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SERMON 40
Ephesians 3:1-13

The Letter to the Ephesians is where Paul sets out his understanding of the principalities and the powers. This isn't something to which Paul devoted an enormous amount of attention; he mentions the principalities and powers once in Colossians, once in Romans, and twice in Ephesians. But it's important, because it has its roots in a way of thinking about how evil appeared in the world that is very, very different than Paul's usual focus on personal sin and redemption. In this view, the powers and principalities are all fallen creatures, and only with the help of Christ can people contend with them. As Paul tells us in Romans: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Ephesians is the heart of Paul's teaching on the principalities and powers: "To me," we heard Paul say today, "though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all men see...that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and power in the heavenly places."

How shall the principalities and powers be rebuked? How will we contend with their extraordinary power? Ephesians will be our road map. The first half of Ephesians, from which today's text comes, tells us how the church contends with the principalities and powers. And the second half of Ephesians, from which next week's

text comes, tells us what we, as church members, must do in the church's battle against the principalities and powers.

Paul's thinking about the principalities and powers has its roots in Genesis Chapter 6 Verses 1 through 4., which describes the Nephilim, a race of divine beings who belong to the heavenly court. "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days," the verses read, "and also afterward, when the sons of God came into the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown." In this way, according to Genesis, evil was introduced to the world.

The idea of a race of giants or supermen as the source of evil in the world had a lot of support throughout the Old Testament. There, the powers and principalities are called "angels", "sons of God" and "holy ones." They are "ministers", "commanders", "hosts", an "army" or, most commonly, "messenger". In apocryphal and other extra-Testamentary sources their names are legion. They are "watchers", "spirits", "glorious ones", "thrones", "authorities" and "powers". Satan was one of the Nephilim, before his fall.

The most comprehensive support for the idea of the principalities and powers comes from the apocryphal Book of Enoch. The first chapters of Enoch contain a lengthy and detailed account of the fall of the angelic "watchers", their punishment, and the patriarch's intervention in their history. The narrative is based on Genesis Chapter 6, verses 1 through 4, the passage about the Nephilim. In Enoch, Adam and Eve are virtually invisible. It is the Nephilim who bring evil into the world.

The Book of Enoch was highly esteemed by Jews and Christians alike. Paul was almost certain to have been familiar with it. In Paul's reading, Enoch's watchers come to include, not just a race of fallen ancient creatures, but, now, all of creation. For Paul, there are good principalities, and there are bad principalities. But all principalities and powers, like creation itself, are fallen. "An angelic power in its fallen estate," says the theologian William Stringfellow, "is a demonic power, because it is a principality existing in the present age in a state of alienation from God, cut off from the life originating in his life, separated from its own true life and, thus, being in a state of death." The principalities and powers contend among themselves to have us worship them instead of God. They tempt us to pursue their goals - power, money, violence and domination - instead of God's. But to substitute the principalities and powers for God is idolatry, and its end can only be death.

In New Testament times people sensed the inner spiritual reality of oppressive systems, but projected them outward and heavenward, and personified them. They spoke of them as angels, demons, principalities, powers and thrones. They intuited that they were under the domination of principalities and powers that they could not see and that were beyond any person's control.

For us, the principalities and powers include all of creation as we live in it: corporations, law firms, military forces and political systems, institutions and movements, ideas and countries and empires and ideologies of all kinds and descriptions. They exist apart from the people in them. They are as much a part of creation as we are. Think of the IRS or Microsoft. We don't think of the IRS as a group of hardworking

federal employees, although many hardworking federal employees work there; no, we think of the IRS as the IRS, an institution with the power to tax and audit and penalize and seize property. We don't think of Microsoft as a gathering of software engineers, although many talented and dedicated software engineers work there; no, we think of Microsoft as the behemoth of the computer software universe, a force unto itself that creates and then exploits markets, ruthlessly destroying competitors along the way. In our time, we have seen information itself become the building material of global institutions, like the internet, an idea that is just as real, just as much a principality and power, as any city or any army. The University of Phoenix, which exists essentially on the web, is just as real, just as much a principality and a power, as Harvard or Yale.

The first half of Ephesians is primarily about the church. Here Paul sets out, more specifically and concretely than in any other place, his conviction that the church is the Body of Christ. This was not unique to Ephesians. But now Paul tells us that the very foundation of his ministry, the core of the gospel that he has been given the gift of grace to preach, is a great mystery about the church that has heretofore been hidden. The mystery is that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." It is the church that will make this mystery known, and the church will make the mystery known to the "principalities and powers."

How will this mystery be made clear to the world? Paul has in mind neither evangelism nor social action or nor any other additional activity by God's people. The church, by its very existence, testifies and witnesses to this great mystery. However

passive, in this fashion the church proves to all principalities and powers how splendid and wise God is in crowning the history of his creation by his full revelation.

But there's a catch: the church is both part of the solution and part of the problem. On one hand, it is to witness to the principalities and powers about God's plan for all the people of the world. On the other, it - as an institution - is also one of the fallen principalities and powers. As we watch the Anglican Communion struggle with the decision to ordain an openly gay bishop, we have no doubt that the Communion, as an institution, is a radically different thing than its contentious individual members. As we watch the Roman Catholic Church try to address decades of child abuse and molestation, we see a small number of individual priests who abused the sacred trust vested in the clergy, but we also see an institution protecting itself as an institution against the claims, not only of an outraged society, but of its very members.

And, because it is the Body of Christ, the church's fallenness is all the more shocking and dismaying.

How do we hold fast to what is uniquely and essentially the church?. To what must we cling at all costs to keep our church from slipping further into the world of the principalities and powers?

Paul pictured the church to be much like the churches he established throughout Asia Minor: small groups of dedicated Christians, persecuted and ostracized, gathered together in the courtyards and living rooms of those church members who were wealthy enough to have large homes. The Word and the sacraments were at the heart of its practice: the gospels were read to teach and inspire; the eucharist was celebrated

to recreate the death and new life of the believers in the death and new life of Christ. Calvin, paraphrasing Paul, said “whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” Calvin was harking back to Luther, who had written: “In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word... Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word...”

But every church is an institution. It was part of Paul’s genius that, even if he couldn’t imagine the church as it is today, or individual churches as they are today, he intuited that a church, no matter how small, was an institution - and therefore one of the principalities and the powers.

Size isn’t always bad. Often size, and the growth that promotes it, is good. Although Paul could not imagine the enormity of today’s denominations or single church memberships of thousands, and even tens of thousands, he knew that the church could, and would, do much more: support missions, for example, or conduct religious education classes for its members or meet the pastoral needs of its congregants. Paul himself asked his new churches to do things like send money to other, impoverished churches, to support widows of church members and to provide hospitality for itinerant Christian preachers.

But, as institutions, like the church, grow larger, they become more like institutions and less like groups of people. The larger the institution, the greater the tendency for the institution to make its mission its own survival and maintenance.

A beautiful building is good, and conduces to spirituality. An organ is good, and adds aesthetic beauty to the beauty of our spoken and sung words. An endowment is good, and permits us to confidently plan and financially support the continuing activities that make our church a church. But, however good these things may be, they are not absolutely essential to the church's mission. We can have a church without a building, but there is no church when the Word is not preached. We can have a church without an organ, but there is no church where the Word is not heard. We can have a church without an endowment, but there is no church where the Word is not done and not lived.

We are to hold to and nurture all that is essentially a gathered church. Insofar as the church is true to itself, it will be true to its witness.

Paul had anticipated that the church, as it struggled to realize the Body of Christ, would always have to contend with a tendency to become one of the principalities and powers. But Paul's theology of sin and redemption applied to individuals, not to corporations or to the church. How, then, could the principalities and powers be redeemed? In the second half of his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul warns us of the enormity of the struggle to come. There he tells us that we, as members of the church, can and must resist and overcome the principalities and the powers.