

“Polarization: How Did We Get So Divided?”

Exodus 17:1-4; Matt. 7:1-5, 12

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The first time I recall personally hearing about polarization was about seven years ago when one of the most gentle even-tempered elders I know told me that something new had shown up in their trailer park in Florida. That winter polarized political conflict had gotten so heated and divisive that this elder and his spouse had resolved to avoid all political conversations with neighbours. Then, fast-forward to the pandemic when divisions already present began to escalate and proliferate to every area of our life together—politics, religion, race, sexuality, health protocols, local congregations, community groups and our families. Even Canadians found ourselves polarized last winter during the **trucker’s convoy** which impacted not only Ottawa, but border crossings at Windsor and in Western Canada. Division has proliferated—making it hard for us to be together and talk to each other.

Canada and other developed countries around the world are experiencing unprecedented polarization and division. While at the beginning of the pandemic people would bang pots in support of health care workers, months later there would be protests at hospitals against health care workers and health care COVID Protocols. One doctor reflected, while little old ladies used to bring cookies to the office—these days little old ladies are more likely to swear and give you the finger. It was even worse for one of my ministry colleagues whose spouse chose divorce because of their vax/anti-vax marital polarization. We live in an anxious time. Our patience is at a low ebb. We are struggling with one another. How did we get so divided? Today we will look at this question; and then next week we’ll consider what our calling is as Christians in the face of such divisive polarization.

Human conflict and division are not new. Conflict is a raging fire in our Exodus passage. Under Moses’ leadership, God’s people escaped oppressive Egyptian slavery. In the most extraordinary display of Divine power—as the Egyptian Army approaches from behind, the Israelites are pressed up against the sea—and God uses Moses dramatically to divide the waters and allow the people to walk to freedom. Moses then leads the people into the wilderness where next they complain that the water is too bitter. God instructs Moses on how to make the water sweet. Next they complain against Moses and Aaron that there is no food. And God sends manna from heaven. But here in today’s story there is no water at all and the divide between leader and people has broken out into open conflict, to the point of threatening to kill Moses.

Considering the recent amazing feats of Moses’ leadership, the people seem pretty short-tempered with him—now to the point of potentially killing him. Even though each time a need has been presented—God has used Moses to provide for the people—still the people argue against Moses and threaten now to even kill him. Why are they suddenly so angry and divided?

This is a community in the midst of great change as they go from slavery to a promised new land. Yet promise is not fulfilment and now the goal seems not days or weeks away but years—sounds a bit like a pandemic. Here in this wilderness of change it's easy to lose one's moorings and wonder whether God is really present or not. God's leading does not always lead to oases. The wilderness, that can seem godforsaken, can be a place where it is hard to sort out perceptions and reality. And the lightning rod for all the anxiety and fear about change becomes the leaders, Moses and Aaron. And the people strike out in polarizing conflict, to the point of violence.

Like the Israelites, the extraordinary change thrust upon us by the pandemic, resulted in people feeling overwhelmed, anxious and uncertain—which makes us more susceptible to falling into polarization. The pandemic took the lid off of polarizations that were latent before, but that now are exposed before us. So what has contributed to this?

Social Media has played a significant role in our divisions. Social media was a great gift in keeping us connected during the pandemic; yet we also know that our ability to really connect with each other happens through face to face contact. Academic, Betty Pries, points out that the empathy part of our brain develops only in the face to face contact that we have with others. Empathy does not develop in the same way over a screen—thus hampering our ability to understand and share the feelings of others. This is significant in itself.

Add to this the algorithms of social media that pull us into sides—filtering items according to what I already think and agree with. The result is that we hear less of the other side of things, we don't talk to people with differing points of view and we miss opportunities to build bridges across our polarizations.

Then add to this our Post-Modern Social Environment of individualism where there's nothing bigger than me; and I decide and get to define my reality every day. In this social environment we are not defined by social context. Yet this can be profoundly isolating and overwhelming, especially in the crisis of a pandemic.

Our individualism is creating an epidemic of loneliness. We are no longer a village to each other. In 2018, the UK established the first Ministry of Loneliness in its government. It was targeted for seniors. And seniors did call for help; but the surprise was that young adults were also calling in significant numbers because they were lonely. We are not a village to each other anymore and this contributes to our fragmentation and division.

Experts tell us that as empathy has plummeted, mental health distress has gone up. A group in the US has been studying empathy rates in young adults since the 1970s. They found that empathy had been gradually going down until in 2005 it suddenly went off a cliff. Corresponding to this has been a rise in mental health concerns as well as a growing world-weary despair that distrusts institutions, including the church.

Now, this is not the first time in history that we have been polarized. The 16th century Protestant Reformation was hugely polarizing and violent. In the past century, here in North America, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War created significant polarization.

Conflict is normal. Although many view it as bad and will do everything possible to avoid it—still, conflict has the capacity not only to harm but also to create positive change because it focuses attention on a problem that has previously been ignored or neglected. But as different points of view get expressed together—something brand new can be sparked.

The Bible today reminds us that although the wilderness is a place of loneliness, deprivation and danger, the wilderness is also the place where God is present and able to deliver his people and bring transformation. Over and over in Scripture the barren wilderness becomes a place of newness—because God is there. God's creative ability can transform the most chaotic, dark and sterile places into places of beauty, abundance and productivity. In the wilderness, God creates new people. And even now in our current wilderness of polarization and division God is doing a new thing. Transformation is possible.

What would it take for the church to be a place that spawns unifying conversations? Next Sunday, we turn our attention to what God is calling us to be in order to be part of this transformation and to offer peace in the midst of division.