



What Way are You Going?

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Stories help us see ourselves from a different perspective. That could be one reason Jesus often told parables. It's certainly one reason I seek out good movies and other programs. I recently found the Ukrainian comedy *Servant of the People* on YouTube (with subtitles in English). You might remember from news reports that the current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, was a comedian and actor and that he starred in this comedy (2016-2019) about a history teacher who is propelled to become President of Ukraine.

In one of the episodes, the TV-president is "visited" by Ivan the Terrible, who insists on one way of dealing with opponents or enemies that was eerily similar to our polarized culture of today. During a four-way debate in which his very reputation is at risk, Ivan the Terrible appears to the President, urging this younger "Tsar" to root out his enemies—the many corrupt officials—by *torturous* death. "Death is not enough," says The Terrible. The TV-President rejects the title "Tsar," as well as the cruelty. The Tsar laughs it off as the way things are, with a retort for every argument or situation the President presents to make rooting out corruption without death or cruelty credible.

The Tsar will not hear reason, so the President simply says, "You're heading one way; we, another. Let's go in different directions, and we'll talk again in 300 years."

How do we deal with people who expect that what we know is both bad and not inevitable? The TV-President ditches his limo for the bus. He makes little changes where he can, and with the few loyal people in his orbit, catches criminals when they are greedy or self-assured enough to fall into traps or in some cases to trap themselves and each other.

I have spent the better part of the past two months trying to think of how to write about the polarization we all encounter in our nation and in the Church. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, preaching at the Mass on the first day of the conclave that elected Pope Francis in 2013, described the importance of the papal ministry of mercy and building unity in the Church. Also at the conclave, Cardinal Prosper Grech noted the risk of schism:

Between ultra-traditionalist and ultra-progressive

extremists, between priests who rebel against obedience and those who do not recognize the signs of the times, there is always the danger of minor schisms that not only damage the Church, but go against the will of God: unity at any cost.

Many of you know that I am a Byzantine Catholic. My sense of this means that I am standing on a bridge between the Latin West and the Orthodox East. Our liturgy and way of talking to and about God are like the Greeks, but we live in communion with Roman Catholics who speak and worship somewhat differently (though if you live in both traditions, you may also experience many similarities when each tradition is at its best).

The polarization in the Church is personally painful for me.

It happens when we are cruel and nasty to each other, demeaning or insulting because someone doesn't do it the way we want it done, or doesn't use the right words the way we expect (1 John 4:20-21, Matthew 5:21-22). "They'll know we are Christians" when we finally decide to love each other.

It happens when we decide we are more knowledgeable than the bishop or bishops and we can make our own decisions about faith or morals, apart from the history of the Church, and teach our view as the only "right" or "true" one. Non-specialists and academic theologians do this in different ways, but we are all susceptible to a kind of self-righteousness on this count.

Polarization happens when we decide that we can reach out to certain people and ignore others who are on our doorstep (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus on our doorstep is not only the poor and visibly downtrodden, but anyone we choose to ignore who might benefit from a crumb of the faith we profess and yet struggle to live.

We're surrounded by polarization in our country, those who bemoan it and those who foster it, goading us to the fight. Dare we Christians have the courage to tell Ivan the Polarizer, "You're heading one way; we, another. Let's go in different directions, unless you also choose to follow The Way?"