The Pressure on Politics: The Difference Between Tribalism and Community
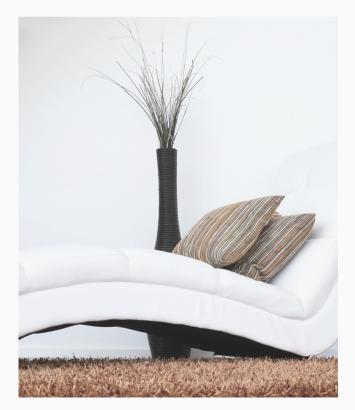
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Politics cannot handle the pressure it is being asked to carry these days. As Neil Postman spent his life powerfully proclaiming, our nation is in a narrative crisis. We are lacking a unified, agreed-upon over-arching story or aim that orders appetites, brings purpose, and gives significance to our lives.

With millions of self-appointed sovereigns and a suffocating sense of isolation, it is no wonder that as a society our rates of depression, malaise, anxiety, and suicide were sky-rocketing even before a global pandemic.

David Brooks describes tribalism as one of the outcomes of such mass existential crisis in his book *The Second Mountain*.

"People who are experiencing existential dread slip into crisis mode: 'I'm in danger! I'm threatened! I must strike back!' Their evolutionary response is self-protection, so they fall back on ancient instincts for how to respond to a threat: us vs. them. Tribalists seek out easy categories in which some people are good and others are bad. They seek out certainty to conquer their feelings of unbearable doubt. They seek out war- political war or actual war- as a way to give life meaning. They revert to tribe."

Brooks goes on to give words to what so many of us are getting caught in on our newsfeeds, at our dinner tables, and in our cities and churches.

While disagreement has been part of humanity since Adam and Eve agreed to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, the entrenched, vitriolic environment of present politics goes far beyond basic disagreement and civil debate. While communities are built on mutual affection (whether that is the love of a hobby, a cause, or a place), tribalism grows community on mutual hatred.

"Community is based on common humanity; tribalism is based on common foe. Tribalism is always erecting boundaries and creating friend/enemy distinctions…Politics is war. Ideas are combat. It's kill or be killed. Mistrust is the tribalist worldview. Tribalism is community for lonely narcissists."

When vacuums of truth and community press isolated individuals deeper and deeper into different tribes, tribal warfare is the sure outcome. The deeper the trenches are dug and the darker the us vs. them lines are drawn, the chances for transformational, relational discussion around disagreements become more few and far between.

"Once politics becomes your ethnic or moral identity, it becomes impossible to compromise, because compromise becomes dishonor. Once politics becomes your identity, then every electoral contest is a struggle for existential survival, and everything is permitted."

Politics was never intended to give us our life's purpose; it was intended to be a vehicle towards an end, not the end in and of itself. It cannot carry the weight of human existence and purpose.

For the believer in Christ, the lines are drawn up very differently. As Solzhenitsyn discovered in prison, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart- and through all human hearts."

We were enemies of God, and in our fallen nature were children of wrath (**Ephesians 2:3**); we were without hope and without God in the world (**Ephesians 2:12**). We were set on our own destruction, deeply entrenched in our patterns of sin. Until the goodness and lovingkindness of God appeared and saved us in the person of Christ (**Titus 3:4-5**).

We need not be sucked into political tribalism when we are the loved members of the family of God. Politics need not become our ultimate purpose because we know the end of all things and are invited to join God in His kingdom work and purpose. Rather than putting the weight and affirmation of our existence on to a political party or system, we know that such a weight can only be placed on the One who created us, redeemed us, and currently sustains us. As such, we ought to be the most free of all people to engage in politics without crushing it or others with it.