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Numbers 27:1-11 & 36:1-12

“Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Daughters of Zelophehad – Small Steps”

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### **Numbers 27:1–11**

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher 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. <sup>2</sup>They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, <sup>3</sup>“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. <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>Moses brought their case before the Lord. <sup>6</sup>And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. <sup>10</sup>If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. <sup>11</sup>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.”

This ends our first reading.

### **Numbers 36:1–12**

<sup>1</sup>The heads of the ancestral houses of the clans of the descendants of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, of the Josephite clans, came forward and spoke in the presence of Moses and the leaders, the heads of the ancestral houses of the Israelites; <sup>2</sup>they said, “The Lord commanded my lord to give the land for inheritance by lot to the Israelites; and my lord was commanded by the Lord to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters. <sup>3</sup>But if they are married into another Israelite tribe, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestors and added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so it will be taken away from the allotted portion of our inheritance. <sup>4</sup>And when the jubilee of the Israelites comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they have married; and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe.” <sup>5</sup>Then Moses commanded the Israelites according to the word of the Lord, saying, “The descendants of the tribe of Joseph are right in what they are saying. <sup>6</sup>This is what the Lord commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, ‘Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father’s tribe that they are married, <sup>7</sup>so that no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for all Israelites shall retain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes. <sup>8</sup>Every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the Israelites shall marry one from the clan of her father’s tribe, so that all Israelites may continue to possess their ancestral inheritance. <sup>9</sup>No inheritance shall be transferred from

one tribe to another; for each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance.”<sup>10</sup>The daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord had commanded Moses. <sup>11</sup>Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad, married sons of their father’s brothers. <sup>12</sup>They were married into the clans of the descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in the tribe of their father’s clan.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### **“Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Daughters of Zelophehad – Small Steps”**

I am currently reading “The Magician’s Daughter,” a story about a young woman of mysterious origins named Bidy who is raised on a magical island. Her parent figure, Rowan, is a magician who fled the authority of the Magician’s council. He believed the council was abusing its authority to control the world of magic instead of using their gifts to make other people’s lives better. At one point in the story, we see Rowan in an argument with Morgen, his former fiancé, about her plans to stay with Magician’s Council. He was arguing that they flee together and fight the system from the outside. Morgen, on the other hand, is making the case to stay on the Council and fight to make changes from within the system.

How do we make change in systems and structures? This is the question driving the narrative of today’s story. Earlier in the book of Numbers (Chapter 16) we are told about the revolt of Korah. Korah was a leader among the Levites who led a faction to break away and argue that Moses should not be the only conduit of God’s divine revelation – that God should speak to and through all people. Moses was not happy, and neither was God. God was angry that people continued to rebel and revolt against God’s plans for the people. God was SO angry that The Lord wanted to wipe out all the followers of Korah, but Moses and Aaron begged for mercy. Instead, in front of Korah’s gathered followers, God caused the earth to open up and swallow Korah and a few of his closest allies. People fled in terror and God commanded that Korah’s belongings be turned into hammered plates to remind others what happens when you challenge God’s plans.

This is the back story to today’s passages in Numbers as five sisters come before Moses to ask him to consider their situation. It is very uncommon for biblical texts to name women – so it is extraordinary that we have five NAMED women in this text – Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Here’s the problem, their father, Zelophehad, has died in the journey to the Promised Land. By this point in their journey, God through Moses had given each tribe and then each family within that tribe land in the promised land. As the oldest generation begins to die on their journey the inheritance laws come into play – as you can guess, the land of the fathers would pass to their sons. Well, as it turns out, Zelophehad didn’t have any sons. He had five daughters. So, what would happen to his land? What would happen to the daughters?

Seeing the injustice of this situation I imagine the daughters of Zelophehad gather in their tent to vent and figure out what to do...

“What are we going to do?”

“This isn’t right! It’s not our fault Papa didn’t produce any sons?”

“Now we are going to lose the land promised to our family before we even get there?”

I am sure there was at least ONE bold sister who was not going to tolerate this foolishness.

“No, we are going to go to Moses and plead our case! Surely there is something he can do!”

“Are you crazy? Do you want to end up like Korah? Swallowed by the earth?”

I imagine more sisters begin to get on board, “No, but why should papa’s brothers get what should be ours? We have to try?”

“Are you sure? Remember Korah?”

“We aren’t trying to challenge Moses authority...we are only asking him to consider a situation The Lord might not have considered”

“The Lord is a good God – surely the Lord will hear our plea and make the world right.”

Finally, all five sisters are on board with an audacious idea – maybe God did not think of every situation or wasn’t as thorough in passing down the Laws in the Torah to Moses...

so they approach Moses in front of the tent of meeting – the place where God would meet and talk with Moses – to plead their case.

Our Papa is dead – he wasn’t one of those guys challenging your authority – he wasn’t with Korah – he wasn’t smart though, he sinned in other ways, we don’t deny that. But he didn’t have any sons...does that mean his name and inheritance should pass from his people? Give us land with our uncles.

These women must have made a pretty strong case – The Lord says, “Oh yeah, the daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying...” The Lord then goes on to not only address their specific situation, but to change the Law so that all future situations just like this are more just. These five women change God’s mind because they were BOLD enough to raise the question. Unlike Korah, they worked within the system to make a change.

To be honest, it was a small change – this didn’t guarantee that women and girls would always inherit along with their male family members...but it made a small change that provided more protection for women that didn’t exist before.

Later in Numbers it is clear that the experience with Zelophehad’s daughters has not left the community’s conciseness – they are revisiting that decision and making new rules to protect the land and ensure it staying within the Clan.

I have read the bible from cover to cover quite a few times – I am not bragging there – just pointing out that I should have known this story. But I didn’t. It wasn’t until I helped lead a Montreat Youth Conference a few years ago that this story left off the page and captured my attention.

This is one of four times in the Hebrew Scriptures where God changed the law because of concerns brought by humanity. Women’s voices changed God’s mind – in the words of our Brief Statement of Faith – the voices of peoples long silenced changed God’s mind. As we prepare to ordain and install a new class of Elders and Deacons today, I think this invites our community and leadership to consider some important things.

How are we raising our voices?  
Whose voices are being raised?  
Whose voices are we listening to?  
How are those voices helping us to discern God's will and hopes and desires for our shared future?

The daughters of Zelophehad demonstrate that we as a community have to be intentional about seeking out different voices – voices that we might not hear all the time, voices whose experience are outside our norm to better understand how their lives are impacted by the ways things are going here in the church and in the world.

My time working with Greater Cleveland Congregations also taught me another lesson I see in this text. Sometimes the actions we can take right now are not going to move the dial all the way to the place we want things to be. But we can't let that paralyze our decisions and stop our work. We have to understand the problem and take the steps we can take right now to make a change and make plans to take future steps to move us farther along. We can't let the perfect become the enemy of the good.

These five daughters prove that we have ALL been gifted with experience and insights that can change God's heart. Let us join together to ensure we are listening to the voices of people long silenced so that we can go to God and be empowered to work for a more just world.

Amen.