

The Truth about Polarization

Micah 4:1-5

October 2, 2022

A long, long time ago, in a land far, far from our own, a prophet named Micah spoke to a people, a people who had grown increasingly hopeless and desperately divided. They were threatened by powers beyond and—even more—by forces within. They had good reason to suspect that their best days were now behind them. Their best days as a nation, a kingdom, a people, now in the past. And into such a context, God called prophets to speak difficult truths to God's beloved people. Now to be sure, some of those prophets conclude that the depth of sin and the breadth of corruption was so great that destruction and exile were now inevitable. That all hope was lost. That God had abandoned this people.

But others see the situation through a different lens. Micah. Micah's is a voice of irrational hope rooted in a miraculous vision of the utterly impossible. Surrounded on every side by signs of decline and the persistent danger of division, Micah sketches a stunning picture of shalom, of peace, of unity. He dares to dream of a day when the house of God will be lifted high above even the mountains that surround them, a day when all of God's children will be at home in the house of the Lord. Micah sees abundance and security for all. He sees the weapons of war beaten into tools for cultivating life, vines and fig trees for all. He envisions the end of fear evoked by constant threats and unjust acts. Micah's prophetic imagination is feeding my soul these days. I find myself hungry for the word of God this prophet speaks, like manna in a desperate wilderness.

The time and place may be different, but our days echo the themes of the prophetic texts. No survey data exists from the northern kingdom of Israel in 750 BCE, but I imagine the numbers would

rival our own, in which 58% of Americans now believe we are a nation fully in decline. In August, the nonpartisan Pew Research Center published a set of survey data under the following headline: "Intensely Negative Feelings about the Opposing Party Grow." In other news, the sky is blue. The data is readily available, but most of you do not need survey summaries to prove that something significant, and alarming, is taking place in our nation. We experience it in our own lives, in our own workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods, and, yes, even in our families. Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Differences of opinion have taken on an existential tone, debate devolved to a ping-pong of bitterly personal attacks. Relationships ended over disagreements. You can hear it in the language we use to describe our political adversaries. Words like enemy, demonic, a threat to our way of life, un-American, and evil.

Now, at the outset of what may be a challenging sermon, I want to be clear about this. I believe in the existence of evil and in the importance of naming and confronting it. I believe that there are malevolent and nefarious forces at work in our world, manifest as hatred for others, acts of violence, systems of bigotry, words that demean and belittle, and people who capitalize on this kind of harm. And such words and deeds should never be tolerated under the banner of seeking what can only be described as a false sense of tranquility. But my concern today is that the increasingly common and unexamined use of extreme language and dismissive labeling make it *more* difficult to see and face those forces when they exist. So, today, we will seek to speak the truth—in love, I pray—about polarization.

In his book, *Why We're Polarized*, author Ezra Klein uses the lens of identity to help explain the increasingly political divisions among us. Klein describes how political coalitions and parties have increasingly—intentionally—sought to organize, define, and activate our identities as primarily partisan creatures. All of us know that our identities are manifold; our identities are complex. We are more than one thing. Indeed, we are many things at the same time, but the effect of recent decades has been the construction of a singular lens through which all other identities are filtered. That lens is political. We are liberal or conservative. Republican or Democrat. Blue or red. And we've allowed ourselves to be sorted first, primarily, by ideological politics. All other identities become secondary to this central identity, this central reality. And so, partitioned by political passion, we sort ourselves into tribes of likeminded individuals. Increasingly, we primarily (or even exclusively) interact with those self-sorted supporters of the same side. Before all else, we are known by our ideological identity.

Now, people of faith have a word for this way of thinking. That word is idolatry. The privileging of *any* reality over our shared identity as children of God is *idolatry*. In fact, I can say it this definitively: *Polarized political positioning, and its effect on us, is the most ubiquitous idol in our time and place.* That false god is everywhere among us.

Given this reality, given these threats, within and beyond us, it seems overly optimistic—for Micah's time and certainly for our own—to sing of peace, of shalom, of unity. After all, who sings of peace in the rubble of war's destruction? Who worships God in a time when idolatry is rampant? Who preaches plenty when many are starving? Who proclaims security when many lack safety? Pollyanna pie-in-the-sky, we might say. But perhaps we find the key to the prophet's confidence in the final verse you heard this morning. Contrasting his own vision with the idolatry of false gods, Micah places his feet firmly on the ground of faith. We will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever, full stop.

And so, my friends at Second Church, and *anyone* who hears my voice today, *this* is your call as people of faith. It is *our* call together to reclaim and restate our primary identity. Not Republican or Democrat. Not liberal or conservative. Not red or blue. Children of the same and only God. Micah's vision is no pipedream. It is a prophetic perspective on what is true. Micah speaks the truth, in love. Micah speaks the truth behind, beyond, and beneath all other truths. It is this: You are a child of God. That's good news. And, much harder but no less good is this shocking news: Your adversary is a child of God. I know. I can think of a thousand reasons why that simply cannot be true. But scripture keeps telling me to say it's so. Even to say this: that claiming our common kinship in the family of God is the only faithful way forward. It's the only one.

The prophet begins this dramatic vision of peace crafted in creative imagination. He envisions a future somewhere down the line when God's kingdom will come, when God's house will be lifted up, when peoples of every type will stream to it. But he does not stop with prophetic vision. Micah is a good preacher, and so he moves from creative vision to pragmatic pathways toward the reality he describes, how we can and must live differently. In the sixth chapter of Micah, he gets straight to the point. We must do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. That is the pathway to the vision of peace he proclaims.

Now, I'm no prophet, but I am a preacher. So, allow me this morning to make a few suggestions suited to faithful living in a time of hyperpolarization.

First, start where you are. Remember that politics is the aggregate of individual relationships, and so examine your own. I was reminded this week of a favorite quote from former Senator Alan Simpson, who said, "Hatred corrodes the container it is carried in." When we lash out at others, when we seethe in fury, when we nurse our resentments, we are allowing that toxicity to rot our souls from the inside out. How can your actions, your words, the choices you

make, contribute to the common good? Where are you called to listen, to be silent and hear the perspective of another? One tactic I've attempted on occasion: When you find yourself in heated debate that might take a turn toward the personal, repeat in your head, "This person is a child of God. This person is a child of God." You may need to repeat it *many, many* times. The truth about polarization is that it is tearing us apart.

Second, disconnect yourself from systems designed only to create endless outrage. By now, you know these systems quite well. The algorithms that govern social media drive division because nothing sells as well as anger. They promote and privilege posts that provoke. It does not matter if they are true or not. These engines of fury feed on your engagement with them. So, disengage from them.

Do not incentivize divisive voices or reward polarization with your active participation. Before you consume or share information, ask yourself: Is this true? Is this helpful? Is this kind? For the truth about polarization is that it is no accident. The author Anne Lamott reminds us that almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes. Including you.

Finally, belong to a community that stretches you beyond your comfort zone. More good news: If you are here today, you've already done that one! The way we engage with each other matters. The communities with which we engage matter. *This* community matters. Here's a secret. Don't run away. *There are people worshipping right now in this space whose partisan perspective is different from yours.* Perhaps dramatically so. The fact that you are gathered here and know that truth is a kind of miracle. What you've decided is really something quite extraordinary. You've determined that there is something more important than your partisan identity. You've made the choice to put yourself in a place where growth can occur, to resist the idolatry of polarity. For the truth about polarization is that it is *not God's will.*

Last Sunday, one of you came out holding the bulletin and pointed to this week's sermon title. You asked me, "Chris, will you end the sermon by announcing your candidacy?" Well, the sermon is almost over, and the answer is no. But I think I owe an explanation as to why not. I truly believe that what we are attempting to do in this place is the most important work in the world. Hard. Painful. Uncomfortable. Without the presence of God and the promise of Christ, impossible. But I also believe God is not absent from our work. I also believe the promise of Christ urges us on in it. I believe we have to try. We have to trust. We have to speak the truth in love. We have to tether ourselves to a deeper identity than the systems of obsession that divide us and the idols that tempt us. We have to tether ourselves to a deeper identity.

We find it at this table. It is World Communion Sunday. Here's the thing about this table. Every time we gather here, we are surrounded by people who are different from us in nearly every imaginable way. There is no litmus test for admission to this table because the one who is our host first shared it with his betrayer. Jesus set the table and the tone. And so, we all come as guests invited. We all come as betrayers who have fallen and are at fault. We come hoping to receive what we did not create and cannot control. We come to be restored, renewed, replenished, recharged. We come to this table, exactly as we are. And this is what you are: Child of God. Child of God. Child of God. Amen.