

Sermon based on Numbers 26:33 and 27:1-11 Ephesians

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The Numbers text we just heard speaks to a decisive point in the lives of the gathered tribes. On the one hand, it was a time for giving thanks and celebration. The people have come out of the wilderness to stand at its very edge, on the plains of Moab, with the land towards which they have been traveling for so long are now within sight on the other side of the Jordan River. They've made it through disputes, setbacks and struggles; and now they need to reorganize for to settle and to build on the land that stretches before them.

Like those ancient tribes, this is a time for us to celebrate and give thanks as well. We are gathered to celebrate this Eucharist, this special time of communion which brings together these past days that have been filled with their own holy communion. We too gather to give thanks for all whose efforts have helped lead us to this point, for wonderful food which certainly beat the wilderness diet and for the wonder of each other. Like those ancient tribes, we are on the edge of something new...but we're not quite there yet.

On this threshold with our thanksgiving and celebration, there is also a bit of danger. It's a danger that comes at the end of many a conference or retreat. We've been inspired, challenged and energized and now we will go back to deal with all that awaits-- emails, phone calls, proposals, demands and deadlines -- all the things we've left behind and that have piled up in our absence. Will this time apart have mattered? Will it make a difference?

The danger for our friends from Numbers is that when the sojourners settle, well, the danger is just that...that they will settle. Settle for something less than the vision and hope for liberation and justice that sent them forth in the first place, settle for a water downed version as they make their way across, settle for buildings that well, seem adequate enough, settle for immigration legislation that well, at least it's a little better, settle for a few alterations here and there when God says I will make all things new.

It is well to be wary because those who entered the land did settle. They settled for their own well-being as a group and neglected the further, full liberating command of jubilee. They settled as possessors who overlooked the dispossessed and disconnected and found themselves exiled from the very land they once entered with such expectation. So there is good reason for some caution as we gather at this threshold like those sojourners at the river's edge. And there is also a bold and hopeful direction raised up by the Numbers story!

As the sojourners face the challenge of reorganizing themselves for life across the Jordan River, they begin by taking a census. It turns out that Numbers is full of numbers! The census is tightly organized. Each of the 12 tribes is named and each tribe has 3 to 6 clans, each with it's own patriarch who is named. So in addition to the census numbers, we get the names of the 12 tribes...plus about 60 other names of clan heads. The Bible

only gives the total figures for each tribe. I used a calculator to add them up for the total. Actually, as when I try to balance my checkbook, there are two different totals... but the more detailed census comes to 601,730 people, none named besides the tribal and clan heads.

But in fact, the group gathered on the plains of Moab is much bigger because the census does not include women and children. And the Bible is very clear on the reason. The first purpose of the census is to determine battle readiness. Only those who could fight battles were counted and at that time, that left out the women and children. The second purpose of the census was to determine how the land was to be distributed, more land to larger clans, less land to smaller ones. Property rights were passed on through males of the clan. Since women and children were not permitted to own property, being property themselves, they didn't need to be counted.

Well given the context, none of this is particularly surprising. What is absolutely astonishing is that when you move through the list of tribes and come to the 8th tribe...the tribe of Manasseh...you read along...The descendants of Manasseh: of Machir, the clan of the Machirites; and Machir was the father of Gilead; of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites. These are the descendants of Gilead: of Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; and of Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; and of Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; and of Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; and of Hephher, the clan of the Hephherites.

Boring...business as usual.....something that would be easy to just skip right over like our Sunday lectionary does...but then you hit verse 33... Now Zelophehad son of Hephher had no sons, but daughters: and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah....then the census goes on its humdrum way as if nothing has happened.

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...Now Zelophehad son of Hephher had no sons, but daughters. We don't hear about any other person and whether or not he had any sons. Surely Zelophehad wasn't the only man in this unfortunate position. ...and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah...the text makes a point of pointing out the names...the names of the daughters.

Now the reason I made this chart and bothered to add up all these numbers is not because math is a hobby of mine. But I was getting excited about adding up these numbers because the more I added, the more amazed I got. The more I added, the bigger the miracle seemed to become. Because when you add it all up you come to the amazing result that out of 601,730 only 6 people are named who are not clan heads and 5 of them are women. And you realize that the man is only named because of the 5 women. Five named women in a census that didn't even count women in the first place. How and why did their names ever break through to this recognition?

We find out the moment the census is over...Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah were standing there on the plains of Moab with everyone else about to take possession of the promised land, but they realized that the system and its policies were set up in such a way that some people were going to be left out of the promise from the very start. And that included them. The rest of the group was mobilizing itself through the census to determine critical mass for battles on the other side of the Jordan with unknown foreign enemies. The 5 sisters saw a battle to be fought right where they stood, within their own community where property rights were passed on through males, males of the same ethnic clan. They didn't need to go halfway around the world to teach people about democracy, they saw the need for some teaching right where they were. Because whatever so called democracy existed, whatever inheritance was about to be celebrated, it didn't include Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.

Their father had died on their sojourn in the wilderness. If they had been sons, they would have inherited his portion of the land. If they had had brothers, they would have been able to share in their brothers' land. If they had been married, they would have gone to live on their husband's land. If they had been widowed, their husband's family would have taken care of them. But being as they had no father, no brother, no husband and no in-laws, they had no rights to any land. Having no land rights in an agricultural economy meant being utterly marginalized. Now they were together with their people on the edge of the wilderness, but what the census made clear was that they didn't count for anything and when everyone crossed over, they would remain forever on the far edge - disconnected from land and from sustainable life.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah were invisible, like immigrants washing dishes in the back, like prisoners tortured away from the media, like genocide that scarcely raises an international eyebrow, like gay clergy forced into the closet, like children sold in the shadows, like species that disappear, unnamed and unrecorded. The sisters were invisible.

There was no forum for Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah to voice their grievance. Women had no authority to enter the public sphere, much less to speak there. Women's place was to administrate the private sphere of home life. For Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah to cross this threshold, this heavily guarded *frontera*, to act outside of this system was to take a huge risk. As women without men, they had the most to lose if the community rejected them...and rejection was quite likely. Even Moses' own sister Miriam was censured for daring to question her brother's judgment as God's spokesperson. Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, has he not spoken through us also? (Num.12) she dared to ask. The reaction was that Miriam became covered with leprosy and had to be shut away for a week in order to learn her lesson. This was not an encouraging example for Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.

But these five sisters, with no precedent, no rights, no authority and no testosterone go ahead and take action regardless... The power of their relationship with one another, their

shared grief and their shared anger over being expected to settle for no settlement gave them collective strength and made them battle-ready to go before Moses and take on the legal system in the most public arena possible with imagination and courage.

It would have been far less risky to approach Moses in private and plead with him to work out some special deal for them, but these sisters are not simply trying to get a piece of the pie for themselves. Because they go public, their petition becomes an action to effect change on behalf of the whole community. They go forward to meet Moses right at the entrance of the tent of meeting in the presence of Eleazer the priest, the leaders and all the congregation. You can bet that everyone was listening. ... "Our father died in the wilderness; ...and he had no sons...Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." To do that would require major policy changes in Israel's bureaucracy.

Now these sisters were clever and creative. They appeal to the self-interest of the patriarchal mindset they want to change...why should our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no sons? Because Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah present their petition to Moses in public, their individual case will serve to change the Israelite inheritance law to include women, a law that has been on the books for centuries in a system that denied female land rights for virtually 2000 years and these five audacious women are trying to change it in a court that doesn't even allow their presence, much less their voice. But the same spirit that must have gotten a hold of them seemed to be at work in Moses too because instead of striking them down with leprosy and sending them to their rooms without supper, 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... It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses."

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah filed one of the earliest lawsuits on record. In fact, this case has been named as the oldest case that is still cited as an authority. In the American Bar Association Journal of Feb. 1924, there is an article citing this case and describing it as an early declaratory judgment in which the property rights of women are clearly set forth. Talk about gaining recognition! The lectionary doesn't recognize these women, but we know that the church can be slower than the rest of society to catch on to some things. Here's the journal article...[Neumark holds up the article]

When the plight of these sisters was invisible to the multitudes of 601,730, actually over a million considering the other women, their situation didn't count for anything in the census, Somebody had counted every hair on their five beautiful heads. How did these five sisters imagine reality outside the system that defined them and confined them? Somebody must have opened their eyes. How did these five women get the courage to step forward and go public with their grievance? Somebody must have given them the strength. The same Somebody who came on the scene in the midst of another census and was only greeted by a few no count shepherds. The same Somebody who doesn't count things up the way the G8 and IMF and Wall Street bean counters do, who didn't count the cost of our reconciliation and redemption...

For the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance. Not due to our courage, but to his...so that we might set our hope on Christ and live for the praise of his glory, so that with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we might know what is the hope to which we are called, what is the immeasurable power of God working in us.

Sometimes when we add up what we're up against and we add up what we've got, well, sometimes it can seem a bit discouraging. I'm not saying that numbers don't matter, but according to the book of Numbers, which ought to know something about numbers... and the census recorded there, as well as the one recorded by St. Luke, they matter less than one might think when you factor in the power of God.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah took action for reform of a system that kept women repressed and oppressed for several thousand years and there were only five of them, five out of 601,730. But five is not one. Wherever two or three are gathered, said Jesus, there am I in their midst. There is power in relationship, exponential strength in connecting with others who share our grief, anger and passion as we have been connecting here, as we reconnect every time we share this holy meal.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah didn't change everything, but they did make a significant difference, cited in legal cases 3000 years later. Of course, it wasn't enough. They left some work for the rest of us as we go back to the places God has placed us.

One last loose end. The book of Numbers doesn't record the reaction of the sisters when they won their case, but I think we know what it was. Of course, they danced.

