

Samuel, the cleric who wanted to lead a nation

1 Samuel 12: 1-25

Babies and bath water. You may have heard the saying, “Don’t throw out the baby with the bath water,” and if you are of that age or you have parented a small child you may even remember the plastic oval buckets used for babies. (I have pictures of me in the bucket, which I will never paste on Facebook.) Then there are the stories of the farm families where water was harder to come by. As my dad would say, you never wanted to be the baby then, because the baby was the last to be washed of the family of five, in the same water. So there definitely was a rush to get rid of the water after all the pig farmers had bathed in it. And so, my uncle Ken would be dipped in it, probably three times and someone would remember to hold on tight to uncle Ken as they threw out the bucket of bath water, probably to the pigs who then drank it and the whole process began again.*

The saying ‘don’t throw out the baby with the bath water,’ has come to mean that when you are about to let something go or throw something away, make sure you do not lose the things within it that are important and life giving. You may know people who do things *all the way*. I have friends who try different kinds of diets and then I have that one friend who just began to fast four days a week and I wondered ‘where is the baby in all that bath water’?

I have friends, when they are converted to Christianity or another religion throw out everything in their life that they think doesn’t fit. This can make it awkward the first time you go and buy them a beer or the next time you say to them on a Saturday, “let’s go out,” and they say: I can’t. It’s Saturday. It takes *everyone* a while after starting a new thing, a new hobby, a new religion, a new relationship to discern what, out of our old lives, do we need to keep and what needs to be let go.

The image on the cover of your bulletin this morning was a gift I found from the Tate museum (they have certain images that you can use for non-profit reasons like this). That is Samuel out front; he’d been leading his people for decades. And that is dear Saul literally holding on for dear life, trying to follow his teacher, his mentor, the one who anointed him King. Samuel had a great gift in praying for his people and in his faithfulness to God. Some of the most beautiful prayers are in 1st and 2nd Samuel are his and even when the people got a King (Saul) as they had always wanted they would still sneak back to Samuel for prayers and rituals.

Samuel though was not only not perfect, but also had a lot of trouble and it began because upon being born he was given to the temple. Now, he was given in love and faith. His mother was a deeply spiritual woman who had prayed for a son and promised to give him to the temple for his whole life, “if I can but have a son”. And so, Samuel was raised by the religious leaders and all the helpers at the temple. He was not parented as much as he was raised to serve. And as we have seen in history any time there is a residential school or a boarding school - not being parented can lead one to not being a good parent no matter how hard one tries. And so, both Samuel and his head teacher Eli are famous, not only for being amazing ministers, but being not helpful parents.

Their sons grew up amid the temple and probably did some great things, but they also grew up believing that they were special, more special than the others. And what would normally happen, the son following the father in the line of work, could not because the community said, ‘Eli, we will have nothing to do with your sons. They are greedy, they put themselves first, they have their own agendas.’ And though that same Eli helped to raise Samuel to be such an amazing priest, Samuel also has this problem. When he is getting old enough to retire he says, ‘so now you have my sons’ and the community says, “have you met your sons? We don’t want them to lead us. They are entitled, they are not serving their communities.”

This is one of the reasons why the people of Israel ask for a new kind of leader. And Samuel has a long conversation with God about whether this kind of leader, one called a King, will be of any use to Israel. Israel has been a nomadic nation for centuries; they have been travellers. Their leadership had not been political, but religious. The head of the family ran the economic world and the head of the temple ran the social and moral world. No kings to be had, no senators and Samuel is unsure why the need for a new system and he is quite negative about a King.

Up until this time, Samuel’s lifetime, so had God. God had been very clear: I am the only monarch in your life and I have helpers called priests, but I am your monarch. But times were changing; the context was changing. The people of Israel who used to have been these twelve tribes, travelling within walking distance to one another were becoming a single nation. They were settling down and building homes out of rock instead of living in movable tents. And their neighbors when they went to meet them to trade goods said, “Well we have a King and our king will speak with your King.” But we don’t have a King! This led to all sorts of complicated (NAFTA-like) talks.

How do we talk to our equals, said the Kings? They didn’t understand that when Samuel showed up and said, “I am the high priest,” that really meant, ‘the one in charge.’ And so, God says ‘Okay, you are changing into a nation, I think it is time for you to have a King. Please know it will not be easy. Monarchy does not actually work when humans are the monarchs.’ Samuel, ever faithful, does what God says and so he anoints a King.

The difficulty is Samuel then goes about his daily leadership life as if nothing has changed. He does not take Saul by the hand and walk him through step by step what is expected (and if he did he probably showed him how to properly sacrifice things in the temple rather than how to keep good notes as the King). He put conditions on Saul; you may go to battle, but don't forget we must do the ritual first and you will have to wait for me and then you can do the ritual properly and then we will get on with the battle. Samuel is late! Saul is now in this odd position of knowing he is supposed to wait and also knowing he is King, has power from God (and that the war is about to start). Samuel puts Saul into a tension: pulled between his need to pray to God *now* as King and having to wait for Samuel to show him how. Samuel may have been a brilliant orator and he could pray and lead worship. But he was not great at adapting to new context.

Now I could go from here and talk about church leadership as an organization. I could talk about the first meeting I went to where, before the meeting, I had a chairperson walk me through how to make a motion. He still wasn't sure a youth representative should *be* on the board, but he wanted to make sure: if she was going to be there she needs the power and the right words to make change.

Samuel would have not taught me the right way to make a motion so that halfway through the meeting when I had my brilliant idea (I get one every meeting) I would have said I think we should, and they would have all said, that's a good idea, and they could have moved on with no need to respond. But I had been taught well and said: I move that we...'. Immediately they had to listen because I was taught how to live into that context. And I could say anything after 'move'! I could have said, 'I move that we have a BBQ next Sunday and every Sunday forever', 'I move that we pay our youth minister in money, not brownies.' I could say anything because I was taught, and teaching is one of the huge responsibilities of all leaders. That ability to teach someone to come into the context knowing enough language that they have power, AND also waiting for that new idea that they are going to bring.

We could also talk about political power. How do we ensure that our leaders remember that they are *elected*, that they are *servng* us? I will stop there, but I really could go on.

Adapting is difficult and sometimes (okay, often) we will debate which aspect of this is an essential (a baby) and which aspect of this is a (now) unnecessary item (the bath water). And so... we gather in Christian community. We gather with people who will call us back to center when we forget. We also gather with people (with a wider or new view point) who will point out those weird things on the side of the road (those huge perogies and Easter eggs) that take us off the path we thought we were taking and help us remember that God is anywhere on the path and off the path and everywhere in between. Amen.

*After preaching this I visited my Dad who informed me I got the order wrong! The oldest was last, the baby was the cleanest so got it first. ☺