

## **“Pulling Down Strongholds”**

A Sermon Proclaimed at  
Lake Shore Baptist Church,  
Waco, Texas

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Texts: Ezra 10:1-4; Ephesians 2:11-22

Let me begin by saying that I am quite honored to be here today, speaking at this illustrious pulpit where many distinguished preachers have brought edifying and challenging messages to this community. I have looked forward to this day with great anticipation not so much because I have such a distinguished message for you but rather because Lake Shore feels like home to me. I love coming here to meet the saints of this congregation because it was here that I learned a great deal about what it means to be and do church. Here I learned that a church where many of the members are introverts does not have to be an uninviting place. Here I learned that everyone does not have to agree on every point of doctrine and practice in order to be part of the work of God in a congregation and in the world. Here I met saints such as Jan, Catherine, Joe, and Gayle, among many others, who are now part of the great cloud of witnesses – witnesses to the work of God in the world. I should let you know that whenever I teach my ministerial students about what a congregation should look like, about what a congregation should be doing, Lake Shore is often the example I use. I use the example of Jan, who would dash outside just before the benediction and position herself at the door, so that she could shake the hand of each person who was leaving the building, making sure that those who were coming here for the first time knew that they were wanted and needed here. Catherine who, day in and day out, would come to work at the church, especially in the kitchen, conscripting me to work for the Meals on Wheels ministry in the process. So, I always look forward to coming here, because my picture of Lake

Shore is a picture of a congregation that is inviting and welcoming. Here I felt and still feel at home.

Now, the way I think of Lake Shore may strike some as idealistic, as not quite representative of what Lake Shore or any other church is. But I believe that thinking about the church in an idealistic manner puts me in good company. It puts me in the company of the writer of Ephesians who has been described as having an idealistic picture of the church, talking of the Christians to whom the work was sent as people who were full of faith, praying only that they should grow in wisdom and describing the church as a place where Jews and Gentiles have been brought together to create one new, beautiful humanity. Some have observed that the church to which Ephesians was written does not appear to have significant problems, as the church at Corinth, for example, which was going through many issues. Ephesians is therefore understood as a work intended to encourage Christians in different locations to be better at being who they already were – followers of Jesus Christ.

The nonpolemical nature of Ephesians does not conceal the fact that the Christians to whom it was written were living through perilous times. While the church may be experiencing a fraternal atmosphere, the times in which they were living was characterized by some dominant forces that might do them in if they were not discerning enough. Ephesians conceptualizes these forces not in physical terms, as we tend to do today, but rather in spiritual terms. The forces are described as “powers”, as “authorities”, and as “dominion.” So we are told in a classic text in Ephesians 6:12 that the struggles the church was going through were not against flesh and blood but rather against rulers and authorities, “against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places” (NRSV). These spiritual forces of evil

were not forces that were present inside the church; rather, they were external forces that were intimately connected the life of the church and challenged the church's witness to the world.

It used to be thought that the authorities, powers of darkness and spiritual forces being referenced here were connected to the religious atmosphere at Ephesus, which boasted the magnificent temple dedicated to Artemis, the popular mother goddess of the Greco-Roman world. Given that some scholars think that Ephesians was not directed at the church at Ephesus, it appears that the notions of powers and authorities and dominion are used to describe the general atmosphere in which ancient Christians lived rather than the religious atmosphere of Ephesus alone. Unlike us today, these Christians did not make a firm distinction between the secular and the spiritual. The two intertwined because to be the church was to be the church in the world.

Ephesians is therefore not simply addressing what obtains at one local church but the general contexts in which Christians found themselves and continue to find themselves even in our time. Christians often find themselves in contexts where various forces conspire to undermine what they could become. These forces often tend to affect the nature of Christian witness. Which is why I think that one of the best ways to name the crises that affect Christian life in our time is to follow the lead of Ephesians and give it a spiritual description. Thus, instead of speaking of authorities and powers I thought it best to use the term "strongholds," a term that is common among Pentecostals.

In Pentecostal-speak, strongholds are perennial and often intractable obstacles that stand in the way of Christians becoming all that they could be. These are obstacles that are often not seen but are however deep-rooted. Because they are imperceptible people are likely to live with them without even realizing their presence. Thus, when one becomes a Christian, in Pentecostal-

speak, one is empowered to perceive these strongholds so that they may be removed. Without removing these strongholds, it is not possible to experience the fullness of the Christian life. In Pentecostalism, especially in what is called neo-Pentecostalism in Africa, there is constant quest to figure out what possible strongholds could be holding Christians back from being all that they could be. This quest to detect the strongholds holding back Christians is often applied to the life of individual Christians but sometimes it is also applied to the life of the church and to whole societies.

I discern a similar movement in Ephesians where the powers and authorities are not only connected to the lives of individual Christians but also to the life of the church as a whole and to the entire cosmos itself. The church in Ephesians is portrayed as a place where God is working to overcome the forces that jeopardize human flourishing. It is portrayed as a demonstration plot of sorts, as Emmanuel Katongole, the Ugandan Roman Catholic priest at the University of Notre Dame, has put it. In short, in Ephesians the church is presented as a site where God is working to redeem the world. If this is the case, then it is critically important for us to discern and engage the strongholds that are holding us back as a church today.

My own diagnosis is that the basic stronghold standing in the way of the church today is tribalism or nationalism, that nativistic quest for purity that often builds a wall between us and the other, between us and them. That tendency to demarcate, to separate, to distinguish, to categorize, which seems so rooted in the human imagination that it seems to have become an amorphous force, a spiritual force, a power, a power of darkness, if you will. It seems to have led us to believe that to categorize, to separate, and to divide tells us all what we need to know about how the world works or how the world should work. This tendency to seek purity through separation and categorization, through the creation of insiders and outsiders, has become a

spiritual force, a stronghold, a spiritual crisis around which most of the crises we experience today may be situated?

As you may already know, I am originally from Cameroon in Africa. Cameroon is often described as “Africa in miniature,” because it is made up of geographically different regions, from the forest zones in the south to the semi-desert zones or the Sahel in the north, a bewildering number of ethnic and linguistic groups, and different major religions, including Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions. Some observers have however noted that “while being ‘Africa in miniature’” may be good for tourism, “for virtually everything else it only creates complications and problems.”<sup>1</sup> Attempts to hold these different groups together have not been quite successful and the future of the country, they noted, looked bleak. That observation was made in 2010. That prognosis is probably one of the few political prophecies that have come to pass because, as you may already know, today Cameroon is at war. At issue is whether or how the two major linguistic groups in the country should co-exist. The divide is between those who were born and raised in what is the English-speaking part of the country and those who were born and raised in the French-speaking part of the country. Because of persistent marginalization, some of those in the English-speaking part of the country have taken up arms in quest of a separate country, motivated by the belief that our salvation lies only in separation, in a kind of linguistic tribalism.

Here in America, the quest for purity through racism has been a persistent theme in the history of this country. The young African American historian Ibram Kendi, in his bestselling book, *Stamped from the Beginning*, says that he sees a parallel movement as American history unfolds. “As I studied America’s racial past,” he says, “I saw a dual and dueling history of racial

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Dike DeLancey, Rebecca Neh Mbuh, Mark W. DeLancey, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon*, Fourth Edition (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), xi.

progress and the simultaneous progression of racism. I saw the antiracist force of equality and the racist force of inequality marching forward, progressing in rhetoric, in tactics, in policies.”<sup>2</sup> These forces of inequality that seek purity either in ethnicity or nationalism, often attempt to raise up walls, sometimes literal, sometimes figurative, and surround these walls with violence, so that the undesirable and the unwanted may be kept out. These lines we draw and walls we build often find their way into the church. In fact, often these walls tend to receive nods of affirmation from the church. And so our tribal and racist tendencies are stamped with sanctimonious theology. Witness Ezra, during what has come to be known as Second Temple Judaism, sanctioning purity in the name of God, urging the divorce of foreign wives. The tribal tendency has obtained a theological warrant. It has become a mighty, amorphous force. It has become a power of darkness that shatters communities in its wake. Here I think of the killed and displaced in Cameroon and children being separated from their parents in the United States. In Israel at the time of Ezra, I can imagine divorced women cursing and screaming in the wake of Ezra’s edict.

But, as the Cameroonian theologian Fabien Eboussi Boulaga has noted, in order to understand the radical community that is the church, we need to situate the church in the context of late Second Temple Judaism in which it developed. It is in this context that Ezra’s edict that sought Jewish purity through divorce makes sense. During this time, different groups emerged to provide their visions of what Israel must become in order to remain a true people of God. These groups were proposing visions that would make Israel great again, if you like. The Sadducees, the aristocratic class, were working with empire to preserve their privilege that was rooted in land and temple. For them, the true Israel, a great Israel must possess land and temple. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ibram Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), x.

Zealots, being zealous for the word of God, urged ethnic purity, sometimes seeking it by violence. The Essenes fled into the wilderness because they saw the world as irredeemably corrupt. For them, the Sadducees were the epitome of evil. The Pharisees creatively interpreted the Torah and evolved the synagogue but were developing laws that increasingly ethnicized Jewish life. In this mix came the Jesus movement, the church. The Jesus movement proposed a way of being Israel that transcended land and ethnicity. As Boulaga points out, the church transcended the territorial and ethnic principles, both of which seemed to have been central in the other proposals that were being made at the time. In transcending the territorial and ethnic principles the church was also transcending blood ties. Henceforth, one's family would no longer be those with whom one was related by blood, language, or race, but those who, everywhere, have accepted the grace to become part of this new community.<sup>3</sup>

It is this new community that is described here in the text from Ephesians which we read this morning. This new community is a fact of history and it only needs to be described. Like Lake Shore Baptist Church, these ancient churches were a fact of life because in them there was already a meeting and communion of Jews and Gentiles, a meeting and communion of those who were formerly separated and who were strangers to each other. In the Christian community, Jews and Gentiles could commune as one new people without the need to follow dietary rules or the ritual of circumcision. In this new community the invisible and visible walls that once separated people had been pulled down so that the church became a porous body long before anthropology discovered that cultures were porous. So, what Ephesians 2:11-22 describes is not an ideal at all but a reality. It is the reality of a community which has consciously decided to define its identity in ways that transcend the different ways by which we are divided and ruled. The church is that

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<sup>3</sup> F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetish: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 93-95.

body that has consciously decided to protest all ways of associating that is rooted in exclusion. The church is therefore a place where people see as family those who are often seen as strangers, a place where those who are far away are brought near. In fact, in the church, the stranger is not merely welcomed; rather, the distinction between stranger and host is transcended.

The fact that the church is an inclusive community bears emphasizing because over the centuries the church has lost its inclusive edge and has come to be marked by exclusion. A movement born in protest against exclusion has come to be rooted in conformity and exclusion. But it needs not be so. Ephesians declares that in Christ we have been given the power, the spiritual power to overcome those forces that push us away from each other. The power that flows from the Spirit of Jesus Christ is a power that makes those who are strangers to each other to become friends in a new, bloodless community.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, there was a group of people called *Osu* or outcaste. They were seen as unclean and were kept at arm's length from the society of the pure and the free. As Chinua Achebe tells us in *Things Fall Apart*, when Christianity first came to the Igbos, there was a stir because in the church the *Osu* mingled with the freeborn. In fact, some freeborn people left the church because they did not think they should mingle with the *Osu*. But the missionary insisted that in the church there could be no distinction between *Osu* and freeborn for all are children of the same parent – God. With that a stronghold was pulled down and the good news of a new community began to take root in Nigeria. May this good news also become real here at Lake Shore Baptist Church. May it become real in the life of the church in Cameroon. May it become real in the life of the church in America and in our world. Amen.