

## “Faces of Our Faith: They Stood”

Number 27:1-11

Changing unjust rules is often hard in society because such laws or practices often are seen as the norm and the way things are. People who rock the boat, raise questions, or demand change are often labeled as troublemakers. Even if the current system we live in is not working well, the anxiety around change often drives people to reject new ideas or ways of doing things.

Here is a great video called “The Little Table” showing how a simple change is often resisted in groups. The video is a parody but speaks of deep truth about how our human systems resist change: <https://youtu.be/W6BJRlyxbGQ>. This is a funny commentary on the ridiculous decisions on which synagogues, churches, and non-profit organizations often spend their precious time and energy.

The good news is that God calls people to stand up for justice and for changing the norms of society to be more just. In fact, there are people in our lives right now who do that. Today we consider five of these people who helped change the law of Moses to make it more inclusive of women. Here is a short video introducing their story: <https://youtu.be/UhZoihnMII0>.

Their names are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. It is interesting that they are called by name because women are often unnamed in the Bible. They were the daughters of a man known by the name of Zelophehad of the tribe of Manasseh of the twelve tribes of Israel. This man according to the biblical account had no sons and Moses and the leaders of Israel just got done with a census in anticipation of the division of the Promised Land among the different tribes. This was their Holland Land office moment! The census took into account only the number of men who were in each tribe. No mention of women as they did not really count when it came to owning land because only men could own property. Women were more like property themselves. Of course, the men at that time were not trying to be mean to the women. This was just the way things were. This was their worldview that women were supposed to be under the protection and authority of a man and not live on their own. The whole society saw it that way. It is easy for us to look back and see that their way was wrong, but at the time this was all taking place, patriarchy was the system people respected and followed. There were always exceptions of women leaders and prophets such as Miriam the sister of Moses, but by and large women were kept under the control of men. To make the actions of the daughters of Zelophehad more interesting, the preceding events show us that these young women were endangering their own lives by speaking up against the inheritance rules of their society. Their demand for justice could have cost them their lives, if we consider what happened to Miriam, Moses' sister, for speaking up against him. She was struck with leprosy as a punishment (Numbers 12). Korah, who was one of the leaders in Israel, challenged Moses' authority and led a rebellion against him in the wilderness and the result was the death of 14,700 of his men (Numbers). Speaking up against the rules given by God through Moses and the leaders of Israel was very dangerous. Yet, these five sisters knew their history and

knew that God would support their cause. They brought their special case before the leadership of Israel. Imagine with me for a moment how difficult this must have been for them. These young single women had to walk in front of all the male leaders in order to get to the tent of the meeting: Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation. Imagine all the eyes looking at them and all the remarks people made under their breath seeing these teenage girls daring to walk up to the highest court in their land, the supreme court of their day. Every step they took must have felt like a giant leap. Every moment they spent to get to the center of the assembly must have felt like an eternity. The tension must have been palpable. In addition, they had to plead their case before all these adult men. They had to speak up and use their voices. They had to remind the leaders that their father was a faithful man. He was not part of the rebellion led by Korah. His heritage was not in question. He was an upright and honorable man. Then came the kicker in their whole speech. These teenage girls had to remind Moses and the leaders that their case was left out of the law that was given to them by God. What happens to land property in the case of a good man who has no sons and only has daughters? They brought a case to the court that was brand new. They dared to point out a major flaw in a system that was set up to disadvantage women. They demanded a new kind of justice that was not part of the way people thought at that time in Israel. They must have known about other nations in the area and their inheritance laws. According to historical and archeological evidence, throughout the Ancient Near East law codes expressly allowed daughters to inherit in such cases.

What is shocking in the story is that Moses takes the case before God. Moses could have said, "God has already spoken to me about this and said nothing about women inheriting anything. Don't cause trouble for us?" He could have used tradition and rules. He could have used old faith stories to remind these "uppity" teenage girls that things were done that way for a reason to keep society happy. He could have accused them of rebellion. But Moses was willing to be open to changing the rules. And indeed, in his prayer, Moses heard God's voice affirming the request of the five sisters. Not only that, this case became the occasion for a new ruling/ a new law to be added to the other laws and codes so that other daughters with no brothers can inherit their father's property. How many of us go into prayer with an open mind like Moses? How many of us are willing to hear God speaking to us about a controversial issue in a way that could challenge what we believe and accept?

The actions of these sisters extended justice not just for them, but also for other women who were in a similar situation. The openness of Moses and the courage of the five sisters changed the rules for the whole society. Of course, this did not go without opposition by some. Later on, the court had to revisit the case and add another provision to say that these young women and others like them must marry men from the same tribe as that of their father's so that the name of their father would be preserved.

This is a great story of courage and justice. It is also a story that challenges us to go beyond the limits of our "normal" ways of thinking to be stronger in our justice and to have our society become more just. I invite you today to think of the people in our world whose voice is often silenced or marginalized. Maybe you are one of those people. Maybe you

need to listen to one of those people. Maybe you need to really pray and be open to God to speak a different word to you on a certain issue or relationship. Sometimes, the social rules and systems we live by are unjust, but we accept them because they had become the norm. It takes great faith and prayer to work for the transformation of such systems.

Who are the people in your life who have helped stretch you? Who are the people in our world today who rock the boat for the sake of greater love, compassion, and justice? The daughters of Zelophehad had great courage to confront Moses and the leaders of their society. It takes great courage to confront such rules and systems. When have you seen or heard of people who have stepped up to challenge unjust social rules? Has anyone done that for you? Have you done that for others? How do faith and prayer empower you in such situations? There is great spiritual depth and freedom promised to us through this story if we are courageous enough to follow the lead of the Spirit. Let's take the time to share.

At the end of the day, the people who dared imagine new possibilities in the world for justice and love. We will conclude with a prayer of awareness for imagination by John Philip Newell:

Awake, O my soul,  
To the sacred dreams that are stirring within you.  
Awake to the imaginations of the heart  
And the cherished hopes of what is yet to be.  
Do not be afraid.  
Awake, O my soul,  
To the sacred dreams that are stirring within you.  
Awake, O my soul, Awake. Amen.