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# Sisters Act

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*LSTC Leadership Conference*

*Perfect Potential: Seeking Excellence in Ministry*

*Texts: Numbers 27:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-19*

My certificate of ordination is dated Feb. 12, 1983. 25 years ago today.

But there was a huge snow storm that day, so I was actually ordained on Feb. 13th, twenty-five years ago. It means a lot to me to share this time with all of you fellow travelers, and it makes me feel a bit nostalgic. A couple of years before my ordination, I was assigned to a church in Jersey City, NJ for my internship. At that time, the church and my apartment were in a run-down section of the city. One day, my mother came to visit with a member of her church on their way back from something in Manhattan. My mother told me later that in the car on the way home, the woman had turned to my mother and said, "Don't worry Barbara. She'll get something better before long." My mother replied, "I don't think that she's looking for that kind of better."

What kind of better are we looking for? Which passions that we start out with stay with us all the way? Which ones do we discard or just give up on?

Do we settle for less than we hoped for? After one, five, ten or twenty-five years? My favorite text about settling—or

not—is the one just read from the book of Numbers. It's a story rich in promise for congregations and church leaders, but, sadly, it's not in our lectionary, and that means that for most folks in our churches, its riches remain hidden away.

The story begins with a gathering of tribes. On the one hand, it was a time for giving thanks and celebration. The people have come out of the wilderness to stand at its very edge, on the plains of Moab, with the land towards which they have been traveling for so long now within sight on the other side of the Jordan River, and now they need to reorganize in order to settle on the land that stretches before them.

But they face a new danger. The danger is that when the sojourners settle, well, the danger is just that: that they will settle, settle for something less than the vision and hope for liberation and justice that sent them forth in the first place, settle for a watered-down version as they make their way across the river. When Nelson Mandela spoke to his nation, on the threshold of reorganizing to build their new future, he said:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am

I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.... [W]e are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And it's not just in some of us. It's in everyone.

But our ancestors who entered the land did play small and settle for less. They

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settled for their own well-being as a group and neglected the further, fully liberating command to be a light for all nations. They settled as possessors who overlooked the dispossessed and disconnected and found themselves exiled from the very land they once entered with such expectation. But there were some brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous exceptions who can show us a more excellent way.

The sojourners begin their reorganization for life across the Jordan River by taking a census. It turns out that Numbers is full of numbers! The census is tightly organized. Each of the twelve tribes is

named and each tribe has three to six clans, each with its own patriarch who is named. So in addition to the census numbers, we get the names of the twelve tribes... plus about sixty other names of clan heads. The Bible only gives the total figures for each tribe. I used a calculator to add them up for the total, 601,730 people, none named besides the tribal and clan heads.

But, in fact, the group gathered on the plains of Moab is much bigger because the census does not include women and children. This is because the first purpose of the census is to determine battle readiness, and only men counted for that. The second purpose of the census was to determine how the land would be distributed, more land to larger clans, less land to smaller ones. Since women and children were not permitted to own property, being property themselves, they didn't need to be counted.

Given the context, none of this is particularly surprising. What is absolutely astonishing is that when you move through the list of tribes and come to the eighth tribe, the tribe of Manasseh, you read along: *The descendants of Manasseh: of Machir, the clan of the Machirites; and Machir was the father of Gilead; of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites. These are the descendants of Gilead: of Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; and of Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; and of Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; and of Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; and of Hopher, the clan of the Hopherites.* No wonder this isn't in the lectionary. But then you hit verse 33: *Now Zelophehad, son of Hopher, had no sons, but daughters: and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah;*

then the census goes on its humdrum way as if nothing has happened.

The whole boring pattern that has been droning on and on for verse after verse, year after year, century after century for almost two millennia in the Ancient Near East is interrupted! ! It splits wide open like the Red Sea; it splits wide open like an old wineskin that can't hold this new wine, and a new word of liberation comes pouring through. *Now Zelophehad, son of Hopher, had no sons, but daughters...* (we don't hear about any other person and whether or not he had any sons. Surely Zelophehad wasn't the only man in this unfortunate position)... *and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.* The text makes a point of pointing out the names—the names of the daughters.

Now the reason I bothered to add up all the census numbers is because the more I added, the more amazed I became. The more I added, the bigger the miracle becomes. Because when you add it all up you come to the amazing result that out of 601,730, only six people are named who are not clan heads and five of them are women. And you realize that the man is only named because of the five women. Five named women in a census that didn't even count women in the first place. How did this happen?

We find out the moment the census is over. *Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah* were standing there on the plains of Moab with everyone else about to take possession of the promised land, but they realized that the system and its policies were set up in such a way that some folks were going to be left out of the promise from the very start.

Whatever glorious inheritance was about to be celebrated, it didn't include **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.** Their father had died on their sojourn in the wilderness. If they had been sons, they would have inherited his portion of the land. If they had had brothers, they would have been able to share in their brothers' land. If they had been married, they would have gone to live on their husband's land. If they had been widowed, their husband's family would have taken care of them. But being as they had no father, no brother, no husband and no in-laws, they had no rights to any land. Now they were together with their people on the edge of the wilderness, but when everyone crossed over, they would remain forever on the far edge—disconnected from land and from sustainable life.

There was no forum for **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** to voice their grievance. Women had no authority to enter the public sphere, much less to speak there. As women without men, they had the most to lose if the community rejected them, and rejection was quite likely if they acted outside the system. Even Moses' own sister Miriam was censured for daring to question her brother's judgment as God's spokesperson. *"Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, has he not spoken through us also?"* she dared to ask (Num 12). The reaction was that Miriam became covered with leprosy and had to be shut away for a week-long time in order to learn her lesson. This was not an encouraging example for **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.** They were expected to play small—to settle without an inheritance.

But these five sisters, with no precedent, no rights, no authority and no

testosterone, go ahead and take action regardless. These brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous sisters decide that their playing small will not serve the world. They decide that they will not settle. It would have been far less risky to approach

has been on the books for centuries in a system that denied female land rights for virtually 2000 years (and that's longer than the ELCA's been around), and these five audacious women are trying to change it in a court that doesn't even allow their presence, much less their voice. But the same spirit that must have gotten hold of them seemed to be at work in Moses too, because instead of striking them down with leprosy and sending them to their rooms without supper, Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: *"The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.... It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses."*

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**Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** filed one of the earliest lawsuits on record. In fact, this case has been named as the oldest case that is still cited as an authority. In the American Bar Association Journal of Feb. 1924, there is an article citing this case and describing it as an early declaratory judgment in which the property rights of women are clearly set forth.

Moses in private and plead with him to work out some special deal for them, but these sisters are not simply trying to get a piece of the pie for themselves; that's still playing small. No, because they go public, their petition becomes an action to effect change on behalf of the whole community. They go forward to meet Moses right at the entrance of the tent of meeting in the presence of Eleazer the priest, the leaders and all the congregation. You can bet that everyone was listening. "Our father died in the wilderness... and he had no sons.... Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." To do that would require major policy changes in Israel's bureaucracy.

The lectionary doesn't recognize these women, but we know that the church can be slower than the rest of society to catch on to some things, too often the tail light rather than the headlight, as Martin Luther King said.

Because **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** present their petition to Moses in public, their individual case will serve to change the Israelite inheritance law to include women, a law that

But how did these sisters come to imagine that they were powerful beyond measure when their plight was invisible to the multitudes of 601,730, actually over a million considering the other women, and their situation didn't count for anything

in the numbers census? Well, there can only be one explanation. Somebody knew the trouble they'd seen. Somebody knew their names. Somebody had counted every hair on their five beautiful heads. The same Somebody who came on the scene in the midst of another census and was only greeted by a few no-count shepherds. The same Somebody who doesn't count things up the way our treasurers sometimes do, the one who *didn't count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him.... In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance.*

Sometimes when we add up all we're up against, all the challenges before us, all the work that lies ahead, all the problems and the decisions, the heartaches and heart breaks, all the downright evil we face, and then we add up what we've got, well, sometimes it can seem a bit discouraging. It can seem that we may as well play it small and settle. It can happen in the first year of a first call or in the 25th. I'm not saying that numbers don't matter, but according to the book of Numbers, which ought to know something about numbers, they matter less than one might think when you factor in the immeasurable greatness of God's power.

**Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah** and **Tirzah** didn't settle for less than their glorious inheritance, and there were only five of them. But five is not one. "Whenever two or three are gathered," said Jesus, "there am I in their midst." Which is why we are here together. Which is why these connections here are so important. I don't know most of you—where in your sojourn you are and what kind of better you are looking for. But if and when you or I are tempted to settle and play small in ways that don't serve the church or the world, I like to repeat this mantra: **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah Milcah, Tirzah..**

As Mandela said: don't ask yourself *who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world....[W]e are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And it's not just in some of us. It's in everyone.*

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation... so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe... AMEN. (Ephesians 1:17ff)*



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