

Claiming the Promise Joshua 17:1-6

It was a heady time, a hopeful time. Joshua and the armies of Israel had conducted two great military campaigns, slicing through the territory God had given them and crushing the power of those who tried to resist them. And now the time had come to divide up the territory, to decide which particular plots of land the different tribes and clans would receive.

But that was the problem. In most cultures in those days, clans were led exclusively by men, and property was passed down from father to son. After all, Jacob had 12 sons, each of whom headed up one of the tribes of Israel. But he also had at least one daughter, Dinah. How come she wasn't able to lead a tribe?

That question was more than merely academic for Zelophehad's five daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. As they saw all their male cousins queuing up to receive an inheritance for the clans they headed, they realized that their own father's family was in danger of being passed over. For you see, Zelophehad had no sons. So, who would claim the inheritance for their clans and families?

Many modern women can relate to their frustration, as the #MeToo movement of the last few years has made abundantly clear. But the church is one place where women have always been overrepresented. Regardless of race or denomination, all congregations tend to have more women than men present on any given Sunday morning.

And this has been true for a long time. Back when the Rodney Presbyterian Church was being built, around 1830, one local man was recorded as saying it was a good thing to have a church built in the community – that would give the women and children something to do while the men were at the horseraces! Oh, and by the way, that man was the son of a Presbyterian ruling elder!

Today, in most congregations, women play quite prominent roles. That's of course true in our denomination – any congregation that wants to call women to serve as ruling or teaching elders is free to do so. In fact, many of our smaller congregations wouldn't have a session at all if women weren't willing to serve.

And even in the Presbyterian denominations that don't formally allow women to take positions of leadership, they manage to get their way a lot of the time. A very reliable source, who will remain nameless, tells of how one of the largest of these congregations, which will also remain nameless, was conducting a building campaign. So they appointed an all-male committee to oversee the design.

Now, this sanctuary expresses our Presbyterian, Reformed theology by putting the pulpit on a raised platform in the center of the chancel. This indicates our belief that the Word of God is the most important component of our worship. Moreover, the communion table and the font are below the pulpit. This expresses visually our understanding that we observe the sacraments according to what the Bible says.

Well, this all-male committee of this very, very Reformed church did not end up with a central, raised pulpit as most Presbyterian churches have. No, they chose to have a pulpit on one side and a lectern on the other side, with the communion table right in the middle, just like Catholic and Episcopal churches have.

How come? The committee was made up of a bunch of lawyers and one judge. So, the lawyers naturally agreed with what the judge wanted. And the judge's wife was Episcopalian. So much for the guys being in charge.

But that doesn't mean the church doesn't have any barriers we need to remove. That doesn't mean that all sorts of people feel welcome in church these days. Just like lots of women in the Ancient Near East considered themselves second-class citizens, lots of people today wonder if there's any room in the Kingdom of God for them.

And maybe you've felt that way from time to time. Maybe you look at the brokenness in your life, and wonder if God could ever love you. Maybe you look at the way you've messed up your relationships, maybe you look at the bad choices you've made and you think there's no room for you among God's people. Maybe you look at the way you've wasted your time, talent, and treasure – and maybe you've given up hope.

If that's the case, we need to hear again what Isaiah told us in our responsive reading from chapter 55. It doesn't matter if we have money or not. It doesn't matter how selfish or wicked we have been in the past. Everyone is welcome to come to God. Everyone is welcome to seek the Lord and to call upon His name, no matter how poor or unimportant other people think we are, no matter how worthless we may consider ourselves to be.

Yes, we can all learn a lot from Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, because they refused to give up hope. Even though the men around them looked on them as second-class citizens, they pressed forward, insisting that there be a place in God's Kingdom for them too.

But how could they be so confident? How could they be certain they and their families would receive an inheritance? Verse 4 tells us that they were looking to the Word of God. They were relying on what God had already promised to give them.

And we can see this promise if we look back at Numbers chapter 27, which records the first time the five sisters brought their problem to Moses, the first time they asked for the same inheritance that their male cousins would one day receive. Moses took the case to the Lord, and the Lord told him, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them" (verse 7). Moreover, God went on to make this a general rule for all His people – that all men who died without sons should leave their inheritance to their daughters.

So, no matter how much or how little sense that made to the men around them, the five sisters stood firm on God's Word. They relied on what God had told them. And so they had confidence to claim their place in God's Kingdom.

And we can do the same thing today. For what did Isaiah 55 tell us this morning? No, everything in God's Word may not make sense to us or to those who live around us. God told us that His ways are simply higher than our ways, and that His thoughts are simply higher than our thoughts. We may not understand why God would want a bunch of mixed-up, messed-up screwups like us to be servants in His Kingdom. We may not understand how God could possibly forgive all the mistakes we've made, or how God could possibly patch up all the broken places in our lives.

But just like Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, we can stand firm on the promises that God has made to us. We can be certain that if we come to God He will sustain us with everything we need.

Because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, we can be certain that if we seek the Lord and call upon Him and turn away from our wicked, selfish ways that God will have mercy on us, that God will pardon us, that God will make us His own children, that our whole lives will be filled with the joy and peace that comes from an unshakable conviction that God loves us with an everlasting, unconditional, self-sacrificial love.

But if, like those five sisters, we refuse to allow any barriers to prevent us from claiming God's promises, and if we rely on the gracious promises of God whether they make sense to us or not, there's one more thing we need to learn from this story. But this time we need to turn our attention to Eleazar and Joshua, the leaders of God's people.

For how did they respond to the five sisters' request? They didn't rely on their cultural traditions, believing that women were just not that important. They didn't just do what they had done with all the other pieces of land and give it only to male clan leaders. They didn't rely on their own reason, wondering how women could possibly take the lead in military matters. No, they did what the five sisters did – they looked to the Word of God, the Word that God had spoken to Moses. And like those five sisters, they did what God's Word said. And so they did the right things – they opened a way for the sisters to take up their inheritance among God's people.

And we have to do the same thing. For if we have answered God's call to come to Him, we must also do the best we can to remove any barriers that might be holding anyone else back from repentance and faith. We must do our part to help others claim the promises of God that we ourselves have embraced. And just as God welcomes all who will come to Him, we must make sure that no one is excluded, that no one is left out.

For what else did God say in Isaiah 55:5? "Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you." Now, the idea that people from every tribe and tongue and nation are welcome in God's Kingdom certainly isn't shocking to a bunch of Gentiles like us. But for Isaiah's Jewish audience, the notion that a rabble of uncircumcised pork-eaters could become the people of God, well that was just as radical as women inheriting real estate in Joshua's day.

Okay, so it's good that the Church no longer discriminates on the basis of race or sex. But does that mean everyone would feel welcome here today? What about young folks who prefer their music syncopated and percussive, and who are accustomed to learning in an interactive style with lots of visual examples? What about men who just haven't ever gotten comfortable with their grown-up voice and don't like to sing in public? What about folks who have a hard time reading? How welcoming is our style of worship to these folks?

Or what about the addict who's having a hard time staying on the wagon? What about folks who are giving into other sorts of temptations that just don't fit with God's plans for us? What about people who are wrestling with depression or grief, folks for whom social interaction has become a chore? How can we come alongside these people and love them and help them experience the joy and freedom we've found in Christ?

But you know what may be the biggest barrier of all? You know what's one of the most common excuses people make for not coming to Church? They don't want to be around a bunch of hypocrites. Well, if we're talking the talk but not walking the walk, if we're condemning sin with our lips while practicing it in our lives, if we're claiming to love others when we are actually sitting in judgment on them, then we ourselves – not race, not class, not sex – we might be the most important thing that keeps people from coming to faith in Christ.

And that means we need to live by the same standard that Joshua and Eleazar used, the same infallible guide that motivated the five sisters to claim their inheritance: we need to stake our lives ever more firmly on the Word of God. For if believing in the Word of God has drawn us into the people of God, then acting on that same Word, basing our lives on it, even on the parts of it that we don't understand, is the key to drawing others into the same fellowship. For if other folks are going to follow Christ, they'll have to see Him living His life through us.

So, let's believe in His promises for ourselves. Let's put those promises into action. And let's try to remove any barriers that prevent others from hearing those promises and putting their trust in Christ.