

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
by. Rev. T. Michael Rock
Sunday, April 6, 2008

Scripture Readings: Luke 4:14-21

Sermon Title: The Will of God

(open with prayer)

Will God Save Everyone? No Exceptions? Yes, I believe that God will save everyone. Last week we looked at the character of God and determined that a God of love cannot possibly be the same of god of eternal damnation. God wants us to be whole. God wants to be who we are with all of our creativity, imagination, warts and all. It is in God's character to desire us to love. Love one another, love ourselves, and to love God who first loved us. It doesn't mean we are perfect at this non-judgmental sort of love, but it does mean that God calls us forgive and be forgiven in the same breath. That is what wholeness is about. It was also occasion of my first conflict about this sermon series.

I was asked this week about judgment and Jesus talking about separating the wheat from the chaff and the chaff being thrown into the fire where it utterly consumed. Obviously, there was some good folks in the world, wheatie types, and there was chaff, the rest of us. Some were given the task of becoming bread of life and others faced destruction. I listen and affirm the complexity of scripture, and then I head to my study to see what Jim Mullholland and Phil Gulley have to say on the matter. Why are some people damned? Jim and Phil search this question with me and come up with two common justifications for eternal damnation and/or hell, which I said last week can't exist within the Character of God. The first justification was that God really doesn't want to save everyone and the second was that God can't save everyone. These are the only two possible reasons for hell that we could come up with. The first assumes God's choice and basically says, "No". The second assumes God wishes that all could be saved but doesn't have that kind of power. Neither premise holds water for that kind of destruction. Remember, God wants us to be whole, forgiven and grace-filled.

So, how do we deal with the "wrath of God" presented throughout the scriptures? I would ask you to search your own souls and stories. This is the practice of faithful learning. Look at your own life and the places where God is revealed. I have been sitting down and listening to people's stories my whole life, and I have never heard a single story that God is revealed is wrath. It just doesn't happen. Sometimes, God is revealed in the healing that comes, or in the surprising relationships that can come

from the experience, but in the stories of our lives, God does not appear in the wrath. Imagine the cancer patient, and all the times faithful people talked about sickness or illness being the will of God, and that God doesn't give us anything we can't handle. I think this could be the single most damaging aspect of modern Christianity. The cancer or other illness does not reveal God. It is our response and relationship to that suffering that reveals God. Remember Dwight's sermon in Lent about the man being born blind? The disciples asked if it was because of his sin or his parents? Jesus said, "Neither, it is so that God can be made known." God isn't in the blindness, God is in the healing and the hope. Jim and Phil remind us that, "Human brokenness is not the result of God's wrath, but the reason for God's grace. God's will is not to break some pots into shards or cast some children into hell. God heals, God does not destroy. God welcomes, God does not reject. God delivers, God does not damn."

The will of God is create something new in us. The will of God is to heal and make whole and be present in our brokenness. When we pray every Sunday that "God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are asking for this sense of healing and newness. God's will for us is that everyone will know salvation and find a seat at the table. The banquet is set and each empty chair is a reminder that God's will is still doing the work of redemption. When all the chairs are filled then the feast begins and the trumpets blare and the harps sing and the angels among us dance a holy dance. **Everyone is welcome, but even more than that, everyone is wanted.** This is the evangelism strategy that I will challenge you with as we move toward Visitor Sunday in two weeks. It is true that everyone is welcome at Robbinsdale United Church of Christ, but the redemptive ministry that God calls us to is to remind our visitors and each other that each of you are also wanted to come to this table. It is the desire of God for everyone to find healing. The Apostle Paul started this movement, and it was amplified by St. Augustine, and later Calvin and many others. Each determined that it was the will of God that we were pre-destined for a place at the table. I had once rejected this theology as one of exclusion and one that lacked freedom and dismissed the presence of grace. But now, I see that they were right about pre-destination. These were the forbearers of the Congregational church as well, and they had the right theology but they were wrong in their math. Their error was vastly underestimating God's desire and will. God wants all of us, on earth and in heaven. That is God's will

The question that is left is how to move in the direction of God's will. This is where we enter the first public appearance of Jesus' ministry. He came to Nazareth, walked into the church, picked up the scroll and read from the Prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the

oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, looked the worshipers over, and said to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." God's will is no longer theory and prophetic words written in some ancient scroll. God's will has happened in this place. We have heard the mission of Jesus and are invited to follow. As a church of Jesus Christ we are called to fulfill what has been heard. Good news to the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight, the oppressed go free and a proclamation that God is still speaking. This is the will of God, to search out the lost and lonely and welcome them to the banquet. This is the will of God, to greet suffering with hope and redemption. This is the will of God, to offer healing for our environment and our souls. Theologian John Robinson writes in 1950 that, "Judgment can never be God's last word, because if it were, it would speak of God's utter failure."

We have to understand that God will save everyone, simple because God is God. We will resist and struggle and doubt along the way and may even die trying to deny but God's grace will find us, forgive us, and usher back to the table. Remember, in God's will we are not confined to our days of breathing. One of my favorite wisdom teachers is Clarence Jordan who wrote in The Cotton Patch Gospels, "I just cannot stick my God into a little time-space relationship here, hindered and always working against the impending physical death . . . Maybe God is in hot pursuit of us; we've been thinking of maybe giving our heart to Christ. We're thinking so hard on it we're driving along and we don't hear the whistle of the freight train. And bam . . . it smashes us to pieces. And God says, "You know, I almost had that one they were really close to believing, but that darn freight train beat me to it." I ask, what kind of God is that? A God whose purposes can be thwarted by a freight train? I can't fit that in.

I say, neither can I. God pursues us. God wants us. Nothing separates us from God. In this Easter season it is important to remind ourselves that the real symbol of hope is not the cross where Jesus died, but the empty tomb that reminds us of the possibility that God's will works on the living and the dead. God's relentless pursuit is our good news. May we serve as God's disciples with the same passion and persistence for those who have been forgotten. May God's will be done.