Sunday, January 23, 2005
THE WIDE CIRCLE OF DIVINE LOVE
Genesis 1:26-27; John 1:1-5

On Friday evening, February 11, and all day Saturday, February 12, First-Plymouth Church will be the site of an exciting seminar based on a book published in 2003. The title of the book is If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person. The co-authors of this book, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, will be present to lead the seminar. There will be lectures, panel discussions, and other events. Everyone is invited. This seminar is being held as part of our "One Church — One Book" emphasis for 2004-2005.

The sermon today is related to this coming event.

In their book If Grace Is True, the authors tell how they struggled as young Christians to reconcile the contradictory images of God presented in the Bible. This made a big impression on me because I've often wrestled with the same issue. I'm convinced that many of you have had the same experience. I'm going to tell one of their stories from their book as if it were mine because I had a very similar Sunday Church School situation.

When I was a young child attending Sunday Church School and worship, one of my favorite pictures in the classroom showed Jesus with children of every race. You probably remember that painting. We also learned a song that went with that picture, "Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world; red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." This song made a lasting impression on me, even though in my Sunday School classroom all of us were children with predominantly light skin colors.

Because of this picture and the song, I found Jesus easy to accept as a child. He loves all the children of the world. It agreed with that other song I learned, "Jesus loves me." Our teacher also reminded us that Jesus came among us to show us God's love.

Later, when I was a teenager and started to read some of the other stories in the Bible, I began to have some strong doubts about the character of God, much like the authors of If Grace Is True. Among many other stories with a similar theme, I remember especially the story in the book of Joshua where the Israelites kill every man, woman, and child in the towns of Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir. This was terrible enough, but what shocked me even more was the reason the Bible gave for the killing: "Joshua left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed them."

This didn't sound like the God Jesus revealed and the one I remembered from the song, "Jesus loves all the children of the world." Furthermore, I knew that in the creation story in the book of Genesis, it is written: "God created human beings in God's image, in the image of God He created them." I wondered, why would God command some human beings created in God's image to kill other human beings created in God's image? Weren't we all children of God?

When I would question this action of God, I was given unsatisfying answers. One teacher said God commanded the killing because those children would grow up in an evil culture and eventually end up in hell. Then I found other passages in the Bible which implied these

children and adults would have ended up in hell anyway because they didn't have the right beliefs.

Another teacher said that maybe God ordered this massacre of all men, women, and children to protect the people of Israel from the evil that would have come through intermarriage with pagans. But I knew of other stories in the Bible where it was okay to marry people of a different religious background.

Still, another teacher told me not to ask such questions. "The ways of God are mysterious," she said. Maybe this teacher found this violent image of God hard to believe, but at the same time, she couldn't overcome her belief that all of the words and stories in the Bible are equally true.

As I continued to grow and mature in my faith and to experience the grace and love of God in my life, and the more I studied the Bible and how it came to be the Bible as we now know it, and the more I studied what Biblical scholars have discovered, I began to learn how to evaluate Bible stories. Some Bible stories and teachings more accurately portray God's character than others.

If you believe that all of the Bible is equally inspired and authoritative, God is as likely to swallow us up in an earthquake or drown us in a flood as God is to forgive our sin and take us into His arms. The reported behavior of God in the Bible is erratic at best and nearly schizophrenic in some instances. God rescues the Jewish people from oppression in one chapter and a few chapters later has to be convinced by Moses not to destroy them.

Learning how to evaluate Bible stories and teachings allows for the possibility that some descriptions of God and God's behavior are more accurate than others. How, then, can you evaluate Bible stories and teachings? Here are several ways that have been helpful to me and to countless others.

First, instead of starting with the assumption that if Christianity is true all other beliefs must be false, it's helpful to begin in another place. Reflect on the wonder and beauty of creation. One of the most notable aspects of the world in which we live is the great diversity that is found among the living and the nonliving. How many varieties of butterflies are there to delight the eye?

Then there is the human family. Try sitting in a shopping mall and counting the categories of people. While ethnicity, skin color, and gender might offer three examples, each individual is unique in his or her own way. There are millions and billions of human beings, all similar but distinct from one another.

Diversity is something we often take for granted. There are in the neighborhood of fifty million species of plants and animal life currently to be found. Wouldn't one kind of butterfly or bird have been sufficient? Apparently not, because variety seems to be the way things are supposed to be.

So why should there not be different religions? Why should you be surprised or troubled by the reality of different ways to express spirituality? Since diversity seems to be the norm in creation, by analogy, a pluralism of religious responses among the people of the world is reasonable to expect. Indeed, a rich diversity of cultures and religions is what you encounter in the world. Just as within the worlds of plants, insects, fish, and cattle, so within the human

world there have been and continue to be numerous expressions of religious interest and concern.

How do you react to such a creation, a world filled with diversity and numerous religious traditions? No one seems upset by the tremendous variety of snakes, beans, trees, rocks, and elements. Diversity does not have to be seen as a liability or the result of a confused Creator. Doesn't it then follow that a variety of religious expressions should be as important to the Creator as a variety of canine breeds?

Religious conflict occurs when one group assumes that it alone has all the truth and then claims the right to assert itself over another. I believe Christians can acknowledge the authenticity of other faiths without denying their own convictions.

In the Bible, God is said to have looked upon the whole of creation and declared it "very good." If the Creator deemed creation to be very good with all the diversity found therein, shouldn't you also come to the same conclusion? Is it necessary to deny or attack the faith of others or to condemn others to hell in order to maintain and defend your own?

While the Bible teaches that sin is a serious source of destructive behavior that disrupts human relationships within the human family and with God, it is not necessary to conclude from this that the whole of creation is now contaminated by human sin. Creation is still good.

The variety seen all around you suggests that variety and diversity are part of the divine intention. Pluralism, diversity, seems more godlike than not. I believe that Christians can emphasize the common good found among all people and can bring their understanding of God and their experience of Jesus to others without denying from the outset the experience and knowledge of others. In fact, the Bible offers accounts of many different people in many different contexts recognizing and experiencing God.

How, then, should Christians understand the many kinds of religious expression that are present in this world? One traditional Christian view is that all the non-Christian people of the world exist primarily to provide a mission field for dedicated evangelists. In extreme forms of this position, it is believed that most of the people in the world have been damned by God before they are even born. This view also assumes that other religions are at best the erroneous result of misguided people searching for God, and at worst represent demonic efforts to prevent people from finding God and becoming Christian and knowing redemption.

There is an alternative view, and it can also be found in the Bible. Other religions, according to this view, are a clear sign of God at work in the midst of the human family in many different cultures and in many different times. They are also the work of God's creative power. God is a gracious Creator who providentially provides for all people, since all are created in God's image.

This view acknowledges the diversity of God's creation and marvels at all the different kinds of people that Jesus loved so deeply. In so doing, you witness God's love in action.

A second way of understanding and affirming the wide diversity of divine love is to be found in the ministry of Jesus. You can also find here another way of evaluating Bible stories. One day, according to the story in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, an individual asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first or the most important of all?" If Jesus had believed all scriptures were of equal worth, he would have answered, "All the commandments are equally

important.” Instead, he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus added this sentence: “All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments of love of God and love of neighbor as yourself.” In other words, the love of God and God’s love for every human being — and your calling to do the same — is the central teaching of the Bible. The Apostle Paul said, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.'” It is the lens through which all scripture needs to be interpreted and evaluated.

The priority of God’s love, God’s grace, means that I cannot accept Joshua’s claim that God commanded him to kill all the men, children, and women in Canaan. In the same way, it means that I cannot accept what the skyjackers said as they crashed into buildings on September 11, 2001, “Allah is great!” Once again, religion was used as the justification for a terrible act of human inhumanity — murder in the name of God. A God of love doesn’t murder His children or ask you or anyone else to do the same.

Using the priority of love as a way to evaluate scripture and the teachings of other religions has allowed me to avoid the all-or-nothing approach to the Bible so prevalent in Christianity today. I sometimes hear people say, “If there is one error in the Bible, how can one trust any of it?” I cannot accept this statement. It suggests the only choices are uncritical acceptance or complete rejection. To reject the Bible completely is to miss its central truths. But if I accept all of it uncritically, then I am accepting some ugly ideas about God.

When Jesus said the first and foremost commandment is, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself,” he was also saying that God has no commitment greater than love. Everything God does, God does because of love. The Bible doesn’t say God can be loving or God is often loving or God is usually loving; it says, “God is love.”

My experience leads me to the conviction that the practice of love, not the defense of doctrine, is the primary challenge for Christians and the adherents of other religions as well. The truth of Jesus that leads to life is the participation in God’s love that the Bible declares is extended to all repeatedly and in an amazing variety of forms.

God’s love is wide enough to include us all. It is long enough to last through eternity. It is higher and deeper than any human love you have known. It reaches into the deepest hell and redeems the lost. Amen.