

How to tell the truth

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I've always admired the prophets. Their job of truth-telling required such courage and personal sacrifice. Yet they never held back. They spoke the truth no matter the consequences. I imagine they were lonely, then. Who could stand their challenging company for very long?

Personal relationships, however, weren't the prophets' priority. Their job was to tell God's truth in a way that would be heard. In this week's reading from 2 Samuel, Nathan skillfully uses a parable to reveal the truth. David is so blind to his sin that he might not listen to Nathan any other way.

I've known pastors who say they've never felt called to preach prophetically. I find this really hard to believe. We're all, at times, put in positions where we ought to prioritize telling the truth. Maybe you've noticed that your friend is stuck in a string of abusive relationships. Or your church has fallen into the comfortable habit of only meeting its own needs. Perhaps you've recognized that your governor's new tax proposal will hurt the poor. Or your brother's workaholicism is ruining his marriage.

Situations arise that require us to step forward and tell the truth. The question is whether we will.

Following Nathan's lead, it might help us to think strategically about the task. How will the truth best be heard? Should we start with a story or a closely related scenario where the truth might be overheard? Should we approach the person individually? Or would the truth be better received in community?

Here are a few suggestions to consider as we discern how best to approach the prophetic task:

- **Be fair.** Listen well. Hear all sides, consider other perspectives, and discern in community.
- **Earn a hearing.** We don't have the same authority as the Hebrew prophets. Relationships matter in how we are heard. People listen to those they trust. So build trust. Honor the relationship, and speak the truth in love.
- **Be wise about where and when.** The time is not always right for truth-telling. Nor is the place--seek as safe a space as possible.
- **Be open to disagreement. Be open to being wrong.** The truth is difficult to discern. We should move forward with humility, open to hearing the truth ourselves.
- **Practice naming. Ask questions.** Stick to the facts, and name what you see. Ask the person to help interpret. "I've noticed the same problems and patterns emerging in your relationships. What do you think that's about?"
- **Challenge, but don't threaten.** It's a fine line but an important one. We can challenge and still be heard. If we cross over into threatening--threatening someone's worldview, his family's teachings, her structures of belief--the person will check out and shut down.

Truth-telling is tricky. The consequences are real, which is why we typically avoid the whole endeavor. But the world needs more prophets who will be honest even when it's hard.