

Faith Mennonite Church
June 17, 2012
Seek Peace and Pursuit It
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Those audacious daughters of Zelophehad

Numbers 27:1-11

The daughters of Zelophehad. Who knew they existed? Their story has probably remained obscure because it is recorded in the book of Numbers. And who, but a few mathematicians, would ever consider reading a book with a name like that! The English name is actually a misnomer. In Hebrew the name is *Bemidbar*, which means “in the desert of.” The book, however, does live up to its English name in one regard: it contains data from two censuses. And since the first census is recorded in the first four chapters of the book, many readers understandably get stuck in the seemingly endless list of names of tribes, clans, and families and don’t hang in there to read the 32 chapters that follow.

Numbers is much more than a statistical abstract of early Israel. It is a continuation of the story, begun in the book of Exodus, of the Hebrew people, particularly as they are making the transition between the wilderness and the new land they had been longing to enter. It contains stories of further development of their communal life and religious practices. It includes accounts of rebellion against the leaders, including some jockeying for power as Moses' co-leaders and siblings, Aaron and Miriam, lead one of the protests.

The set-up for the story we read this morning happens in the preceding chapter (26) where there is a census of the second generation--those who were born in the wilderness and who will be the ones to enter the promised land. The census was taken in order to apportion the new land among the 12 tribes of Israel. That apportioning is done entirely according to the *men* of the clans and families.

Enter the five daughters of Zelophehad. Their clan line is well defined: Zelophehad was *son* of Hopher *son* of Gilead *son* of Machir *son* of Manasseh *son* of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans (27:1). But these daughters also had names: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Five names to equal the five generations that preceded their father. Only, their names, because they were women, were not included in the census. And because they had no brothers, their father’s line was about to end. Not only would they and their father’s name be disenfranchised, the whole Manassite clan would receive a diminished portion of land.

So the five sisters stood up publicly in front of Moses, the priest, the leaders, and all the people to state their cause. They presented their case, not simply as a matter of justice for them, but also as a matter of the legacy for their father's name. They remind the company that their father died of natural causes, which is the meaning of their statement that he “died from his own sins.” He had not died as a consequence of taking part in one of the desert rebellions. He should be remembered, they claimed. Land should be passed down in his name.

Moses found their case compelling and agreed to consult God. And God's response was positive: yes, give these women an inheritance!

Of course nothing is ever as easy or simple as it looks at first. In the final chapter of Numbers the case of the daughters of Zelophehad comes up again. This time there is the concern over what happens if/when the daughters marry. Once they are married their land would be passed along to their children, but if they married outside of their clan, their land might actually find its way to the clan of their husband. Thus, a new accommodation was made: the daughters were instructed to marry within their clan, to ensure that the land would remain in the clan.

This story, from the early stages of development of the people of Israel, teaches an important and enduring lesson about law: it is not permanently fixed but grows and changes along with the growth of God's people and in response to the call for justice. This doesn't mean that anyone can change the law as they wish. There was a clear process here: the daughters of Z raised a concern within their community.

The leaders (in this case Moses) consulted God and received a preliminary ruling. Later additional concerns were raised, calling for additional discernment. Together the community shaped the new law that they would live by.

We will recall similar situations in Jesus' day. In Luke 14 there is an account of the Pharisees accusing Jesus of breaking Sabbath laws when he healed a person on the Sabbath. Jesus replied that laws were made for people, not people for laws. Similarly in John 8, we find Jesus quietly challenging the men who brought a woman caught in adultery, ready to stone her, thinking they had the full force of law behind them. Jesus recognized the double standard—that only the woman was brought and charged as guilty. Where was the guilty man? Jesus sent the men away, not questioning the command against adultery, but challenging a one-sided disciplinary practice.

None of these accounts—in Numbers or the gospels—suggest that laws aren't needed. Instead they affirm that laws serve both the good of individuals and the community. The two must always be held together in a positive tension, whether we are talking about the distribution of goods in our society (such as the land, as in the story from Numbers) or about questions of personal morality including sexuality (as in Luke's account of the case of adultery).

We must confess that we don't do very well as a society, or as the church, in holding the individual and communal in balance. Our society is highly individualistic and tends to place individual rights above all else. Our modern sensibility would be to applaud the ruling that the daughters of Z obtain an inheritance, but we might chafe at any restrictions placed on their decision of whom to marry.

The story of the daughters of Z offers us a dual challenge: first we must ever be vigilant for people or groups within our society who are not served by our current laws or traditional practices. As a congregation we have worked on behalf of justice for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. In the past we provided sanctuary for undocumented persons, we have befriended new immigrants, and we have joined in the protest of a broken immigration system. Our friends at Missio Dei have taken an active role in challenging housing foreclosures and we have sought various ways to respond to the needs of homeless persons and families. The need for vigilance is something we never rest from.

A second challenge of this story is to think both communally and individually and to stay engaged in processes of discernment with all levels of our church as we seek to build more just communities. In these processes of discernment we need everyone:

- we need the audacious daughters of Z who raise their voices to point out an injustice;
- we need leaders who will listen, pray, and create avenues for authentic conversation and discernment, and
- we need diverse members: some to help us recall our history and others to help us thoughtfully anticipate the ways that the community will be affected by modifications to current laws and customs. We cannot know all the unintended consequences of change, some of which might raise the need for further modifications.

But we trust that this is the work of God. This is the work we are called to do, now and in this place. As we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we believe we will be led into truth.

Let us give thanks for those audacious daughters of Zelophehad!