

BOLDLY TRUTH-TELLING: THE EXAMPLE OF HULDAH

2 Kings 22:14-20

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2 November 2014

There are conversations we have to engage in which we dread. You put it off as long as you can, but finally one day you blurt it out to your significant other, “Honey, we have to talk about money; we have to make a budget.” Something bothers you, you hope and pray it will go away, but it doesn’t and so one day you summon up all your courage and say, “The way we’re disciplining our children isn’t working; we have to talk about it.”

Your college freshman comes home for the first time, and you’re so happy to see him. You’ve missed him and you want to hear all about how he’s doing. You make his favorite food. You don’t want to do anything that will spoil the homecoming but you have to have the conversation. “Before you go back to school, we need to talk about your midterm grades.”

You cannot be a leader if you can’t initiate the difficult conversations. Everyone would want to be the boss if the boss can deliver good news all the time...calling an employee meeting and announcing, “10% raises for everyone again this year”...or proudly telling the stockholders that dividends will be higher than expected. But not everyone clamors for leadership because it also involves the toughest kinds of conversations. “Your performance evaluation indicates that you need to make some significant changes in the way you’re doing your job.”

We’re defining leadership broadly during this series; leadership also includes the way we lead our own lives. We won’t change anything about ourselves if we don’t learn

to speak honestly to ourselves. Not shaming ourselves, not criticizing, but reflecting on the ways in which we're doing well as well as the areas in which we can improve, setting small manageable goals, and encouraging ourselves along the way.

Leaders are those who have the courage to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable, even when it makes them unpopular. All U.S. presidents bear the burden of delivering challenging messages. We comment about how we see them age, right before our eyes, during their terms in office, so great is the responsibility.

When I was in college, beginning to think about the kind of leader I wanted to be as an adult, Jimmy Carter was president. I have a distinct memory of him addressing the American people, wearing a cardigan sweater, talking to us about how we needed to take seriously the energy crisis, turn down the thermostats in our homes (hence the sweater), and try to use less gas. He started the speech by saying, "Tonight I want to have an unpleasant talk with you about a problem unprecedented in our history." Whether you liked Carter as a president or not, the point is that he spoke from his heart even though he knew it would be unpopular.

King Josiah realizes that there are problems. The nation of Israel has divided into two. He is ruling the southern kingdom, known as Judah. A small territory, but with real challenges. There are tensions between those who live in Jerusalem, the big city, and those who live in the outlying rural areas. The rich are getting richer, the divisions between classes is growing. The rich and powerful disregard the poor. Josiah is a leader whose heart is set on God and God's ways. He announces a work project in the temple and he wants to pay workers there a fair wage to set an example for other businesspersons in Jerusalem. While working in the temple, one of the workers

discovers a scroll. Josiah reads it and is horrified by its message, but he's not sure that it's authentic, that it really contains a word from God. Who should he ask to look at the scroll? He first asks five men whom he trusts. Then he tells the men to ask Huldah to look at the scroll.

Huldah is a prophet and a loyal member of Josiah's leadership team. Now Huldah knows Josiah and respects him. She wants the best for him. I can imagine her taking a deep breath, and doing what she knows she has to do. She looks at the scroll and says, "Yes, this is real. This is a scroll containing prophecy you need to pay attention to. The people of Judah have disobeyed God and followed other Gods. They're causing their own country to destroy itself." Huldah speaks, and everyone pays attention. The five men, the king Josiah...and these words propel Josiah into action. He institutes a massive religious and social reform. He purges the land of idolatry.

Change came because the truth was spoken. It happens in our personal lives, it happens in our relationships, it happens on the job, and it happens on a global scale. If we don't confront the truth, we won't be motivated to change things.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, words encouraging them to grow into full maturity as disciples of Christ. Here is some of what he writes in Ephesians 4: (paraphrase mine) How do we equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ? All of us need to come to unity in faith and knowledge, to maturity. We must no longer be children, listening to whatever we want to hear, but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way, into Christ, and then the whole body will build itself up in love.

Speaking the truth in love: it's what we're called to do, to ourselves, and in every other relationship and setting. It is the hard work of leadership.

Telling the truth is hard; listening to it isn't always fun either. Sometimes we listen to the leaders who tell us what we want to hear. Josiah could have done that. He could have picked someone to interpret the scroll who he knew would shy away from controversy and conflict, someone who didn't want any hard work or bad news. It takes courage to listen to the leaders who tell us what we don't want to hear, but isn't that how we grow?

Here's what one of our presidential historians has to say about leadership: "A real leader can somehow get us to do certain things that deep down we think are good and want to be able to do but usually can't get ourselves to do on our own. It's a mysterious quality, hard to define, but **we always know it when we see it**. . . . Deep down, **you almost always like how a real leader makes you feel**, how you find yourself working harder and pushing yourself and thinking in ways you wouldn't be able to if there weren't this person you respected and believed in and wanted to please In other words, **a real leader is somebody who can help us** overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to **do better, harder things** than we can get ourselves to do on our own..."

As we welcome new members into this church, as we continue to seek God's guidance for our own lives, our relationships and the organizations we serve, let us pledge to speak the truth to one another, and listen to the truth from one another, so that we may grow into the people God created us to be.