

Enough
I Samuel 8

How do you know when you have done enough?

For those who are in the helping professions...

For those who are parents...

For those who are givers and doers...

For those who find our identity in working and serving...

It is a question with which many of us are very familiar.

How do you know when you have done enough?

The story we just read together comes near the end of Samuel's long life of service both to his people and to his God. And in many ways, it is heartbreaking, and for some - rather close to home.

Samuel has gotten old. Not really old, mind you...we still have about 16 chapters in the first book that bears his name before he dies. But old enough that everyone has started thinking about what happens after Samuel. And this line of thinking has apparently caused everyone – Samuel included – not a little bit of anxiety. I assume it all started with Samuel, when he decided that it was time to start succession planning. At least I am guessing that this is what was on his mind when he appointed his sons to be judges in Beersheba. Or maybe that was just the way things worked back then - after all Samuel had come into the limelight when Eli's sons had abused their power and brought judgment on the house of Eli...But Eli was a priest, while Samuel was a judge, and it is my understanding that being a judge was not a hereditary thing, but rather an identity that arose directly from God's call. So I think it is reasonable to conclude that Samuel took matters into his own hands in establishing his sons as judges, even though we aren't exactly told so in the story. Even so, it might have worked out OK if his boys didn't turn out to be complete chowder heads. But they weren't cut from the same cloth as their father. Like the sons of Eli, Samuel's sons turned out to be selfish, greedy, and corrupt. And to make matters worse, everyone knew it. And it didn't take the people long to

decide they had had enough of Joel and Abijah (Ah by' jah) to know that isn't where they wanted to stake their future.

And that is pretty much where we pick up the story with our scripture today. The elders of Israel had been talking and they had decided on a new course of action. Since Samuel was getting to be old, and soon wouldn't be able to lead them, they decided to ask for a king, like all the other nations had.

Now here is the problem. From the time of the Exodus – when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt – to the time of Samuel, a period of about 220 years, the Israelites had understood themselves to be a loose confederacy of tribes with no king but God alone. Throughout that time, God had called human leaders to take the reins as needed – first Moses, then Joshua, then the judges, of which Samuel was one (and for those of who know how the story plays out, the last). Israel was the covenant community rooted in the sovereignty of God alone. They were a people with a divine king. So when Gideon – one of the earlier judges – had been approached by the people and asked to become king following his victory over Midian, he refused, saying, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you: the Lord will rule over you.”

So the desire for a king wasn't something new to the Israelites. It had happened before, and Samuel knew this. And so when the elders asked him to appoint a king for them, he wasn't happy. He knew their tradition and their history, and how the temptation “to be like the other nations” was a recurring one for his people. So, like he presumably had been doing his whole life, Samuel went to God in prayer. But what he heard from the Lord wasn't what he expected. He had been expecting to hear the voice of God reminding him of their covenant relationship, and encouraging him to lead the people in being strong in resisting the temptations of being like the other nations...Instead, God told Samuel to listen to the people. Even though what they wanted amounted to a rejection

of God – saying in effect that God wasn't enough for them – the Lord told Samuel that it wasn't his fault, and that after he had told his people in no uncertain terms exactly what they would be getting if they got themselves a king, he should go along with what they wanted.

So Samuel, ever faithful, went back to the people and reported what he had heard from God. He didn't mince any words in telling them exactly what having a king would mean in the long term: Sure, there would probably be good things – good central organization, military leadership and national defense, and economic stimulus were among the most likely. But they would come at a high price. In the end, the way of a king is to take, take, take. He will take your sons and he will fill his armies with them, and make them work in his fields and in his foundries. He will take your daughters and put them to work as domestic servants in his palace. He will take the best of your land and give it to his favorite nobles. He will take the prime portion of your harvest and make gifts of it to his court. He will take the best of everything that is yours, and use it for his purposes. And in the end, where will you end up? “You shall be his slaves.” And when you realize how miserable you are as the subjects of a king, don't even think about crying out to God for help. You will have no one to thank but yourselves.

If Samuel expected that rosy little picture to sway public opinion, he was sadly disappointed. “Nope, our minds are made up” the people responded after hearing Samuel's warning. “We are determined to have a king and be like everybody else!” Again, Samuel went to God in prayer, repeating the wishes of the people once more. And again, God must have surprised Samuel, telling him, “OK, they've been warned, so now give them what they want. Set a king over them.”

After that, the next thing Samuel does is to tell everyone - to go home. And that is where the chapter ends. Now, I don't know about you, but when I read this story, I feel so badly

for Samuel. He has given his life in service to the Lord and the people of Israel. He has been steadfast in administering justice, and he has done everything he could to be faithful and righteous and good. And in this moment, the reality comes crashing down upon him – it wasn't enough.

After all his years in leading the people, he was failing them in his most important job – keeping them faithful to their covenant with God. They were about to give it all up to be like the other nations. At its root, it was an idolatrous move, and God acknowledged as much to Samuel in prayer, saying in essence – “It's not you, it's me. I am the one they are rejecting – just like they've been doing over and over again ever since Egypt. They want to serve other gods. OK, let them. And let's see how they like being slaves again.” ...

How do you know when you have done enough?

This is the question that I imagine Samuel was faced with when he sent the people home at the end of chapter 8. He had tried his best. And it wasn't enough. His people were about to make a colossal mistake. Was there anything more that he could do?

How do you know when you have done enough?

Our scripture reading this morning ends at chapter 8, verse 20, right after the people reaffirmed their demand for a king. It's not until chapter 11, when Samuel is leading the people to Gilgal that Saul is made their new king, when the people got what they wanted and made Saul their king. However, imagine the anguish that plagued Samuel. God told him to give up and to give the people what they were asking for. But, Samuel sends the people home, still without a king, but not telling them there is divine sanction for that outcome. He just says, “Go home” ... He must still be asking himself...is there anything more I can do?

How do you know when you have done enough?

It is a profoundly human dilemma, a question many of us have to ask ourselves over and over again.

- When a parent watches their daughter or son heading down a road that leads to destruction.
- When a loved one is battling addiction.
- When a sister and her children are caught in an abusive relationship.
- When the neighbor you have been trying to help get back on his feet starts to flounder.
- When the company you have served for years is coming undone.
- When your nation seems to be tearing itself apart at the seams.
- When your church appears to be losing its way.

How do you know when you have done enough?

Do you just reach a point where you have to give up? Wash your hands of the matter and move on? If you do, how can you avoid the inevitable sense of guilt, wondering if you could have done more?

A few years ago, after one of my Ministry Formation classes, I was talking with another member who asked this rhetorical question: *“We are constantly urged to give, give, give! of wealth, time, service. It can foster a sense of guilt. Is there ever a time when one can legitimately not feel guilty?”*

In other words...

How do you know when you have done (or given) enough?

And this is where I find good news in this relatively bad news story from Samuel. In acquiescing/giving in to the demands of the people for a king, God tells Samuel, in effect – you have done enough...You have been faithful...You have done your best...That is enough.

I find it encouraging that it took a while for this message to sink in with Samuel. God first soothes Samuel’s sense of personal responsibility in verse 7, and gives him the green light

for the demanded kingship once he delivers a solemn warning to the people. But Samuel goes back to God again when the people are still wanting a king after his dire speech. Like he's not sure if he has done enough. So God repeats the instructions –“ listen to the people. Give them their king”. You've done enough. And still Samuel sends the people home without telling them that they are going to get their king. I have to think he is still wondering if he has done enough to dissuade them, still feeling guilty about the prospect of giving up.

When we read on, we see that eventually, Samuel seems to get the message. The people get what they want, if not what they need. Samuel continues to faithfully lead and to serve for 16 more chapters, through most of the kingship of Saul - even through the anointing of his eventual successor, David. And God sticks with the obstinate people too, despite their implicit rejection. God doesn't rescue them from the outcomes of their choice. But God doesn't abandon them either. God goes with them, even down the road that ultimately leads to their own demise...Which, I think we can all agree, is no fault of Samuel's.

So... How do you know when you have done enough?

When you've done your best...When you have been faithful...I think that is all we can ask of ourselves...I think that is enough.

And I think that's enough for God too. Amen.