Daughters of Zelophehad at the Door of the Tent
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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\textit{Numbers 27:1-11}

Today we are continuing our summer sermon series on Women of the Bible by looking at the story of five women who rarely ever get mentioned in sermons or bible studies. I’m speaking of the daughters of Zelophehad, a male member of the tribe of Manasseh who fled Egypt with the Hebrews during the Exodus. Like almost everyone else in his generation, Zelophehad died in the wilderness, before they entered the Promised Land. He had no sons, only daughters—named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. The fact that the book of Numbers names them is significant. The Biblical text does not always name daughters—but it almost always names sons.

The passage we are about to hear from Numbers 27 comes on the heels of a census taken of all the Israelites over the age of 20. The count was taken both to keep track of males eligible for serving in the army and to help divvy up the land they were about to invade and conquer between the various tribes or clans and their families. In a patriarchal society, the laws concerning the inheritance of land and property were patrilineal. Property passed from fathers to sons or brothers or other male kinsmen, not to daughters. But what happened when there were no sons?

After the census had been taken, discussions were beginning on dividing the land among the clans and their members and that’s when these five daughters of Zelophehad show up at the door of the tent of meeting—the place where Moses went to seek God’s face in prayer. Listen for what happens when they show up!

\textit{Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hefer son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, ‘Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.’}

\textit{Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.’}

Back when my daughters were small and we lived in upstate New York, Judith and I used to take them out to eat at Friendly’s restaurant in Glens Falls. The kids’ meals came with what they called cone head sundaes, a scoop of ice cream with two M&M eyes and a mouth with a sugar cone on top. By the age of 2 and a half or so, Rebecca was old enough that I couldn’t get away with helping myself to any of her sundae, but when Martha got to be old enough that we were ordering kids meals for her, I’d
swoop over with my spoon and eat about half of hers. I'll never forget the evening that all ended. It is an everlasting part of Fulp-Eickstaedt family lore.

Martha was about a year old, still in a high chair and not yet saying many words. After I finished my meal and the girls had been served their sundaes, I leaned in with my spoon to start in on Martha's ice cream. That's when she suddenly said, "Hey! Hey!" That's when the jig was up. The days of sneaking ice cream from my younger daughter were over. My little girl sensed that something was not quite fair about this and she was speaking up for what she thought she had coming to her.

When the daughters of Zelophehad—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—showed up at the door of the tent of meeting where Moses would go to seek God's face, they were coming to speak up for themselves in the face of something that didn't seem fair to them.

A census had been taken to help determine how many heads of household in each tribe would be in line to receive portions of the land God was about to give into their hand when they invaded Canaan. In a patriarchal and patrilineal system, the daughters of Zelophehad were going to be left out. Their father had died, and they were not yet married, so they were SOL, so to speak. So the five of them came to say, "Hey! Hey! There's something not right about this! This system is not fair or just. It's not our fault that our father died—and he died for his own sin just like anybody else, not because he participated in that failed rebellion against Moses' leadership. We are the ones who carry on our father's memory and we should receive what would have been coming to him, whether we are married or not.

Now you have to understand that this was quite a challenge to the status quo. The tradition was that property, rights, and inheritances were passed on to men, male children, and not women. That's the way it had always been. Thus it is written, thus it shall be. But these young women sensed the injustice in their father's promised inheritance being given away to others simply because he had had no male offspring. So they showed up, they stood up, and they spoke up. Hey! Hey!

And Moses, who was right there at the door to the tent, took their case with him into his meeting with God. Then God told Moses, "These young women have a case. Listen to them. They're right. When there is no son in a family, inheritances should go to the daughters. If there are no daughters, well then, okay, whatever would be given to a man's children should go to his brothers—and if he has no brothers, then give it to his uncles, and if he has no uncles, then the nearest male kin in his clan." Now, we could get all hung up in the ins and outs of Biblical inheritance laws here, but what really interests me is that these five women are daring enough to present their case.

There is nothing passive-aggressive about it. They don't grumble and complain amongst themselves about the unfairness. It's not like those meetings that take place in parking lots after the meeting. The five young women note their situation and proactively and assertively go to the person who can do something about it and they state their case.

When they do, Moses, to his credit, has the good sense to go to God in prayer about it. We don't know whether Moses was favorably inclined towards their plea or not, but he was right there at the door of the tent where he went to talk to God, and he knew enough to seek God's will in a time of transition. He didn't say, "We've never done it that way before. The tradition is clear.” Instead Moses talked to the living God.

In that regard, I think Moses was a bit like the people in the last twenty or thirty years who wrestled with and were transformed by the coming out of their gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgender
sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends who said to them and to us, “Hey! Hey! We are beloved children of God, too. Make room for us. Be kind and just and loving to us.”

It should be said that Moses’ mind might never have been changed—he might never even have taken it to God—if it weren't for the daughters of Zelophehad speaking up for themselves.

That set me to wondering. Who are the descendants of the daughters of Zelophehad—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—throughout history?

Surely Sojourner Truth was one. Born a slave in New York the 1790's, she was freed in 1827 and became an outspoken advocate for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. At the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, she said something like this:

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? ["Intellect," someone near her said.] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negro rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him....

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough, Sojourner Truth said, to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.¹ Now that's a speech.

Sojourner Truth was a descendant of Zelophehad's daughters if ever there was one. So was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Clara Barton, and Amelia Earhart, and Rosa Parks. So is Ruby Bridges, who was one of the little African-American girls who was the first to integrate the schools in Little Rock. She only just turned 60 in 2014. So are Gloria Steinem, and Malala Yousfazi, and Margaret Towner, who was the first woman ordained to be a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, two years after Ruby Bridges was born. And by the way did you know, that yesterday was Women's Equality Day?

But you don't have to be a woman to be a spiritual descendant of Zelophehad's daughters. You just have to have the strength and courage to show up, and stand up, and speak up. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah show us that the way it has always been is not the way it always has to be—especially if that way was unjust or damaging to you or others.

¹ Soujourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?", speech at the Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio, December 1851
Brené Brown was on the money, as she so often is, when she wrote, “To love ourselves and support each other in the process of becoming real is perhaps the greatest single act of daring greatly.” She could have been writing about Zelophehad’s daughters, or about women and sometimes men who leave relationships and homes where they and their children are being abused and they finally get to a shelter, or people who admit that they are trapped in a generational cycle of addiction and decide that they are going to love themselves enough to be the ones to break the pattern by getting help, or the people who contemplate suicide but have the courage, God help them, they have the courage, to reach out and say, “Hey! Hey! Hey! I need a hand. I’m struggling here!”

Having said all of that, rather than just seeing ourselves and our family and friends as Zelophehad’s daughters, I think it is at least as important to consider how their spiritual descendants keep showing up at the door of our lives, our tent of meeting, the liminal place where we go to God in prayer. I’m not just talking about this sanctuary, I’m talking about our day-to-day lives. Their stories show up in our newsfeeds, and in our inbox, in our daily encounters if we think about. The immigrants who flee oppression only to be treated like they are less than human if they don’t have papers—and sometimes if they do; the LGBTQ people whose rights are in danger of being rolled back; the people of color who keep showing up and telling us that they continue to be treated differently and unfairly because of the shade of their skin—don’t tell me that’s not true—the people who struggle just to have enough, just to have enough to live on in systems that are tilted against them.

My daughter Martha spent this past week being trained to be a Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer. The other day, they took them into New York City and talked to them about how they were going to live and eat on three dollars a day. She’s going to be living with three other YAVS and they’re going to be pooling their resources. (I think I’m going to be sending her money from time to time). But what about the people who don’t have daddies to send them money, they’re daughters of Zelophehad, too. And when they show up, and stand up, and speak up, for God’s sake, can’t we learn from Moses to listen and bring them to God in prayer? I mean honestly go to God with their requests and needs and then listen for what a God of compassion, and love, and justice—a God made flesh in Jesus Christ—would tell us about how to respond, how the world might be changed.

Their names are Stephanie, Mareshia, Keela, and Quanesha. You might not know their names, but you may know their story since it was national news several years ago. These four girls are best friends, two are African American and two are white. They do everything together and have always done everything together. Yet their senior year they realized there was something they could not do together, they could not go to prom together. Although it was not officially sanctioned, their school held two proms—white prom and black prom. Yes, 59 years after the Supreme Court said separate but equal was not constitutional, the high school in Wilcox County, Georgia was still holding separate proms.

These two proms were long part of the school’s history. When the schools were forced to integrate, the school stopped putting on dances and let each group of parents put on their own dances. The white parents put on the white prom and the black parents put on the black prom. They were held the same evening every year. And somehow this continued for 59 years in Wilcox County, Georgia.

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Until these four best friends got to their senior year and said, "We want to go to prom together." **Hey! Hey! Hey!**

Perhaps the saddest part of the story is that they met quite a bit of resistance from many adults in Wilcox County, including from the state’s governor who called the girls request for one prom, “a publicity stunt for the political left.” And you know what other adults said, “Well maybe this is a good idea but old traditions are hard to change.”

All these girls wanted to do was go to the prom together, so they held their voice and they started a Facebook page pushing for an integrated prom, with this prom theme: Love has no color. And all the other students agreed with them, it was long past time that Wilcox County had one prom for all the students. This group of students led by four teenage girls stood up, they took a stand.

Can you hear them? Four girls in prom dresses with their arms creating a chain: “Hey! Hey! The way you have done things is too small for us. We know there is something bigger and truer and we are going to do that.”

The next year the prom was again put on outside of the school but it was for both black and white students and the year after, Wilcox County High School held its first official school sponsored integrated prom.

The daughters of Zelophehad—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—and the Prom Queens—Stephanie, Mareshia, Keela, and Quanesha—show us what it means to show up, to stand up, and to speak up.

Ever since Jesus came along we don’t talk so much about inheriting a physical promised land anymore, we talk about inheriting the Kingdom of God. And there’s room for everybody in that kingdom.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.