

June 18, 2006
Numbers 27:1-11
First Parish Church
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God is Still Speaking

Some time ago I came across this true story of a woman who, whenever she cooked a big roast, cut off the two smaller ends first and put them beside the rest of the roast in the pan before she put it all in the oven. Her husband had watched this behavior over the years and puzzled about it, but figured she knew what she was doing. One day, though, his curiosity got the best of him and he asked her why she did it that way. She looked up at him, puzzled, and said, "I don't know. That's what my mother always did." So, she called her mother, who immediately began chuckling and said, "Well, our oven was so small, and the pan I used was so small, I had to cut the ends off to fit it in the pan."

In the beginning there was a reason, but over time, it became one of those, "Well, we've always done it that way" things. Family life and church life, both, are full of those types of experiences.

In an institution as grounded in tradition as the church, we are always living in the tension between "We've always done it that way" and new possibilities. Change for change's sake can be quite dangerous. But assuming that everything is settled is just as problematic.

Ironically, part of our tradition as Congregationalists has been to be open to new revelations. About a hundred years before the founding of First Parish Church, as our Pilgrim forbears were

leaving Holland, their pastor, John Robinson, said they should trust there is still *more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word*. I think he meant not only the written word but also the living Word, the risen Christ. The hymn we just sang is based on those words. (*We Limit Not the Truth of God*, #316 in the *New Century Hymnal*)

In recent years, our present day denomination, the United Church of Christ, (which is celebrating its 49th anniversary this month) has been using a contemporary spin on that idea, in the "God is Still Speaking" campaign, using the words of Gracie Allen: "*Never place a period where God has placed a comma.*" In other words, God often has something new to say in the face of a new situation. There is more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word.

Some members of the Christian community however take a different approach, which goes: *It's been said. God said it. And that's that.* Many months ago I was reminded of this viewpoint as I was going to pick up our daughter at college in Waterville. There is a church on Kennedy Drive, just off the freeway. I think it's the Free Evangelical Church. They have a big sign on which they put a message for the public. About the time the first set of UCC television commercials were airing, this church put on their sign,

Don't put a comma, where God has placed a period.

That puts the tension in stark contrast doesn't it. As we ponder how to respond to a particular situation we wonder - Has God placed a comma or a period? We can see this tension in today's scripture readings. In the gospel reading the Pharisees argue that God has placed a period when it comes to Sabbath day laws. Jesus challenges this perspective and tells his disciples they may gather grain to eat. The Sabbath is for the people, not the people for the Sabbath.

In the reading from Numbers, which I want to focus on today, the daughters of Zelophehad challenge the practice that only men could inherit the land. Zelophehad had no sons. He had five daughters. But women weren't supposed to receive the inheritance. It had never been done that way.

In theory, I suppose Moses and the other leaders would probably find it fairly easy to dismiss the idea of women receiving an inheritance. But this is not a theoretical case. It's always different isn't it, when you know real people who are affected by "an issue." Moses knows these women by name. They are Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, Tirzah. They are the great, great, great, great granddaughters of Joseph.

Like everyone else, they have wandered in the wilderness. They have dealt with the dust, the scorpions, and the constant search for water. They have taken down their tent in the morning, walked through the heat, put up their tent in the evening and looked forward to the day when they would be settled in the land.

The problem was their father died along the way and they had no brothers. As they all got closer to the Promised Land, the sisters caught wind of the conversation among the men that Moses would be dividing the land among the tribes – more accurately, among the men of the tribes.

With trepidation and yet conviction, they decided that they would go to the leaders – to Moses and Eliazar the priest and all the leaders and plead their case. So they went to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Rarely did women come to this place of God. So, when the daughters of Zelophehad arrived, everything and everyone became very still.

The daughters spoke, "Our father died in the wilderness. He had no sons. Shall his name perish in the wilderness? Give us an inheritance among our father's brothers."

Can't you hear the gasps?

"You've got to be kidding."

"Why, I never!"

"They know the law."

With our modern day sensibilities this feels like a case of women's rights. And in some respects it is. However, our strong sense of individuality and individual rights would have been foreign to the people of that day. Their primary identity was with the group – with the family. In many respects, the daughters of Zelophehad are speaking up for and in honor of their father. *Shall his name perish in the wilderness?* Surely that caught the other men's attention. No man wanted his name to die out.

To Moses' credit, he brings the matter to God. And God agrees with the women. "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall let them possess an inheritance. ...If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter."

This is the heart of the story. In the face of a request from some of his people, Moses brings the matter to God. He doesn't just say, "No, we've always done it this way." He doesn't just say, "God already told us that women can't inherit." He doesn't just say, "Don't worry, we'll take care of you." On the other hand, he doesn't just say, "Sure, what the heck?" He presents the matter to God. And God says....

God is still speaking. Scripture makes it sound so easy. You ask God a question, and God says,.... In my experience, it is rarely that easy. Listening carefully for God's voice, in the midst of the cacophony of human voices that wish to tell us what God thinks and wants, requires patience and spiritual practice.

It's hard to be patient, living in the midst of a world that expects instant communication. Remember when you had to actually catch someone at home or on the phone so you could give them a message. It might take a couple of days to communicate with someone. Now, you can leave a message on their answering machine or you can send an email and be done with it.

Maybe God should set up an automatic answering service: *Hello this is God. If you are calling...*

- *to give thanks, press 1*
- *to confess, press 2*

- *looking for guidance, press 3*
- *because you didn't like the answer you got last time, press 4*

Engaging the Mystery, which we call God, isn't like that. Listening to the Still Speaking God requires quiet time, alone. It also requires time to really talk with one another about what is on our hearts - what we are sensing and what we are pondering -to ask one another, "How is God speaking to us in this time and this place?"

At Church Council and Deacon's meetings we are in the midst of conversations about marriage. In the midst of public discourse about same sex couples, we are wondering, "How is God speaking to us in this time and this place?"

In various contexts in the church, we are looking at space issues and program needs. We are wondering how the closing of the Naval Air Station will affect our life together here in the mid-coast region. And specifically, we are wondering what ministries God is calling us to in this time of change. "How is God speaking to us in this time and this place?"

I hope you will ponder these questions, and I hope we will continue to engage one another in conversation around these matters of faith.

It is our heritage to trust that God is still speaking - that there is *more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word*. May we listen.

Intro to the Scripture Reading

Usually we follow the lectionary for our scripture readings. The lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings, which covers much of the Bible. However, sometimes I like to select a reading that is not included in the lectionary. There are many interesting, and somewhat hidden stories in scripture. This one is in the book of Numbers. I was first introduced to this story by an Old Testament professor when I was in seminary.

Most of us aren't very familiar with the book of Numbers. It follows the wanderings of the Hebrews in the Wilderness, after their deliverance from Egypt. A significant part of this book includes two census counts - two numberings of the twelve tribes of Israel. God tells Moses to list the names of all the men in each clan and family.

The second census is recorded in chapter 26, just before today's reading. The people are preparing to enter the Promised Land. It is important to know who everyone is so the land can be distributed properly among the tribes. In this census we find something quite surprising – the names of five women. The only women listed in either census. They are the daughters of Zelophehad. And as we will see in a moment, these women trace their lineage back to Joseph – you know, Joseph of the amazing technicolor dreamcoat.