

Sept. 18, 2016
Numbers 27:1-22; 36:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

***Covenant in Action:
Daughters of Zelophehad***

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Two factors led to my choice of today's scripture reading.

1) Last year at the end of the confirmation class one of the youth said she wished we had looked at more biblical stories about women.

2) This fall in worship we are exploring our new church covenant.

This led me to the story of the Daughters of Zelophehad from the book of Numbers. In this story we will hear the five daughters of Zelophehad and their conversation with their people about who gets to inherit land. The themes of justice, kindness, and humility are definitely in play in this story.

I've met very few people who know of the daughters of Zelophehad. Maybe it's because their story isn't included in the lectionary. I'm not sure I would know it except one of my Old Testament professors did her Ph.D. dissertation on Numbers and she made us aware of this story.

The daughters lived in the time of Moses. The Hebrew people have been wandering in the wilderness and are preparing to enter the promised land. They are talking about who will get land. The daughters of Zelophehad have a problem. They have no father and no brother. According to the custom of their people that means they don't get any land. What will they do?

SERMON

Our new church covenant is based on the prophetic words of the Hebrew prophet Micah: *do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God*. These words have reverberated through communities of faith for over 2,500 years. They are still as compelling today as ever.

It sounds so morally and spiritually appropriate to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, you might think that humans would have it figured out by now. However, it turns out to be profoundly challenging in each new time and place. We are creatures who have a penchant for doing the very things we know we should not do and not doing the very things we know we should do.

Throughout scripture we hear of people's struggles with justice. Time and time again we hear the psalmist lament, "How long, O Lord, how long?" As we seek the realm of God there is so much suffering along the way. We need hope. We need a vision to stay with the struggle.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered hope with these words:

*The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.*

These words were not original to Dr. King. They trace back a hundred years to a Unitarian minister and abolitionist,

Theodore Parker. In these words we hear our hope and our calling.

However, as we move towards justice, we know the painful truth that along the way there are fits and starts – one step forward and two steps back. If you want to watch the struggle for at least fairness, up close and personal, give a group of sibling children a large bag of mms and ask them to share. My mother learned over time it was just easier to buy each of us our own small bag.

What's fair to whom and when is a perpetual human dilemma. For example, in this country we no longer prevent women from inheriting land but things are far from equal. In the 21st century in the U.S. we have a growing divide between rich and poor and women and children are a disproportionate percentage of the poor. Women still earn on average 20% less for the same work as men. The challenges of today's story are still with us.

Let's look more closely at the story. One of the amazing things about the story is the women are named – Mahlah, Noah, Tirzah, Hoglah, and Milcah. To be named is a sign of respect.

Their story involves the work for justice, kindness and humility. The women begin by recognizing and speaking up about the injustice that they are experiencing. Then Moses is kind in actually listening to their case. He is also humble enough to turn to God for guidance. God gives a word indicating that indeed the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. They decide the women shall receive their father's share of the land.

If the story ended there, maybe we would have heard the story over the years. However, the men of the tribe of Manasseh, the tribe of Zelophehad, protest. These men are afraid they will lose control over the land. So the step forward for justice is accompanied by a stutter step backwards and the women are restricted to marrying someone from within their own tribe. How often a step forward for those in less power is accompanied by a retrenchment by the powerful!

As contemporary Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso says in her retelling of this story over time the people forgot about Mahlah, Noah, Tirzah, Hoglah and Milcah. The people forgot about the justice God called for.

We have made significant progress in the rights for women in this country and much is shifting around the world, especially in educational advocacy for women. As Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." Indeed, education is one of the most important tools for addressing gender inequality and poverty. Education is one of the great gifts that the American people have to offer to the rest of the world.

But as we step forward in gender justice we sometimes experience direct backlash and sometimes discrimination moves more underground and operates under other guises.

At this point in time in our country I've been wondering why is it that many people seem to hold the female candidate for president to a different standard for transparency and civility than they do the male candidate?

What is that about? I would like to ask the daughters of Zelophehad what they think is happening.

I know that our sons and daughters are watching. Children have a profound sense of fairness/justice and an attuned radar for kindness (and correspondingly meanness.) They are deeply impacted by the ways that we all choose to interact with them. They are deeply impacted by what our public life tells them about who we really are.

I realize I benefited enormously from the fact that both my parents treated me like a full person. Unlike some fathers in my day, my father played sports with me. He took me to the library and shared his love of books with me. He talked with me and listened to me and argued with me. He treated me as a person - just as he did my brothers- just as he did his high school students for almost 40 years. We all benefited from his delight and respect in who we are.

We are blessed as a congregation by the presence of the children in our midst – the daughters and sons of First Parish Church. May we delight and respect who they are. And may we be open to the ways they call us to live out our covenant today and in the days and years ahead.