

“Faithfully Acting Up”

Numbers 27:1-11

Rev. Liz Miller

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It's been a couple months now that I have been working as your Associate Minister. Almost every week someone asks me, with a mixture of concern and hopefulness, “How are you doing? How is the new job going?” And, I have to be honest. There's no point in hiding it. I have the best job in the world. The only one who might be able to argue with me that their job is better is Rev. Allen, and we could probably agree to call it a tie. (Right, Chief?) I'm living my dream with you, people I love, and having more adventures while serving God than I ever imagined I could. Since I have been serving in South Church in another capacity for the last few years, I didn't think it would feel that different, but it does. And, it's awesome.

So now, here we are, two months after a congregational vote, in the middle of this installation service, and I wouldn't be surprised if there was still some confusion about what an installation service is or why we are having one. The first time I heard of an Installation Service I pictured changing a light bulb and wondered what would actually happen to the minister when they are installed. It's not the same. An installation Service is a utilitarian phrase to describe something much more abstract: its the recognition of our shared ministry and our commitment to do ministry together. Ministry is all about relationships, so in April, when you all voted to call me as your Associate Minister, that was kind of like the proposal. You asked, I said yes, and then we all said, “Yahoo! Hallelujah!”

Today is more like the wedding. Or really, because I was installed once as your Minister of Discipleship Education, it's our recommitment ceremony, acknowledging that our relationship has changed over the last few years, and we'd like to make a new kind of commitment now that we know

each other better. We've said yes to a new future together and the installation makes it official. Another way to look at it is that it is a reminder of the covenant we are each making: to serve God, and to work side by side together in our church and in the world.

I thought all week about something I could give to you today. A small gift. A token of my love. I was going to make the whole congregation matching friendship bracelets but I didn't have all of your wrist sizes, so we'll save that for another week. Instead, I want to share with you my favorite Bible story. It's about the daughters of Zelophehad. Their story is not well known, but for me, it defines what it means to be a community of faith and it is a challenge to us all as we do ministry together. We heard the scripture reading already, but I am going to retell it in my own words, since many of you probably have never heard it before, and the daughters of Zelophehad are worth knowing.

In order to begin to get to know someone, you have to learn their name, so I want to teach you the names of the daughters of Zelophehad. Repeat after me: Mahlah (Mahlah), Noah (Noah), Hoglah (Hoglah), Milcah (Milcah), and Tirzah (Tirzah). From now on, every time I say the phrase, the DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD, I want you to respond with their names: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. I'll say it with you and if you don't remember the first time, you'll catch on. It is a little tricky. I practiced with Beth and she kept reverting back to reindeer names. I think we can do better today.

The story of the DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) is in book of Numbers which is, a book full of numbers. It is full of the records of the census that was taken by the Israelites when they were in exile and taking stock for their future. The most important things to them were counting how many men they had so they knew how strong their army was, and knowing how many plots to divide the land into when they finally settled in their new home. The book of Numbers is a census, and it reads as about exciting as our modern census does. The biggest exception to the boring lists is the appearance of the DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah).

Moses and his closest advisors were meeting one day, and in walked the DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah). They went right up to Moses, and said, “Hey Moses! We are the DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah). Our dad died, and he didn't have any sons. According to your rules, because he only had daughters, his share of the land will be given away to someone else. We don't think that's fair. We think that we deserve to inherit our father's share of the land.” Moses listens and ponders what they have just told him, and then he goes to talk to God. God listens and tells him, “The DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) They are absolutely right! You need to change the rules, and include daughters in any issues of inheritance going forward.” And so it was.

I love this story so much. Every time I hear it I get something new out of it, but there are three things that I keep going back to time after time.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah teach us that we are all called to be active participants in our faith community; we can't let someone else do our part for us. We can't let someone else speak for us. These five women would not be in the Bible if they had been content to let Moses and his advisors do all the leading. We would have never known their names. Yes, Moses was called on to be their official leader. And yes, he had an advisory council, but that doesn't mean it is up to them to attend to all the work of being a community. When a small group of people are left to make all the decisions, voices get left out and important perspectives are missed. It's important to have as many voices at the table as possible in order to make sure everyone is heard.

When I hear this, I'm reminded of how in our new by-laws it is no longer a requirement to be a member in order to serve on a Team ministry. It sends the message that everyone is called to lead, and there is nothing you have to do or prove in order to be welcome to fulfill that call in this church. In fact, we really believe that we are a better church when we have more people speaking up about what they are passionate about, and sharing those passions with the church.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah also remind us that tradition is important, but justice

is more important. What isn't directly spoken in their story is that until they advocated for themselves, they were discriminated against and left out of privileges that others were receiving. It took someone speaking up and pointing out that something was an injustice for it to be changed. This is still true today. We are still learning how to include people who are left out, how to speak up for the disenfranchised, and how to help others find their voices. We still often fall short.

The reality is, that the traditions and the practices of this community are based on the people who have been here for generations, slowly changing as more people join in, but our particular group of people is, by and large, a fairly homogenous group. In a couple of Team Ministry meetings in the last month, during the opening devotion, I have posed this question: picture a group of people who are not predominantly present in our Church. Maybe it is a group of immigrants who speak a different language or someone with a different cultural background than you or someone else entirely. Whoever comes to mind, imagine they begin coming to South Church, and more and more people from this same group begin attending and eventually assuming leadership roles. What might change? What would we gain or lose? How would you feel about those changes? It's a question without a concrete answer, but it is worth reflecting on because it is the same question posed to us by the five sisters. They challenge us to think about who we need to make room for in our community and who we are leaving out, whether it is intentional or unintentional. I think Jesus must have been thinking of these five sisters when he said, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

Finally, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah teach us that it's good to talk to God. When I read their story, I am reminded that sometimes I get things wrong. It happens to us all. Probably at least once a week or once a day if you're paying close attention someone can point out a mistake I've made or an area where I've fallen short. If we are honest, we can all say the same. There are best practices we can implement to keep this at a minimum, and for me, one of them is talking to God. By having a regular conversation with God, I try to reframe what I'm going through or what decisions I am making from a perspective much larger than my own. It's not always easy to talk to God. She's not the

most verbose conversationalist, but it is an important practice that gets easier with time. The United Church of Christ proclaims that “God Is Still Speaking” and if that is really true, if God is still speaking, then we need to still be listening, and adapt when we hear something new.

It all ties together. The DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) are a strong reminder that our perpetual challenge is to make room for new people to feel welcomed in our community and to help each other use our voices, to work for justice at all times, and when we struggle with how best to do so, talk to God. In my opinion, these daughters have provided a pretty solid foundation for ministry.

I wanted you to know this story before you install me because each day I serve you, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah are with me. They shape my ministry and they speak to me—reminding me to look for the voices I have forgotten and to refer everything back to God, who is the one true authority. They remind me that each person and each perspective is valuable and that this work that I feel called to is work that we are all called to do together. I can't do it without you. We need each other, and I wouldn't want it any other way.