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Faces of our Faith
The Daughters of Zelophehad

Numbers 27:1-11
Luke 18:1-8

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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

As you know by now, we have shifted away from our Disney sermon series to *Face of our Faith*. Here is the trailer: <http://www.mechpresby.org/message.aspx?messageGuid=7169c113-d316-4ab5-9803-9afcf28a3a04&subheadertext=Faces+of+Our+Faith&episodeguid=5ca09533-5fb1-4d8b-8310-6bdc7473debc>

That trailer highlights those faces of our faith that we will be preaching on through the end of June and the faces of our faith here at MPC that have impacted who this congregation is and where we are today. If you want to watch the trailer where you can pause it to try and pick out people you may know, go to our website – [mechpresby.org](http://www.mechpresby.org) – and then scroll down to click on where you see the title of this series.

I am glad to be doing *Faces of Our Faith*. Some of you may recall that this is the sermon series we were in the middle of in 2020 when we stopped meeting in-person and moved everything online. Those faces included Judas, the Penitent Thief on the Cross, Joseph of Arimathea, and Mary Magdalene; among others.

It feels like good and proper symmetry to be picking up that sermon series as we hopefully shift to being back in person again.

And, although Disney was fun, not everyone has seen all of those movies so not everyone is familiar with Moana or Simba or Coco. Unlike a sermon series based on Faces found in Scripture. I mean, who among us does not know Adam & Eve, Eutychus, or... the Daughters of Zelophehad?

There are so many empty or vaguely filled in spaces in the Biblical canon we hold in our heads – even for me, and I have a seminary degree written in Latin. Our understandings of what is in Scripture are so impacted by the cultural church canon, that I cannot help but wonder what influences it. Why don't we know about the Daughters of Zelophehad or so many other cool stories found in Scripture?

I think there are a number of factors, including the Revised Common Lectionary. Some of us are so used to that 3 year cycle of texts (usually 1 OT, 1 NT, 1 Gospel, 1 Psalm) that if we don't have a Shepherd Sunday 3 Sundays after Easter, we feel a little disjointed (just to prove my point, after I typed up this sermon, I looked up the RCL readings and Shepherd Sunday is today).

When we only preach and study based on the Revised Common Lectionary, there are entire portions of Scripture that we never hear, and a long list of faces of our faith that we never meet.

The RCL plays a role, but I think there are other factors too including Vacation Bible School. Rare is the VBS that does not have a day dedicated to the Good Samaritan. And that is good – it's Gospel and love your neighbor as yourself, even the neighbor you don't really like that much, is basically the foundation of our faith. But why do we never hear and teach about so many other great faces of our faith?

Today we learn about 5 sisters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah. We are going to focus on their story found in the Torah, specifically the book of Numbers. They are mentioned five times through the Old Testament and in a random fact, there are only two others who are mentioned in more books than them – Moses and Miriam.

Their story requires a little bit of background – the setting is the Israelites, having wandered around the wilderness for decades, are now on the very cusp of entering the Promised Land. In order to keep things organized, they are divided into twelve tribes – one for each son of Israel. So there is the tribe of Joseph and Reuben and Benjamin, etc.... And within those tribes are clans – again broken down into groups according to the sons' names.

The governing body over all of these clans and tribes are found at the tent of meeting. You will hear more about that in the story. The other helpful piece of background to know is that according to the law at the time, when a man died, his inheritance – his land and property – went to his sons and if he did not have sons, it went to his brothers, leaving any daughters to rely on their uncles' generosity.

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. 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."

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."

The Stories of God for the people of God... **thanks be to God.**

I am not sure what is more shocking in that story – that five women had the guts to go to where all the powerful men were and ask for justice?

Or that Moses took them seriously enough to bring it to God?

Or that Scripture – the Torah no less – has the statement: *the women were right?*

Or that over centuries of oral tradition and stories finally being written down, this story stayed in there. The story even says their names:

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

I cannot even imagine the amount of determination these women had, to go to the place of sacrifice and worship and power – a place where a woman’s voice was not often heard – and take a stand for justice. The text says the women came forward; they stood, they spoke, they questioned, they even demanded.

How hard must that have been for them who were usually unseen and unheard. All they wanted was for what was rightfully theirs and with that comes being recognized, being valued, and being seen as human beings.

Because if you are unseen... you are dispensable.

I guess one of the questions we could ask of the text is, was the inheritance rightfully theirs? According to the law, it was not, and let’s face it; that law was probably quite literally, written in stone.

We deal with this question in current day. How often do we hear in response to an arrest in the news, “well, that’s the law; if you don’t like it, change the law.”

But just because something is law - even Mosaic law – does not mean that it is just law. Changing the law requires getting the ear of those in power, and no one was more in power than Moses. To his credit, not only did Moses listen, but he was willing to open his heart and wrestle with the question enough to ultimately bring it to God.

God heard the voices of these women and I cannot help but wonder if Moses was shocked to hear God say: *the daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying...* and then God proceeds to dictate a new law.

The old law was no longer suitable, so God made way for change.

Lauren Wright Pittman, from Sanctified Art, drew today’s bulletin cover art. She writes that ^Ain this image, the winds of change, the breath of God, surrounds the tent of meeting and the voice of God descends on these women, hearing their cry. New life sprouts from the ground as the law is heard afresh.”

But as we know too well, the work of justice is never done.

In the last chapter of Numbers we hear about the daughters of Zelophehad again. Once again, they are named: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. But this time their day in court does

^A Picture from Sanctified Art, using the same panning effect used in Storytime with Cathay (please)

not go quite as well for them, at least not according to our modern-day expectations and understandings of justice. The heads of their clan went to Moses and the leaders and voiced their concern that if the women claimed their inheritance, then if they married outside of the tribe, that allotted portion of the inheritance (which eventually would translate into land in the Promised Land) would then go to a different tribe than the one they were from.

This time Moses did not confer with God and commanded: *The descendants of the tribe of Joseph are right in what they are saying. 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, 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'* (36:5-7).

Amos 5:24 say: *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

It is a beautiful sentiment, but the truth is that justice more often happens in fits and starts, rather than a flowing stream. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice... but anyone who has been involved in the fight for justice, knows that we all have to keep leaning on that arc, because the laws of humanity tend to snap right back to favor those in power.

Just like the persistent widow from the New Testament reading, we have to keep knocking, keep continually coming at the unjust to change hearts and minds... and laws.

The story of the Daughters of Zelophehad invites us to come forward, to stand, to speak, to question, and to demand change when we experience injustice. And if we are the ones in power, this text challenges us to not turn our backs on the ones who need us to see them.

There are voices in our world that are less valued.

There are bodies in our world that are not seen.

There are people who cannot breathe.

They need us, like Moses, to listen, and be willing to open our hearts, and wrestle with the question enough to ultimately bring it to God.

We who can be heard,

We who are seen,

We who can breathe...

We must take that breath and breathe life into those old, tired, worn out, unjust laws.

We must do justice.

Love kindness.

And walk humbly with our God.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.