**SERMON Numbers 27:1-11**

How do you approach rules in your life? For the majority of my life, I have been a rule follower. I believed that rules are rules, they’re there for a reason, and my job was simply to follow. My wife, on the other hand, has never been this kind of person. She has, for the majority of her life, operated on the belief that rules are made to be broken. Now, we’ve both grown and changed, but as I think of attitudes towards rules while reflecting on this week’s passage, it is clear that our two postures towards rules don’t quite capture all the possible options. A third posture emerges in our text, one that doesn’t simply embrace all rules or rebel against them. Instead, show us that rules are made to be revisited, reimagined, and reinterpreted. A community makes laws and establishes tradition based on *particular* circumstances and contexts, but those *particulars* change over the course of time, and laws need to change with them. Our bible passage this morning doesn’t just highlight one “Face of Our Faith,” but five: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, more commonly referred to collectively as the Daughters of Zelophehad. There are many remarkable details about these characters, but our point of focus today is on their keen **sense of what is just**, and what that justice requires of them. Spoiler alert: just because something is enshrined into law, does not make it just.

Immediately prior to when we meet these women, God instructs Moses and Eleazar the priest to, “take a census of the whole congregation of Israel” (26:2). One of the goals of the census was help the leaders divide the land of the Canaanites between each of the tribes of Israel. And, tribes with larger populations would be allotted larger tracts of land, than smaller tribes. A calculation which seems to reflect a basic concern that each Israelite tribal and family unit has enough land to meet its economic wellbeing. What it does not consider however, was the reality that Canaan was already occupied. You see, issues of justice often look straightforward when understood from one perspective, particularly that of the author or the lawmaker, or the culturally dominant group. Our challenge, as followers of Jesus, is to primarily concerned with what justice looks like from the ‘Other side,’ which in this case would be from the side of the Canaanites. But that’s a different sermon.

Ancient Israel has a patrilineal inheritance system, where the rule was that only sons were to inherit land and property from their fathers. If there are no sons, then the land was to go to the father’s brothers, no brothers, then to the husbands of the daughters. From male to male to male to male, this was the custom in Israel, this was the rule. The generational disenfranchisement of women was coded into the law, leaving Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah excluded from receiving any share of their family’s land…because they were manless. This wouldn’t’ve come as a surprise to them, it wasn’t some insidious plot designed specifically to discriminate against these five women. The intent of this law was to ensure that territory was kept within each tribe. However, the impact of the law did not account for the situation that the daughters of Zelophehad ultimately found themselves in. And there we find a tension, that plays out, again and again in our time and place. These daughters knew the rules, they knew their culture, their traditions, and the law…but in this instance upholding the rules meant being left to wander in the wilderness. It meant being plunged into poverty, left dependent on hand-outs, treated with distain, and robbed of dignity and security. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah knew this rule of patrilineage to be unjust.

The issue of intent versus impact often comes up in everyday conversations and conflict, in a nutshell, intent refers to what you thought you were doing or saying. Impact refers to how that action or word was experienced by the other person. And when we scale-up the situation from intrapersonal interactions to societal one, we can quickly see how devastating the actions of certain institutions or laws can be, whether intended or not, on particular people. We know all too well, that harmful impacts disproportionately hurt minority groups in societ. This is certainly the case with the forces of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism amongst others.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, descendants of Joseph, understanding the current law of inheritance to be unjust, mount a legal challenge in front of the tent of meeting, the temporary, portable house of God. The first words of their story are a declaration of the women’s agency: “The daughters of Zelophehad…came forward.” This articulation of agency continues in verse 2: “They stood before Moses,” before all the leading men in their community, the whole assembly of people. The five of them stood together and stationed themselves between God – whose presence was understood to occupy the tent of meeting, and their people. This was a large and public demonstration. The women did not quietly and apologetically sidle up to Moses in private and beg for a favor. They understood that this was a matter of justice. The current law was sexist and unjust and as such, it would impact more than just them.

In verse 4 they tell Moses – they don’t ask – they tell him, “Give us the land!” Orphaned women with no brothers, the daughters say, *should* be allowed to inherit their father’s land. To preserve the father’s lineage, the daughters say. But we know the real reason, for without resources, a woman in this patriarchal society would be forced to choose between poverty and a desperate marriage. As Gandhi once said, “An unjust law is itself a species of violence.” Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah’s demand acknowledged the violent impact of this unjust law, particularly on women like themselves. It would have been safer for them to hold back, keep quiet, and tell themselves it would all work out. But with courage, and with boldness they came forward, they stood their ground, and they stated their demands.

It still takes courage to come forward in search of justice. In the early nineteenth century in the United States, married women could not own property. A single woman could inherit property from her father, but once she married it belonged to her husband. He owned her wages as well. In 1836, some women came forward to the New York state legislative to challenge the laws. But it would take over a decade for the *Married Women’s Property Act* to pass, and 72 more years and many more acts of coming forward before women received the right to vote. Women and members of many minority groups find that they still need to come forward in politics, in business, in education, and even in the church, to seek justice, respect and equal opportunities.

Coming forward is risky, the daughters of Zelophehad may be labeled as selfish, greedy, or impatient. They may be accused of challenging the institution to change before people were ready. But, I invite you to consider this story as a model for those who still seek justice in the face of injustice today; dignity in the face of shame; inclusion in the face of exclusion. Consider these women, as you reflect on the places where you need to step forward? And on how the church offers support, encouragement, and resources to those who have already put themselves on the line? Where are the descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah today?

“Give us the land!” they tell Moses and to his credit, he recognized that this decision was bigger than him. He turns to God rather than dismissing them out of hand, and God vindicates them in the strongest terms. God’s response in verse 7 reads, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in their speaking.” The women’s assertiveness is matched by God’s powerful affirmation. God reveals new *torah*, new teaching, a new rule, and new law…not only for these 5 women, but for all women after them. This was not merely an exception to the rule. God made it clear that the rules were to be reimagined, changed to allow all daughters to inherit land, if there were no sons.

The story of these five women offers a compelling lesson for the notion that rules are fixed and immovable, no matter who is disadvantaged or hurt by them. This story reminds us that divine justice has not abandoned those abandoned by society. It not only provides hope for all who experience exclusion and discrimination, it challenges *us* to think differently about our role in our community, and people of faith and has participants in wider society. We know full well that people in our city do not start life with the same resources and access, whether it is to healthy food, healthcare, a quality education, opportunities for a dignified job, a living wage or housing. Just as in the days of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah many in Louisville find themselves on the brink of devastating economic insecurity, weighing the risks of coming forward to demand justice.

I’m so proud of the ways Saint Andrew continues to partner with the Saint Matthew Area Ministries, with the House of Ruth, Bellewood and Brooklawn, Shelby School and many other local agencies. These are all important ways that you have answered the call to come forward. To stand *with* and *for* the most vulnerable in society. But the call of justice may challenge us to go further. I pray that as we donate food, give of our benevolence funds, and collect school supplies, that we also feel compelled to look up-stream to see what larger forces have created an environment that leaves children, poor people and minorities struggling to make ends meet, feel safe and secure, have adequate food and shelter; let alone a voice in decisions that deeply impact their lives. This text invites us to come forward, to stand, to speak, to question, and to demand change when we experience or witness injustice, even if it’s coded in law. Where are the descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah today?

These women reappear in Numbers chapter 36, the passage is silent on what happens with them in the intervening time but tells of some male leaders within the Manasseh tribe coming forward to object to God’s judgement through Moses to allow the women and other women in the same circumstances to inherit land. They claim to be concerned about losing land to other tribes, were women to marry outside their tribe. Here, the daughters of Zelophehad do not seem to be present, they are no longer subjects with agency but objects of dispute. Moses, rather than appealing to God as he did the first time, makes his fulfillment of God’s command conditional: only if the women marry within their tribe, they will receive the inheritance. But this is not the end of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah’s story. These remarkable women show up again in Joshua chapter 17, after Moses’ death and the elevation of Joshua, and it seems as though despite his tailoring of the command of God to suit the patriarchal concerns of his constituents, he never follows through with allotting the daughters of Zelophehad their share of the land. So, they make another demand for their inheritance rights. They some forward again, this time to Joshua and Eleazar and before the leaders and in Joshua 17 verse 3 say, “The Holy One commanded Moses to give us an inheritance along with our male-kin.” They do not say, Moses failed to obey God and died. There is no need. The implication is clear. They simply affirm their rights and in response Joshua does not consult God; he does not talk with Eleazar or the elders, instead he gives them the land, immediately. After all, “The Holy One commanded…”

The road to justice is a long and complicated one, progress often does not take a linear path and as Frederick Douglass said [paraphrased]: The whole history of progress towards human liberty…have been born of earnest struggle. Declaring: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” African Americans would go on to have had many more painful reasons to come forward in the search of justice from Douglass’ time. Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston, Louisville and many other places. Getting demands heard and agreed to is often only the first step. Holding those in power accountable can take longer. Coming forward to demand justice is not a one-and-done action, it is a perpetual state of being in a world that is painfully broken by the -isms of our day.

But Church, hear this good news, **you** are the spiritual descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, these fierce daughters of Zelophehad. I hope that you have seen that this remarkable story about five women’s demand to inherit land is part of a much larger story about social justice. A story that you are part of.

**You** are the spiritual descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. Throughout the scripture of the Old and New Testaments we are told to care for the most vulnerable in our society. Widows, orphans, and strangers. Or, hear it this way: Single mothers and their children, immigrants, refugees, and people in transition. **You** are the spiritual descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah seeking to embrace the call of the prophet Micah. To “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God” (6:8). **You** are the spiritual descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah come forward, and stand up, and speak up. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah show us that ‘the way it has always been’ is not the ‘way it always has to be,’ unjust rules must be revisited, reimagined and reinterpreted. Come forward, descendants of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, come forward.