

This message was prepared for the Maumee Valley Presbytery and the Tontogany Presbyterian Church by Rev. Wanda Lantz Stopher on the occasion of the ordination of Pamela Graf Short On the third Sunday of Easter, the fourth day of May in the year of our LORD two thousand and fourteen.

Text: Numbers 27:1-11, presented here in New Revised Standard Version

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. **2** They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, **3** "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. **4** 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." **5** Moses brought their case before the Lord. **6** And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: **7** 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. **8** 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. **9** If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. **10** If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. **11** 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."

Imagine with me...it's Sunday morning, John and Marthella Graf call up the stairs,
"Jack,

 Brian,

 Ned,

 Pam,

 Tom...

 it's time to go to church, come!

And just for a moment...imagine the five of them responding in unison, "Yes, Mother! Coming, Father!"...as they scramble down the staircase and line up in a row! (Think Von Trapp Family!)
Jack,

 Brian,

 Ned,

 Pam, and

 Tom...

All those boys and one little girl, Pammi-meaning honey...all sweetness, favored, princess...
But also a little girl certainly made strong through a good bit of teasing and tussling.

If you will...indulge me once more.

Imagine with me, Zelophehad...you know,
son of Hopher,

 the son of Gilead,

 the son of Machir,

 son of Manasseh,

 who was the son of Joseph

 (Yes, Joseph, once second in command of all Egypt.)

 You know the family.

Imagine Zelophehad and his wife calling their children, calling their five daughters:

“Mahlah,
 Noah,
 Hoglah,
 Milcah,
 Tirzah...”

Come! We’re gathering at the tent of meeting!”
(Again, think Von Trapp Family!)

But in a culture where names had meaning, listen to the list again!

Mahlah=Disease,
Noah=Motion,
Hoglah=Partridge,
Milcah=Queen,
Tirzah=Favored...
”Disease,
 Motion,
 Partridge,
 Queen,
 Favored...”

Come! We’re gathering at the tent of meeting today!”

I don’t want to over-interpret the point, but it’s stunning to me to hear those names’ meanings! And hearing the progression of names from plague to blessing, it’s difficult NOT to imagine that the names of these daughters ALSO name the change of heart of the parent, who increasingly treasures the gift of daughters, five in all, even without one son to his name! But alas, Zelophehad dies in the desert and we can assume his wife died there as well. For the entire generation suffered for their sins and died for their unfaithfulness...died for their lack of imagination and accompanying trust in the power of God to deliver on a promise.

When my husband, Bret, and I moved from London, Ohio to Archbold, Ohio, we had about thirty days to pack up one three year old, and 6 month old and get resettled before Wauseon football practices began. So we lived with my parents three months. Then we house-sat for my grandparents when they went to Florida. Through the entire fall and winter...we searched...for a house. The housing market was tight! Nothing like now! And every time we thought we had something, one thing or another fell through. On one occasion in the dead of winter we visited a house...cold, dark shades pulled down over every window, and filled with boxes...everywhere piled high. We just said, “NO.” There was absolutely nothing that sparked a bit of imagination or hope related to this house!...Months went by! Grandpa and Grandma were getting packed up to return! Other deals fell through. Spring came. And (not so surprising, actually) that house was still on the market! We visited again. And though it was exactly the same house, the shades were lifted (as it were), revealing large windows and inviting streams of natural light...and the boxes had been cleared away, creating space...physical and creative space! And suddenly, where previously there were no possibilities, dreams were ignited, and hopes came to life!...And we continue to this day to live into this house that became our home.

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward...stood before the face of Moses himself, but not only before Moses!...stood before the face of Eleazar the priest...not only before Moses and Eleazar, but before the face of the leaders...And not only before, Moses and Eleazar and the

leaders, but before the face of all the congregation of the Israelite people. These daughters stood before Moses the prophet...and Eleazar the priest, and the leaders and all the congregation of Israelites, and they said, “Our father died in the wilderness for his own sins. He had no sons, but we are his! We are his children. Why should our father’s name be deleted from the clan? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers.”

Time out!!!

1. We need to slow down just enough to recognize that these daughters were vulnerable! In addition to the overwhelming nature of the setting, none of these daughters had yet married, indicating that they must have been quite young, and orphans at that. Their vulnerability was met and exceeded only by their courage!
2. We ought to slow down, and lift a shade or two. When we do, we can well imagine that these may have been Presbyterian Daughters, “reformed and always reforming!” The law regarding clan inheritance was so fresh, it had never yet been put into practice! The people hadn’t yet entered the land! But even so, a need was identified that the law didn’t address and these, Zelophehad’s daughters, imagined...they opened the door to the possibility...that there could be a new thing! These are daughters of the Spirit! They might well have been Sisters of St. Francis!
3. As we hear this story, we need to slow down and clear away enough clutter to realize that these might also well have been Anabaptist Daughters, seeking peace and justice based on the deep believe that “God of Enough” would provide enough for all! That’s what inheritance was all about...equitable sharing of the land as tenants. The land belongs always to the Lord! And the laws about inheritance were made for the people! Not the people for the inheritance! These are daughters of faith, who recognize an injustice and dare to ask for it to be made right!
4. We should slow down and clear away enough clutter to remember that these are Daughters of God! The land itself would provide a place and vineyards and meaningful work, but their hopes are for their father’s name to be carried forward...for an inheritance of place among the People of God, a place that includes both land and community...a place rooted in relationship! These are daughters of God!

So they make their request and Moses must respond. Frankly, I can imagine a number of other responses Moses **might** have made to these daughters of Zelophehad.

I can imagine that he might have responded,

“The law says inheritance goes to sons, not daughters.”

“The Lord said it. I believe it. That settles it!”

OR Moses could have said,

“Nearly everyone is here! Let’s vote on it!

Let’s see what the will of the people is in this matter!”

OR Moses might have said,

“Well, there this only so much land given to the clan of Mannaseh, and to also grant you an inheritance would mean fewer acres for all the other families of Mannaseh...he could have figured and calculated and then ruled on the request.

BUT Moses did what he often did in the wilderness journey, he brought their case, brought their cause to the Lord.

And our scriptures say,

“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying.” “They speak right! What they say is correct, just, honest, true!” And God continues, “Of course, you must grant these daughters the inheritance of their father!”

People of God, there IS enough in God’s kingdom for all God’s children to have what they need and to find their place in the promised land among the community. Daughters and Sons of God, lift up the shades on the enormous windows, and imagine the Kingdom Jesus came proclaiming, the kingdom of God who treasures every child; the kingdom where those who mourn are comforted, those who hunger are fed and there is enough for all to have a place to live and enough to make a meaningful life, provide for their children and live in peace! Can you imagine it?...This is the place where you all say together, “YES! We have hope and future in Christ our Lord! This is our inheritance!” Today we dare hope and long for all God’s people to whole together, of one mind, heart, and soul!

Today we celebrate the faith and faithfulness, the courage, the imagination, the Spirit-gifts, and the inheritance of another daughter in the line of Zelophehad. Pamela Graf Short, struck by intersection of the hunger of God’s people and her own passion and call to preach the Word...Pamela comes before us today, before the People of God. She comes with a verse that has inspired her journey, Psalm 16:5 & 6 “the LORD is my inheritance. You are marking out a lovely place for me.”

Pamela, may this rich inheritance, the call to serve our Lord Jesus Christ and all his people, nourish you well. As in the past, shall it be forever more that you find your deepest meaning and satisfaction in your identity as the Daughter of Christ. May the courage and faith and imagination of the Daughters of Zelophehad be yours as well.

People of God, may we never cease to take our petitions and our matters to the Lord, who is faithful. Together, let us name every injustice and take one another petitions to God.

May our imagination for the fullness and abundance
and eternity of the kingdom
be outdone only by God’s generosity and by Christ’s love.
May our own faith and courage
be rooted in the justice of God’s reign over all the earth which,
after all belongs to God from the beginning to the end of the ages.
In the name of GOD who is indeed all our inheritance;
GOD the parent,
GOD the child,
GOD the very breath of life. AMEN!

Resources that informed this message:

<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/>

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/playpopup.asp?SID=10160522926>

<http://pastordawn.com/tag/daughters-of-zelophehad-sermon/>

“Presbyterian Church USA Book of Order 2013-2015”

“New Interpreters Bible Commentary-Numbers”

“The Message of Numbers” by Raymond Brown

Various images of art depicting the Daughters of Zelophehad

Various conversations with God’s people