mean the person that you or I think is the most evil, most despicable person on earth. I believe God can and will save everyone." This is not apology, but I have to admit that these words are not mine. The statement I just read is from the book, If Grace is True, by Phil Gulley and James Mulholland. When I first read those words a few years ago a chill ran down my spine, I laughed a nervous laugh, and I immediately started to think of the exceptions to this statement. I had already proclaimed in my faith journey that there was no room for hell in Christian theology, but this statement forced me to empty the place of my judgment in my own heart. I had to start finding away to practice what I preached. If God saves everyone, then I have to imagine the possibility of redemption for the most evil and horrible people that I could imagine. This hard work of my growing faith has caused many 'dark nights of the soul' as St. John of the Cross versed it.

What was helpful for me was to start at the beginning. Where did the possibility of God saving everyone come from? Maybe it came from the Oglala Lakota Sioux who tell the story of creation as the people followed the white buffalo out of the Black Hills. There were red people, white people, yellow people and black people. As long as they lived on the earth there would be division and strife, but upon their death, they would be reconciled and redeemed once again. Death is not an end, but a returning. That story dates back over 3000 years. Maybe it was the Hebrew story of the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah. In an effort to bring the world together, God chose an unlikely pair of travelers to start a family that would out number the stars or the sand. Maybe it was from the prophet Mohammed who proclaimed in the Koran that there were many paths to salvation, but each person must choose a path. Maybe it was Jesus who brought together Jew and Gentile, women and men, young and old, rich and poor to eat at the

table. Maybe it was the respected merchant Marco Polo who traveled East looking for treasure in 1261 yet came back with more pieces of salvation truth lived by the followers of Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tzu. The reaction of the Roman Christian church to the faith stories or reincarnation and the possibility of universal salvation was the invention of purgatory, a place where God could continue to work on the soul even after death. Maybe it was the truth that was linked in all of these stories. Everyone is welcome and everyone is wanted. The gospel of hospitality becomes the central message for the church. We proclaim it week in and week out. We are the open and affirming church, we are the accessible church, we are the peace with justice church. God welcomes us, God wants us. So we reflect that desire into the world and remind everyone that grace is true. God will save everyone, no exceptions.

But, what about Mussolini, Pol Pot, Osama Bin Laden? What about Hitler? What about this evil man who condemned six million Jews to death in an attempt to wipe out Jews from the planet. The suffering he caused continues to strike fear and pain in the hearts of survivors and families over 60 years after his death. He was evil, he deserves hell. He deserves to rot in the torment of the eternal gas chambers and prison camps. When I say that, I pass judgment on him in the same way he passed judgment and persecuted an entire race of people. Hitler did on earth what many people expect God to do after we die. Hitler condemned. Do you see the difference? Hitler condemned. God saves. Hitler hated. God loves. I cannot be consistent in my faith practice if I allow anyone to be condemned. That is not who God is. That is not who God calls me to be. No one is apart from God. Not Jew or Greek, slave or free, women or man, straight or gay, child or elder, Christian or not. All people are created to love and live and be whole. The role of the church is to help people learn how to live, love and be whole. God does not condemn. God loves.

Now, I don't know how God does it, that is a divine mystery. All I know is that God pursues us, nothing separates us, and God has the patience and will to make us whole. I have to admit that I have a hard time loving everyone, especially those who perpetrate evil, abuse, and dehumanization. In fact, it can almost make me ill to think that I will share someday in eternity with people who have done despicable things. So I find myself praying to God, not to help me love them, but to have patience with God to work things out. When I pray for patience, time slows down and I find myself having the space to listen and to forgive. When I pray for patience, I can begin to see how the persistence of God works on my own judgment. In my own life, the lack of grace is impatience, and the fullness of grace lies in my ability to listen and be present with others. God's persistence use of patience allows for people to find God and find themselves. The good news we celebrate in this

place is that somewhere along the way, we were shown that patience and listening ear. We gave up trying to control others and allowed them just be loved. The worship service may go over an hour, but we are developing the patience of saints and disciples by allowing ourselves to just be present in the preaching, singing and praying of our lives.

We also have these stories about the persistence of God's grace. When the shepherd loses one sheep out of hundred, the shepherd does the irrational thing and pursues that one lost sheep. God will pursue the lost until everyone is accounted for. When the woman loses a coin she lights a lamp and begins looking, not until the lamp goes out, or the kids come home, or the oven timer goes off. She looks for the coin until it is found. God has no other agenda except to find us again and again. When the prodigal returns home, he is met by loving arms and a celebration. There is no condemnation, judgment or ridicule. There is only grace and love. God seeks and welcomes and listens and saves. This is who God is and what God does. God has eternal patience for us. God never stops creating in us the possibility of whole. It is why forgiveness is a part of every worship service at Robbinsdale United Church of Christ. We hear the Assurance of Pardon, not because we are awful sinners, but because we are asked every week to create the table where everyone is welcome. We are being asked to recognize that we are forgiven, and that we are called to forgive over and over and over again, until we begin to let go of our judgment of others and imagine a heaven where God sets a table in the presence of my enemies and the cup overflows. We are going to keep acknowledging forgiveness and grace until we can imagine a heaven where we are washed with tears of forgiveness and joy. It will be a heaven where the Fundamentalist Christian parent is sitting down with their gay son, we will see a humbled Hitler washing the feet of a Jewish Holocaust victim with his tears, we will see a WW II American soldier eating with a Japanese pilot, and we will see Saddam Hussein and George Bush sharing a meal. Jesus will be kissing Judas and the lion will be lying down with the lamb.

We will continue to love, even if it seems impractical, because God first loved us. The more of us lay down our judgment and prejudice the less place evil will have to roam in our hearts and in our world. We need to spread the good news of the Persistence of God on visitors Sunday and every other day of the week. We need to remind ourselves of God's still speaking voice, "The dwelling place of God is with mortals, God will live with us. We will be God's people and God will be with us. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will pass away." No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, "I am making all things new."

I can hear that voice. It is the voice of God proclaiming that we are all made to be one. It is the triumph of grace. Forever and ever and for everyone. AMEN.