

“Reformation IV: Reformed and Always Being Reformed #metoo”
Numbers 27:1-11
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Imagine if they hadn't said anything. Imagine if Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah had done what women of their time were supposed to do: stay quiet and let the system act on them instead of acting on the system. I'm sure they weren't the first daughters who had found themselves in this situation. There must have been other daughters who lost their inheritance, lost their family land because the system wasn't designed to protect their interests. The system wasn't designed to respond to their voices. The system was designed by men. I'm sure there were many others before Mahlah and her sisters decided to break the silence. #metoo.

That's the first miraculous thing about this text - the women come forward. Miraculous because systems and the families they shape have a way of shutting down expressions of pain. The church sometimes corroborates with that system. We don't always create spaces for people to share the addiction that's tearing their family apart. We don't always create space for people to acknowledge their struggles to pay the bills. We don't always create space to name the depression that is threatening some of us. We don't always make room to share what's really going on.

But the women come forward. Maybe they come forward because they are uniquely courageous. Maybe somebody taught them to lean in instead of pulling back when the system goes against you. Maybe someone helped them embrace their righteous anger instead of suppressing it; to harness it and direct it like all prophets must learn. But watching them present their case before Moses, I think they're more than just uniquely courageous. I think they know the power of the past and how to claim it.

You see, the women stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting. At first I thought they stood there because they weren't allowed inside. You know, the usual patriarchal arrangements that we've come to accept as routine for biblical times. That's the assumption we make. Anything before our time must have been more backward than where we are today because, of course, progress always moves forward. That's what we think. We are always more enlightened than the people who have gone before us. That's what I assumed reading this text. The women stood at the entrance of the tent because they weren't allowed in. Just like women still stand outside too many board rooms where a disproportionate number of men are making the decisions that affect us all. Just like they stand outside too many bishoprics where too many are making the decisions that affect all of us. Just like they stand outside of too many Senate chambers where decisions are being made that affect all of us. I just assumed that the women stood there because they had no choice. And that's partly true. Moses was the only person allowed inside the tent. Moses and the high priest once a year.

But the entrance to the tent is also the place where Aaron, the first priest had been ordained. (Leviticus 8) It's the place where Israelite women had stood together during the early days of the Exodus to *minister* to the LORD. (Exodus 38:8) Minister – a word that's used in other places to describe people who are warriors for the LORD.¹ Women who guarded the sacred tent to protect this sacred space for *all the Israelites, for all the children* of the LORD. This was the ordination place where servants of God received their assignments. A powerful place where women had received power before.

But it was also a dangerous place. The place where Korah tried to lead a revolt against Moses. (Numbers 16:18-19) The earth opened up and consumed all of them. (Num 16:31-33) The place where Aaron and Miriam complained that they deserved as much power as God had given to Moses. (Numbers 12) They contracted leprosy for a week. It was the place where Aaron's sons were consumed by fire for making an unauthorized offering. (Number 10:1-2)

That's where the daughters of Zelophehad stood – in this dangerous and powerful place – a place of power where women before them had once served as ministers, in the place where the first priest was ordained. A place of risk where the claims to justice don't always turn out well. That's where these women stood to make their case.

I guess that's the place where you always have to stand if you want to make a change in the world around you. The place of power that is also the place of risk. That's where the first Reformers stood when they lobbed their complaints against the mother church that seemed to have power that could crush them. That's where the suffragists stood at Seneca Falls when they called on their country to give them the right to vote. That's where the Freedom Riders stood when white people came out to beat them into submission. The place of risk and the place of power. That's the place you have to stand if you want to change the world around you or even just your place in it.

And the trouble with standing in that place is that you seldom know if that place really is the place of power or just the place of risk. When you're the queer person coming out of the closet you don't always know whether your people there are going to greet you with their love or their hate. When you're the woman who stands up to the harassment in the workplace you don't always know if you're going to lead the liberation or just lose your job. When you're the kid who stands up to the bully on the loose you don't always know if the world's going to change if it's just going to crush you. That's the trouble with standing at the entrance of the tent of risk and power. You don't know whether that power is coming to save you or not.

And still the women came forward. They came forward with all the men arrayed before them. Can you imagine what it took to stand there? Five women

¹ The Hebrew word "tsaba," "to serve" or "to minister" is used in the Old Testament to speak of soldiers "going forth as to battle" as well as priests serving the LORD. See Marilyn Mansfield, "The Ministering Women and Their Mirrors," The University of Sydney, Australia, Paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature Conference, Kings College London, 6 July, 2011, http://www.academia.edu/4303429/The_Ministering_Women_and_their_Mirrors.

before Moses, the great judge. Eleazar the priest, the leaders – who I presume were all male – standing between you and the tent, between you and the place where real power resides, while the congregation waited and watched. Waited and watched to see if justice would be granted or if they'd be crushed by an earth opening up beneath them, fire descending from heaven, or just plain patriarchy putting them back where it wants them.

And yet there's no hint of fear in the words that they speak. "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." (Num 27:3-4)

What stands out the most to me about their argument how well they know their own tradition. They know that the arguments for passing land man to man are strangely rooted in ideas of equality and fairness. Equality among the tribes – to make sure that no one tribe is able to swallow up land from others tribes. Fairness – to prevent one tribe from gaining an too much power over the others. Land passes from father to son to keep it inside its own tribe so that the 12 tribes would have equal power across the generations.² The daughters know this tradition well. They must have studied it until they understood the best way to argue for their place, the best way to reach their opposition. And so they call on the best of their tradition in order to argue for its reformation. Why should the name of our father be taken away from our clan just because he doesn't have any son? Give us a possession *among* our father's brothers. It's a powerful thing to know you own tradition as well as the people who would use it against you.

That's the way the most effective reformers have always made their case. Martin Luther argued that the Church had left behind the Word that was the only real way to know Christ. He wasn't arguing for a new church. He wanted the existing one to go back to being faithful. And other reformers who went on to critique Martin Luther argued against his sins in the same way. They knew the tradition. The suffragettes who gathered at Seneca Falls called on the Declaration of Independence and on the best of Christian theology to demand rights for women. They knew their own tradition better than the men who tried to use it against them. Martin Luther King stood with one foot in the Constitution and one foot in the Bible, as Taylor Branch has said,³ to demand this country to live into its original creed. He knew it contained the seeds for God's own justice. None of these reformers argued against their tradition or from outside of it. They drew on its power to change their current reality. *Semper reformata, semper reformanda*, our Book of Order says in the Latin. "The church always Reformed, always being reformed." Rooted in a tradition that gives every new generation the power to change it – to become more faithful, more just, more like the reign of God.

² Dennis T. Olson points this out in his commentary on Numbers in *Interpretation Bible Commentary*, (Louisville: John Knox Press), 1996, p. 163-167.

³ I've heard Taylor Branch speak of Dr. King's approach in more than one oral address.

That's what these women do. And the LORD hears them. And I don't know why the LORD waits to change something that God can clearly see needs changing. It would be nice if the LORD didn't have to hear public pain before acting. It would be nice if the LORD didn't wait before cleaning up all the injustice around. It would be nice if the LORD would get out of the tent a little more often and fix stuff without our action. This story doesn't address that question. Rarely does the Bible address it the way we ask it. I just know that power comes from the highest place of all to deliver what these women demand. To deliver a change that Israel has never seen.

And maybe it seems like a small change to us today. Patriarchy isn't fully dismantled by their one action. When the daughters marry a man inside their clan, the land passes to him. In fact, the forces of the patriarchy regroup and reorganize so that by the end of the book of Numbers a new ruling ensures that if the daughters marry outside of their clan, the land goes to their husband. The fabulous five sisters don't change the world with their one action. They don't end all the discrimination, exclusion, or even abuse that will continue to prevent the women of the bible from seeing anything close to justice for everyone. Change always takes more than one protest, more than one action, more than one effort. It takes persistence over time.

But the generation of these women will be the first to enter the Promised Land. Their father's generation – the one that led them out of slavery – they will all die in the wilderness. Mahlah's generation will lead the people to the Promised Land. They'll lead them there with the seed of fairness and equality planted clearly so it at least has a chance to grow into the next generation. So that the people of faith who come after them can draw on their courage to stand in the same place and ask the next question and make the next demand. "Why should we be forced to live in a world where so much harassment in the workplace is ever tolerated? Give us the justice that we deserve."

"Why should we be forced to live in a world where the earth is sacrificed on the altar of greed? Give us the justice that we deserve."

"Why should we be forced to live in a world where black and brown people are more vulnerable in our nation than whites, where urban people are pitted against rural people? Give us the justice we deserve."

My Bible titles this story "The Daughters of Zelophehad," but I'm pretty sure it's a man who gave it that title. I will remember them as Mahlah, and Noah, Hoglah and Milcah and Tirzah. The sisters who came forward. The sisters who stood at the place of power and risk. The sisters who knew their own tradition contained the seeds for their own liberation and ours too. The sisters who realized that if you want to change your world or even just your place in it there's no avoiding that place of power and risk. That's the gift they gave us. It's right here in our tradition, waiting for you and me, and the ones after us. Holy power from the seeds these sisters planted. Holy power like the world has never seen.

That's the gift they gave to us and to any future people who need to know that when you stand in that place of risk and power you need not fear for your future. Some sisters have stood there before. Sisters of the LORD. ⁴

⁴ Thanks to the Rev. Adam Ogg, Burke Presbyterian Church for pointing me to this text through his colleagues.

