

Ben Lattimer
Sunday Service, Sermon
September 10, 2010
Numbers 27
Adjusting Course

Sermon

Intro / Hook

Admit it. You'd never heard of the Daughters of Zelophehad. I'd never heard of the Daughters of Zelophehad. They never show up in the lectionary readings. They're not the subject of any catchy contemporary praise songs.

When I was younger I tried reading through the Bible from cover to cover a couple of times. I cruised through all the stories of Genesis and the first half of Exodus. Then I'd start to slow down in all the laws and the detailed description of the temple. And I'd really lose steam somewhere in the middle of all those laws in Leviticus. Once, I powered through Leviticus - only to get lost in the wilderness of Numbers. I never made it as far as the daughters of Zelophehad.

But here they are - in our Bibles. These 5 brave, powerful women who pushed back and changed the rules: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah...

As Jessica noted earlier this week: This might be "the first documented instance of the fight for women's rights..."

Context

The story finds us in the wilderness - but JUST on the edge of the Promised Land. After their deliverance from Egypt - the Hebrews have been following Moses - wandering for a generation. But now their wandering days are nearly at an end.

They are approaching the land promised by God all those centuries ago to Abraham and Sarah... These former slaves have been waiting anxiously for a land to call their own. Now they are set to take possession of it.

The chapter just before ours, gives us a census - the names of the patriarchs of each tribe and clan. Now, this is important, because they are going to portion out the land - and they want to make sure that each tribe, each clan gets a "fair" share. I say "fair" - that's not entirely true.

They were trying to be fair... Sort of. As best they understood it. They weren't trying to be fair to the women. The rules were that the sons inherited the land. And if no sons, then uncles - other males, the next of kin. This was the rule that had been set out by Moses himself - the traditional understanding - how they'd always done it, for generations...

Then in walk the Daughters of Zelophehad...

You see, their father had come out of Egypt along with the rest. He had wandered for years in the wilderness, just like the others... But he had no sons, no heirs. His legacy was set to fade away.

“Why should our father’s name disappear from his clan, just because he had no son?”

Looking Beyond the Rules - to the Spirit of the Law

They’re doing something really important here. They’re pointing beyond the custom, beyond the tradition, beyond the rule that’s always been- beyond the letter of the law - to get to the *spirit of the law*. They’re looking to the reason the rules were instituted in the first place. Like when you’re driving - with your eye to the horizon, so you can see clearly to adjust your course...

The rules were put in place, as Dennis Olsen writes, “to ensure a just distribution of [the] land and [to maintain] the integrity of all the tribes.” To make sure that everyone gets enough - a fair share...

The Daughters of Zelophehad call out those in power - they call *Moses* out - pointing to their story and the *unfairness* in it. There’s a bravery in this - these women speaking up and speaking out in a male dominated world. There they stood...

What Happens Next...

What happens next is remarkable. Moses listened...

The man in power - didn’t act defensive. Didn’t immediately start talking, explaining to them how they didn’t understand the way things work. No, Moses listened. He thought about it, prayed about it. This is so important. Cindy and I have this mantra when surprised by a difficult decision. Buy time. It’s a reminder that most questions don’t have to be answered right away. Buy time.

“You raise a really good question. I need to give it some thought. Pray about it. Talk it over with Cindy and others... ”

Moses listened. He thought about it, prayed about it. He acknowledged their story... And then he changed the rules.

As Lauren Wright Pittman puts it, “The catalyst for this moment isn’t only the women’s strength; it also took a man in power to listen, to open his heart, to wrestle, and to offer his grasp over this patriarchal law to God... Though the laws were probably carved into stone, God shows us in this text that the law is living, breathing, adaptable, and changing. This [story] invites us to come forward, to stand, to speak, to question... We must breathe life into those old, tired, worn-out laws.... *New life sprouts... as the law is heard afresh.*”

Conclusion

That's what makes this story we never read so important. It's an antidote to fossilization. Right here, within the story of the law - there's this invitation to reexamine the tradition... This is the Bible's own account of pushing back, adapting its rules. This story doesn't just give permission - it's not just an invitation - it's an *obligation* - for each generation to reexamine the traditions - the rules that were created for a purpose, and to see whether the law as we have understood it continues to live into the *spirit* - the purpose - for which it was created.

"We've always done it this way" is no longer enough. Even the "Law of Moses" becomes dynamic and alive. *God* in this story is alive - still speaking - in real relationship with Moses and with the people.

The daughters bravely speak their truth - and they get justice... But the change isn't just for them! This becomes a statute and an ordinance for all the people moving forward. Other daughters benefit from the courage and resolve of these 5.

As Dennis Olsen says, they "create new possibilities... These women are models of boldness fueled by hope, models of advocacy fueled by a concern for the larger community, and models of faithfulness fueled by a dynamic relationship with their tradition and with their God."

May we too find the courage to cry out for justice when all is not right - and the grace to be ever willing to listen for God's voice when it invites us to change...

Amen.