



Sermon, April 8, 2018  
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

## “The Powers that Be”

### Scripture: Romans 8:18-39 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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.

### Found on the MIT website (note, this is humor):

(<http://www.mit.edu/people/dmredish/wwwMLRF/links/Humor/Administratium.html>)

**New chemical Element Discovered: Administratium:** The heaviest element known to science was recently discovered by investigators at a major U.S. research university. The element, tentatively named administratium,

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has no protons or electrons and thus has an atomic number of 0. However, it does have one neutron, 125 assistant neutrons, 75 vice neutrons and 111 assistant vice neutrons, which gives it an atomic mass of 312. These 312 particles are held together by a force that involves the continuous exchange of meson-like particles called morons.

Since it has no electrons, *administratium* is inert. However, it can be detected chemically as it impedes every reaction it comes in contact with. According to the discoverers, a minute amount of *administratium* causes one reaction to take over four days to complete when it would have normally occurred in less than a second.

*Administratium* has a normal half-life of approximately three years, at which time it does not decay, but instead undergoes a reorganization in which assistant neutrons, vice neutrons and assistant vice neutrons exchange places. Some studies have shown that the atomic mass actually increases after each reorganization.

Research at other laboratories indicates that *administratium* occurs naturally in the atmosphere. It tends to concentrate at certain points such as government agencies, large corporations, insurance companies, and universities. It can usually be found in the newest, best appointed, and best maintained buildings.

Scientists point out that *administratium* is known to be toxic at any level of concentration and can easily destroy any productive reaction where it is allowed to accumulate. Attempts are being made to determine how *administratium* can be controlled to prevent irreversible damage, but results to date are not promising.

(other sites add: Scientists warn that *Administratium* is known to be toxic and recommend plenty of alcoholic fluids followed by bed rest after even low levels of exposure.)

We all can laugh at this because we all have had to deal with some sort of bureaucracy. Have you ever...?

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- Ever tried to get something done with a governmental agency or a store or a corporation, and get led all around a maze of rules and procedures?
- Watched as people who get elected to "clean up government" end up doing the same things
- Ever been in a situation or place where your skin literally crawls and you can almost taste the fact that there is something bad, or wrong or downright evil about there?
- Feeling that in certain contexts you can say some things but not other things?
- Ever wondered why some things are obvious to everyone else in the world, but are virtually ignored in a certain country?
- Incidents in which a group of people do things and engage in acts as a group that they would never do as individuals? How can moral individuals commit immoral acts in certain contexts?

John Steinbeck, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, wrote:

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours.

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.

Yes, but the bank is made up of men. No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it but they can't control it.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor and theologian whose life spanned the first ¾ of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He argued that people behave differently in groups than individually. In his 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr applied his analysis of the human condition to societies and nations. Individuals, he said, may strive to be moral. But collectively, human beings are compromised and prone to immorality, even evil. He once wrote that "civilization depends upon the vigorous pursuit of the

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highest values by people who are intelligent enough to know that their values are qualified by their interests and corrupted by their prejudices.”

Last week I talked about the “Crucifiers” in life. Crucifiers are part of a system – What Paul calls “the Powers” - in which normally moral people can do immoral things. But it’s much more than this. The New Testament scholar Walter Wink helps us understand just how the Powers operate in everyday life.

What are the Powers?

- Integral worldview helps us to understand – unseen as well as seen aspects, spiritual and material
- Institutions, etc. Attitudes, justifications, laws, regulations, etc. Systems. Examples:
  - City government, county government, church hierarchies, service organizations, companies, agencies, etc.
  - Sometimes you end up being the “enemy” or opposition or problem that you wanted to correct.
- Powers have a divine calling, created for a divine purpose, but have fallen from that purpose. Powers are created for good, Powers are fallen, Powers are in need of redemption. Need to be recalled to their divine calling, which is to exist for the welfare of all humans and for all of created order.

Jesus struggled to transform the way of thinking and systems of power and domination of his time, to call all persons and human systems back to their divine purpose. In order to comprehend his method and message, we need to understand the inner and outer dimensions of power and domination in our world, and how Jesus challenged and sought to transform it. Paul carried this work forward by going into the belly of the Beast, as it were, straight into the realm of the System, the Powers, the Roman Empire.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans is directed to the small gathering of the followers of Christ located in the heart of the Empire. The people of Rome

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were tolerant of most religious expressions. However, that tolerance was largely limited to religions that were polytheistic – meaning, the Roman authorities didn't care who you worshiped as long as you included the emperor and didn't create problems with other religious systems.

That was a problem for both Christians and Jews during the middle of the first century. That's because both Christians and Jews were fiercely monotheistic; they proclaimed the unpopular doctrine that there is only one God – and by extension, they refused to worship the emperor or acknowledge him as any kind of deity. For these reasons, Christians and Jews began to experience intense persecution. This is the Powers at work. How were Christians to live the transforming love of Christ in this situation?

Paul urges this small group of Jesus followers to persevere in the work of being transformed by the love of Christ. Later Paul says “**12:1** I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

For the next three weeks, I want to look in greater depth at how Jesus shows us how to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We will look at the powerful myths that control and guide our culture, and then at powerful spiritual practices and tools to help us unlearn those myths and live according to the Good News that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son into the world to save us from ourselves, and to show us the way to Abundant Life. This Life is for every person on earth. Come back next week, and learn more about it.