

**CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER:
THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD¹**
Numbers 27:1-11

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 4, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hephher 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.’

I.

From the hymns we sang in our pre-service music through the sights and sounds of the remainder of the service, our morning is filled with words from our nation’s history and character:

- O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain
- Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring
- Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

¹I am indebted to a lecture given by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, New York, New York, on May 6, 2019, entitled “Sing Now – to God.”

The words we learn and memorize and say and sing are so important for our faith and so important for our national character they are worth affirming when they point to who we aspire to be and remind us of how far we have to go. “God mend thine every flaw.”

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In a column in *The Atlantic* this past week, the noted international relations expert Anne Applebaum wrote about words: the words we use as we seek to capture our nation’s history and impact its future.

You can...read American history...[she writes] the way you would read a great piece of literature, seeking to understand the complexities and the nuances, the dark and the light, the good and the bad.

You can be inspired by the Declaration of Independence, horrified by the expulsions of Native Americans, amazed by the energy of immigrants and frontier settlers.

You can understand that the United States is a great and unique country whose values are worth defending – and realize simultaneously that this same country has made terrible mistakes and carried out horrific crimes.

Is it so difficult [she asks] to hold all of these *disparate ideas* [*these opposite words*] in your head *at the same time*?²

These disparate ideas – these different points of view – both *from* and *about* our nation’s past and expressing hope for the shape of its future – are all expressed in *words*. Words written, spoken, sung, passed down, committed to memory, debated, researched, applied to new and previously unforeseen situations.

“*How much longer can we expect our democracy to last?*” Applebaum asks.

As long as we keep talking, I believe, as long as we keep listening, as long we keep using *words*, with some degree of *care*, with some degree of *compassion*, with some degree of *courage*, with some degree of *creativity*. A thousand years ago Maimonides said: “Accept the truth from whoever utters it.”³ We need to hear, accept, act out of the truth from whoever among us utters it. If we do, our democracy will survive.

II.

For this second of eight summer sermons on “Characters with Character,” I have chosen one of the least familiar stories in the canon of Scripture, one on which I have neither preached nor heard a sermon. The story is that of the five daughters of Zelophehad – *Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah* – who go to the leadership of the people of Israel to demand the right to inherit their late father’s property since had no sons as heirs.

This text is a terrific example of a particular people – the people of God – *using words* to work together within the culture of their day and time to implement a change which made their society more just and complete. I scheduled this story for *today* because I want us – on this Fourth of July – to consider how the way we use words impacts the present and future of our nation.

² Anne Applebaum, “How Much Longer Can We Expect our Democracy to Last?” in *The Atlantic*, June 28, 2021, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/milley-critical-race-theory-marxism-racism-fox-news/619308/>.

³ Maimonides, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), quoted on the frontispiece of *Liberties*, Volume I, Number 2, Spring 2021.

The story unfolds over thirteen verses near the end of the Book of Numbers.

- The people of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness for nearly forty years after their dramatic crossing of the Red Sea and their freedom from slavery in Egypt.
- They are about to enter the Promised Land.
- In a meeting of the official council, moderated by Moses, a priest Eleazar assumes a prominent role and all male members of the community are present.
- Into this official setting of men, five women, adult sisters to one another and daughters of a man named Zelophehad, come forward and ask to inherit their father's portion of the tribal land, because he has died without a son to inherit his land.
- They make the request of Moses who immediately passes it on to God.
- God examines their claim, grants their request, and goes one step further by decreeing that what they are asking will become part of Jewish Law.
- In a subsequent chapter,⁴ the tribal leaders come to Moses concerned that if the women marry someone of another tribe, their inheritance will pass to that tribe, rather than the tribe from which they have come. Moses listens to this request and issues a directive that the daughters of Zelophehad will need to choose husbands from within their own tribe. The daughters appear to accept this condition, and with that, the matter is closed and the Book of Numbers ends.

Thus in this story, we have a request, a granting of a request, an extending of that request to become law, and then a narrowing of that request to accommodate what today we call an unintended consequence.

It is a simple story with a relatively just and happy outcome.

III.

But this is just a surface reading of the plot. If we pay attention to the meaning of some key *words* in the passage, we get a more profound understanding of the role *words and language* play in the request of the daughters of Zelophehad and its coming to fruition.

Commentator Avivah Zornberg points out⁵ that the most striking aspect of this story is that when God approves the daughters' request, God's first comment is about their *speech*, their *words*, their *manner of asking* rather than about the *substance* of the request.

- When God says: "The daughters of Zelophehad are *right* in what they are *saying*," the Hebrew word translated "right" not only means "legal, according to the law," but it also has more imaginative implications than being technically correct or legally permissible.
- "Right," can imply the *ideal*, as if pointing to the world as God intends it to be, not just the world as it is.
- "Right" implies justice, beauty, balance, a sense of symmetry.

⁴ Numbers 36:1-13.

⁵ Much of what follows is from Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 263-268.

- “Right” implies wisdom, much like the wise woman who ends the Book of Proverbs, with whom the daughters have been compared through the centuries.⁶

The point is this: Before the Lord orders Moses to grant the daughters of Zelophehad their father’s inheritance, God *speaks* about their *speech*.

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Second, while their speech is *eloquent* and *effective*, it is *not overly deferential*.

In fact, it reflects a long heritage of Israelites who are willing to step forward and make requests of God or God’s representatives:

- Give us water, the people say in the wilderness.⁷
- Give us meat.⁸
- Give us seed, they say in Genesis.⁹
- Rachel: “Give me please of your son’s mandrakes.”¹⁰
- Abraham: “Give me a burial site.”¹¹
- The people: “Give us a king.”¹²

Even though the daughters of Zelophehad are in a formal setting, as women making a request of men in a legal tribunal, they express a vital need, an existential element necessary for their future, and they express it with clarity, passion, and determination.

When the narrator says the women “came forward” and “stood before” the tribunal, both verbs express a sense of *audacity*, even *encroachment*. These five women – named several times in scripture – *stand tall* in a situation in which intimidation and shrinking back would be the order of the day. They enter territory into which few others – particularly women – dare to go. They are *polite*, yes; they are *civil*, yes; but they are also *strong, bold, firm, determined*.

They are like so many people we venerate in our history:

- Early explorers and settlers
- Puritan divines
- Revolutionaries
- Abolitionists
- Suffragettes
- Freedom riders
- People who open their windows and welcome with ticker tape soldiers returning home from defeating Nazi totalitarianism and with cowbells ringing first responders entering the wards of coronavirus victims

⁶ Proverbs 31:28, Zornberg 277.

⁷ Exodus 17:2.

⁸ Numbers 11:13.

⁹ Genesis 47:19.

¹⁰ Genesis 30:14.

¹¹ Genesis 23:4.

¹² I Samuel 8:5.

- People in our day and time who speak up in an attempt to spread the protective umbrella over all its children, regardless of race, religious background, ethnic heritage, language, sexual identity or orientation, or economic status.

Like the daughters speaking up, *words* matter.

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Yet their speech is *not* a cry of anarchy.

- They present themselves as daughters of a *man*, who comes from a *line of men*, and who himself is a *father* – all aspects of the tradition and culture into which they are born.
- They stand up for the honor of *his* name and its continuance among the tribe.
- From within a system in which they live, they *speak up* and *call forth* the *best* that system has to offer, and with their *words*, they lead it to *change* even more than they realized it could change.

In response:

- *God* accepts their request.
- *Moses* accepts their request.
- *The tribunal* accepts their request.
- Their request is *written* into Law.

When at a later date, tribal members raise a concern that if the daughters, with their newly inherited land, should marry outside the tribe, the land will be lost to the tribe forever, the daughters agree to choose as their husbands only members of the tribe, so that the upon their deaths the land will remain within tribal families. Like the tribal leaders, the women are willing to *compromise*. They seek not *destruction*, but *access*. Yet in the sweep of history, their request has changed *the mind of God*, *the leadership of Moses*, and *the law and tradition* of their people. All through their *powerful* and *profound* use of *language*. *Words matter*.

IV.

Though this is one of the most unfamiliar stories in the Bible, it shines forth in human history as a time in which ordinary citizens – five women who are sisters – band together and muster the *courage* to speak and the *wisdom* to know *what* to say and *when* to say it.

- They are heard because the leaders they approach have common sense, decency, intelligence, concern and faith to recognize the *legitimacy* of what they are asking and to put it into *legislation* guided by the God they all worship.
- This change occurs without the threat of violence or use of force, without devious methods, without demagogic language, without verbal bullying, without questioning of motive or assassination of character, without security protection needed for officials elected or appointed to govern, without disregard for, twisting of, or flat denial of basic facts.
- This change comes through the language of women and the language of God superseding any prior laws or traditions enshrined in the practice of the people.
- It occurs within *process* and *procedure* that has been *established* – slow as it often is – and to which the daughters appear to have access.
- The change occurs because *the daughters work the process* and because *the process works*.

- And most of all it occurs because it is *the right thing* for the people of Israel to do.

In the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, human words move both history and the heart of God and evoke a rare and rejuvenated “Word of the Lord.”¹³

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In our day, Applebaum asks: “How much longer can we expect our democracy to last?”

- As long our citizens will use words, with the care, compassion, courage, creativity of *Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah*, our democracy will last.
- And, as Applebaum’s words point out, as long as “leadership constantly adjusts and changes, shifting to absorb new people and ideas,” our democracy will last. Leadership like God. Leadership like Moses. Leadership like the tribunal of the people of Israel who listen and respond.

God says: “The daughters of Zelophehad are *right* in what they are saying.” It is their *words* that lead to change. If any nation should know – and perhaps relearn – the *power of words* to *change history*, ours should.

Amen.

¹³ Rashi: *Devarim* 2:16-17: “...from when the spies were sent forth until now, *the word* is not mentioned in this section...to teach you that during these entire thirty-eight years during which the Israelites were lying under God’s censure, the divine Utterance was not specially vouchsafed to him in affectionate language, face to face, and tranquility of mind...”