

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
by. Rev. T. Michael Rock
Sunday, April 3, 2008

Scripture Readings: Exodus 3:7-15 and Luke 7:44-50

Sermon Title: The Salvation of God

(open with prayer)

Will God Save Everyone? No Exceptions? Yes, I believe that God will save everyone. The first time this idea was introduced to me was in my first semester in seminary. I was taking Systematic Theology from Dr. Mark Heim, a Baptist minister and scholar. He was just coming off a sabbatical and had published a book called, "Is Christ the Only Way?" The book had caused some minor controversy at the seminary and several of us immediately disagreed with this liberal professor. His colleagues, however, gave him a much harder time than any of his students. So Dr. Heim developed this strategy to the question about the book. When asked about the title of the book, "Is Christ the Only Way?" he would respond, "Read the book, or assume that I say, Yes."

This approach disarmed his critiques and probably sold a few more copies. It forced me to read the book. In its pages I was first confronted with the idea that if God loves then God will save every person, and if you believe that God is love then salvation cannot be an exclusively Christian experience. Salvation can no longer be the sole possession of a specific culture, religion, denomination, or person. Salvation belongs to God. It is that simple. Salvation is the work of God.

One of the basic stories of God's work is in the prequel to the Exodus event in the Hebrew Scripture. God hears the people and want to save them. They have not worshiped God, prayed to God, or had sung any hymns. They were the descendents of Jacob had lived in Egypt for 400 years without any evidence of uttering the name of Yahweh. Yet, in this story God hears their suffering and enters human history to save them. God appears to a shepherd, Moses, who has been an outcast from Egypt and commands him to deliver this message of salvation. When asked who God is, the voice of God says, "YAHWEH." I am who I am. I have always been and I will always be. I am has come and I am will send and I am will save you. This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations. Salvation is the work of God. We do not earn it. We cannot buy it. We cannot put barriers around it. God will save everyone, no exceptions.

So, does that water down our faith and make the church irrelevant if God is out there doing the work of salvation? Why would we maintain this building and sing these songs, and pay the minister? This is where life

gets risky. Most Christian churches focus on Jesus and atonement theology. That is, Jesus came to take away the sins of the world, and by his death we were made free. These churches were built and maintained to keep a head count of who came and acknowledged the death of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. It is why churches are full on Easter. Jesus paid the price so we could sing Hallelujah. Let's take an offering.

When we look at the possibility that grace is true and free and not earned and is given regardless of our understanding of the cross we have opened up this new can of worms. Jesus didn't have to die for us to be saved. The redemptive work of Jesus was not on the cross, but at the table. When Jesus sat with the outcast, dined with the lepers, broke bread with tax collectors, and healed the rich and the poor, Jesus showed us the way of God's salvation. God's will is a healing will. God's character is a loving character, and God's salvation knows no boundaries. Jesus didn't die in order for our salvation, Jesus died because of the clash between unwavering love and unyielding pride and intolerance always results in a cross or an assassination or torture or imprisonment or persecution. The cross is our reminder of resistance to God's grace. Jesus didn't come to die on a cross, Jesus came to teach us how to live and how to love.

Our companions on this journey of grace, Phil Gulley and James Mulholland remind us that when, "the cross is no longer understood as a payment for human sin, than it begins to remind us of the cost of being gracious in an ungracious world." The hope of the cross is that the story did not end on Good Friday our resurrection story is all about the victory of love over death. Love continues. No intolerance or fear of hatred can kill the undying love of God. The church is here for us learn about the greatest force in the universe. The church is here to teach us about living and loving. It was the purpose of Jesus' ministry and it is why we keep the heat on the winter time in this building. We are called and compelled to come together for living and loving. When we become a church that is only there for us to be baptized and buried in, then we might as well shut the doors. If that is the case, then we no longer understand who God is, who God was, and who God will always be.

My faith was strengthened as I read Dr. Heim's book during holy week in my first year. I think my faith as a Christian formed during those days of questioning. I found that I could embrace the resurrection in a new way because it was consistent with what I had learned about God. God was always about creation and life. Resurrection moved out of the realm of mystery and into the concrete as I began to understand that God was determined to love and redeem and raise again. I began to understand that there were no boundaries to God's grace. The resurrection is our story of God's salvation, not for Christians, but for all humanity. God triumphs over death. Jesus lives and continues to teach us

how to love. We are forgiven and we can begin again and again. This is the good news of the salvation of God.

It is good to recognize that this is difficult work. For the past week I have heard from a dozen folks about someone in their lives that, "deserved hell." A couple folks even described people's behavior and said, that "hell is probably too good for that person." I understand those feelings, and I promise that next week we are going to deal with evil and the absence of hell. For now we look at a simple story in scripture that we have heard before. Jesus is having a meal with Simon and his family. These were righteous folk who followed the law and loved God. A woman came into the courtyard and began to bathe the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume. In the story she is remembered as a prostitute or a beggar, she has no standing and certainly would cause most family meals a fair degree of upset. Yet, she is there kissing the feet of Jesus and showing him gratitude and love. Was it because Jesus died for her? Was it because he suffered? Was it because he rose from the dead? No! She no longer feared rejection and condemnation. She caught a glimpse of the living grace and living love. This despised woman who was already condemned by her faith, experienced salvation.

The message of Jesus on that day was to teach Simon and his family the difference between living life judgmentally or graciously. Jesus and this woman taught Simon how to love. When we give up our idea that God saves some and condemns others we give up wondering how that all works out. We give up understanding judgment. When we give up the need to judge, we can begin to live more graciously.

The first step to this, of course, is to learn how to see our own reflection. The woman in the story saw herself as redeemed. She saw herself in a new way and acted like a loving fool. What a gift. To be released from our barriers or belief and judgment, we need to see ourselves as a part of salvation. Knowing our own weakness and our own shortcomings, how, then can we judge others. God's salvation is for everyone. Our gratitude needs to be for everyone. Jim and Phil comment that the worst thing that happened to Christianity was that it became a religion. It became about the rules and the laws and the judgment. It became what Jesus tried is whole ministry to undo.

What we have to remember is that following Jesus is the center of our shared ministry. We are called to love like Jesus, live like Jesus, affirm like Jesus, heal like Jesus, and in short, be like Jesus. It is a joy to be a Christian and to be a member of a church. It is joy to look out in a congregation full of people that are a part of my salvation. It is a joy to know that there are no barriers to our God who continues to enter our lives with glimpses of light in order that we might live more abundantly. Life is a joy, love is a joy. We are the joy of God in human form. Thanks be to God. AMEN.