

Living God's Shalom: Tradition, Compassion, Fairness

Scripture: Numbers 27:1-11

I. Intro. Living God's Shalom is our focus this summer. And one of the special things about this focus is that we are using the same Bible stories the children are using in Sunday school. This allows the children to connect with the sermons, and families to compare notes around the dinner table. Parents can ask the children "What did you like about the story of the 5 sisters?" or "What is something you did in Sunday School, about the story with 5 sisters?" Children can ask the parents "What did you like about the story of the 5 sisters?" So let's take a look at the story and see what we like.

You probably already know this, but the genealogies of the Bible are all traced through the man's side. From the Gospel of Matthew we have: Abraham was the father of Isaac – Isaac was the father of Jacob – Jacob was the father of Judah –, and so it goes down to Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. And in Luke it goes like this: Jesus was the son of Joseph, who was the son of Heli, who was the son of Matthat, and on it goes for 73 more, until you get to the son of Adam.

And you've heard of the 12 tribes of Israel, right. Jacob, had 12 sons: Manasseh, Benjamin, Judah, Asher, to name a few. And each of these sons all had families, who had families and together they make up a clan. And all these clans then, make up what is called the tribe of the original son of Jacob. The Old Testament, especially the books of Numbers and Chronicles list the names of the head of each clan. Some of the 12 tribes have as many as 60 clans listed. We have these records because the King had ordered a census to be taken. Because the census was taken first of all to determine how many men would be available for military purposes, we note that just men were counted and named. An earlier census and list of names was compiled by Moses. And why is that? Moses knew that once the Children of Israel got into the promised land, that land was going to be divided up. How would it be apportioned? A simple way would be to divide it up into 12 parts, a part for each of the 12 tribes, and then the 12 tribes would divide their part up by the number of clans in their tribe with each clan getting an equal share. But wait a minute. Some tribes had 60 clans or family groups and some had only 20 clans. A section divided by 60 would give lot smaller portions than one divided by 20. So, to be fair – to give clans equal portions, Moses did a census and figured out how many clans there were and divided the land accordingly, with a big a portion going to big tribes and smaller portions going to smaller tribes. So it ended up getting divided up something like this. I know you can't see names, but you can see the different land divisions and their proportions. It still sounds pretty simple – you just do the math and everyone is happy. But it's not that simple. As you might imagine, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness can make things complicated. For one thing some – even many – heads of families died in the wilderness. Some died because of snake bites. Remember that? People were attacked by snakes and those that looked to the bronze snake up on a pole were saved. And some died because of conflict. One big conflict was an uprising against Aaron and Moses, that resulted in those clan leaders getting swallowed up by the earth, or burned up by fire from heaven. Remember that? You may want to read some of those exciting times in the Old

Testament. Anyway, because these clans were rebelling against God, Moses ruled that they couldn't have any land.

So if you are reading the Bible through, and come to chapter 26 of the book of Numbers, you come to this genealogy: *29 These are the descendants of Manasseh: Machir, the clan of the Machirites; and Machir was the father of Gilead; of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites....of Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; 31 and of Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; – only Marj Shoemaker, and Judy Unruh wouldn't be bored by now – and of Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; and of Hopher, the clan of the Hopherites. 33 and of Zelophehad son of Hopher and his daughters Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.* And if you have not dozed off, something hits you. Whoa, now! Daughters. There have been no daughters, only sons in this listing up until now! What is going on?

Heidi Neumark, Lutheran pastor and author tells us what is going on: *The whole boring pattern that has been droning on and on for verse after verse, year after year, century after century for almost 2 millenniums in the Ancient Near East is interrupted! It splits wide open like the Red Sea and a new word of liberation comes striding through.* Pastor Heidi counted all the first names listed in numbers: do you know how many there are? 601,730. She said that she kept counting because the more she counted the greater the miracle became. She discovered that only 6 people are named who are not heads of clans. And, she says, 5 of these are these women. 5 of over 600 and 1 thousand. She goes on to say that without these 5 daughters, Zelophehad, himself, wouldn't even have gotten in! There were a lot of fathers who died without sons, who never made the list. So how did Zelophehad and his five daughters get in the list? And, of course – because we are on the subject of land – a bigger question is, how did these 5 women get land? As Pastor Heidi puts it: *How is it that these women were permitted to own property, when they were considered property themselves?*

Our scripture for today tells us. Numbers 27:1, nrsv says it this way: *The daughters of Zelophehad came forward.* They came forward. They were the first women to come forward. And studying their actions you can see how wise and intelligent and prepared they were as they came forward! Why do I say that? With just a little study you see they came forward at a strategic time and place. They came to Moses in public, with priests and all the people present. Pastor Heidi thinks there was a good chance, if they would have come to Moses in private, Moses would have denied the request. Moses surely did not want to open this huge, complicating can of worms. It's going to be hard enough to divide up the land to the clans with living fathers and son. Why would he open the subject to dead fathers and living daughters? So they came forward in public. And what is the strategic place? It was before the tent of meeting. They waited until Moses was at the holiest place of Israel. The tent of meeting, also called the Tabernacle, was the portable, visible place of God's presence. Surely their chances were greater at this place than any other place in the camp.

Their wisdom, intelligence and preparation can be seen in their presentation as well. Why did they say that their father Zelophehad was not part of Korah's rebellion? They put this right up front to counter a likely objection Moses would make. It would have been very possible for Moses to dismiss their request immediately by saying their dad Zelophehad was a part of that rebellion, and not even have to deal with their request. So they say right up front he was not part of it.

Continuing on, we see they pose a very interesting question. It is very carefully worded: *why should our father's name be taken away from the clan, just because he doesn't have a son?* It certainly appeals to tradition, to honor, and maybe even to the male ego. And then they make their proposal: *give to us a possession among our father's brothers.* In other words, when the land is divided up among our uncles, let us stand in for our father, and be given his share of the land.

What was Moses' response? "I need to check with God." And to his credit, Moses really did check with God. He wasn't just making an excuse to buy some time. Moses had a very active relationship with God, and Moses was able to hear from God. What a great leader. What did the Lord say?

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.

And that's what Moses did. He gave them land. He saved their father's name among the clans, and he created a new law – one that gave justice to daughters all across the Promised Land. It became part of God's new shalom. Compassion and justice trumped tradition that day, creating a new tradition.

So how does this apply to us in our time and place? What are the lessons from Zelophehad's daughters? The Spirit has probably already spoken your lesson to you. But I will mention the lessons I see. These women teach all of us, when we see injustice:

- don't be afraid to come forward. Go ahead, be assertive. Take some charge of your life. You won't get anywhere if you do not come forward. In fact, you will only get the alternative: you will resent, you will become bitter about your situation. You will become a victim, and take on a victim's mentality. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah came forward. So can we.

- Be strategic in your presentation. Give thought to what you want you say, and when you will say it, and where to say it.

- Prepare your presentation: you want to say it in ways the hearer will relate to, and will understand it. Connect it to your tradition. Appeal to reason, to justice and to compassion.

- trust God. God is good. God's desire is that all will live in shalom. God is going to great lengths to create shalom for his people. God will be communicating to his leaders how to adjust the traditions so that compassion and justice prevail in them.

I thank God for this story that both displays God's shalom, and gives us specific ways that we, too, can live God's shalom. Thanks be to God.