

Ephesians 3:1-12

Epiphany Sunday

January 3, 2021

One of Paul's stranger ideas, enthusiastically taken up by his anonymous disciple and writer of Ephesians, is the existence of "principalities and powers," the "ruler of the powers of the air," the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." It's not entirely clear to me how Paul envisions these powers – what they are and how they operate – but they are aspects of the creation, spiritual forces, that oppose God and oppress her people.

What really grabbed my attention was the idea that we – the Church – have something to teach these powers: "that *through the church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

Wow.

And what is this wisdom that we're supposed to proclaim to these powers?

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Paul's career was defined by his message that Gentiles *as Gentiles* should be welcomed into the church of Jesus Christ, a Jew, God's messiah. They should not have to follow Jewish customs and laws in order to be considered part of the body of Christ. But the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 AD, known as the Roman-Jewish War, changed the situation.

The revolt had a religious element to it, meaning that Jewish Christians had to choose between joining the rebellion, or staying neutral and insisting that *Jesus* was the Messiah, the saviour of Israel – and thus being labelled traitors and cowards by their fellow Jews. Similarly, Gentile Christians who believed in a Jewish messiah were suspected of being rebel sympathizers, and were thus forced to downplay the Jewish nature of their faith. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to be both Jewish and Christian, and so the Church became increasingly Gentile.

Thus, whereas Paul is trying to convince Jewish Christians that Gentiles *as Gentiles* belong in the Church, in Ephesians his disciple is trying to convince *Gentile* Christians that Jews *as Jews* belong in the Church.

So the revealed wisdom of God that the Church is supposed to proclaim is that Christ has “created in himself one new humanity in place of two...and...reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” [Eph. 2:15-16]

In other words, unity is God’s plan. Inclusion is God’s plan. Recognition of our common humanity and our common status as children of God is the plan.

Again, I don’t know the exact details of Paul’s or his disciple’s worldview. I don’t know about mysterious “elemental spirits of the air.” But I worship a God in whom all Creation lives and moves and has its being. So if there are powers and authorities that

are opposed to God's dream, then they are themselves part of the unity that God has created, but somehow twisted and perverted.

And *that* actually maps pretty well to everyday experience. Our political system is supposed to ensure that government reflects the will of the people, but it especially serves those with the most wealth. Our economic system is supposed to reward those who work the hardest, but while a CEO makes millions, the only reward for a single parent working two minimum-wage jobs is enough income to feed their kids, go to sleep, and get up and do the same tomorrow. You can't convince me that a CEO making twenty times their salary is working twenty times as hard.

The logic of these systems depends on division. You're a Boomer; you're a Millennial; you can't trust each other. You're a Christian; you're a Muslim; you can't trust each other. You're male; you're female; you can't trust each other. And so we can't stop and compare notes; we can't ask who this division and system of exploitation benefits and make common cause to change things.

Life should be a blessing but many live with sickness. Love should be a blessing but to many it is bought, sold, withheld, and used to harm.

Traditionally on New Year's Eve we look back on the blessings and failures of the old year and resolve to improve ourselves. We look forward to the new year. But this time, the near-universal sentiment is, "at least 2021 can't be *worse*."

So, you know what? Maybe our writer is on to something. Maybe there is something fundamentally wrong with the way things are. Maybe we are part of a system that has somehow gone off the rails in a fundamental way.

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The thing about a system, even a dysfunctional one, is that every part influences the whole. When one part changes, the other parts adapt, in small or big ways. A therapist, a physicist, an economist will all tell you that. So does Ephesians. The message of God's wisdom is that everything is related and included, and that this reality has been revealed and heightened in Jesus Christ. The Church has somehow been placed at a fulcrum: at the centre of this system. We are not just a place where this truth is revealed; we are a place where this *becomes true*. A sacrament is something in which the saving grace of God is revealed and enacted, so the Church is itself a sacrament.

When we in the Church act out this relatedness, when we welcome the outsider, when we acknowledge our common humanity to those we define as "Other," we become the body of Christ. And in some mystical way, this ripples through the rest of the body, so that even the powers that be sit up and take notice. We are part of the body, we are part of the system. When one part of the system acts in death-dealing ways, the whole body sickens; conversely, when we act in life-giving ways, the whole body is healed.

When the Church becomes a place and agent of God's inclusion, the powers that be tremble...and are redeemed.

Let that be our Epiphany, and the Good News for 2021.

Amen.

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