

Standing: in the gap, on justice

*A sermon for the beloved community at Grant Park Church,
Numbers 27:1-11,
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Today, I want to share with you one of my favorite stories in the entire Bible. Like a good TV show, I think this story has a slow-burn to it that captures my attention. It's like a good piece of commentary on the realities of society and the realities of ministry. I think this story provides space to consider the different happenings around us from a different perspective. And like a good blueprint for the architecture of justice, I think that this story speaks to us, Grant Park Church, in the circumstance and the moment we find ourselves in.

This is our circumstance: as I have been warmly welcomed into a number of Baptist spaces in the last number of years, I have so distinctly come to appreciate the value of freedom. From my time learning church history at Wake Forest from Dr. Bill Leonard, the American and Baptist historian, to my time serving with the congregation and people down in Austin, Texas at First Baptist Austin, to the conversations I have had around tables and spaces with Baptist folks of all kinds... Freedom has been a very clear value.

Specifically, there are those four fragile freedoms that Baptists hold to: Soul Freedom – that each person has the freedom to decide for themselves in their relationship with God, Bible Freedom, Church Freedom – the autonomy of each congregation to organize and govern themselves, and Religious Freedom – that very important separation between Church and State that says “every person decides for themselves.”

I have come to understand you all through these lenses. I have gotten to know, through your recent history and through your long-past history, the ways in which these freedoms are painted on the walls of this church. With your Soul Freedom, your Bible Freedom, your Church Freedom, and your Religious Freedom, I believe, Grant Park Church, that you have thoroughly aligned yourself with justice:

To welcome your queer siblings radically and fully into the fold of your community is the work of justice, full stop.

And none of this happens in a vacuum, of course. Throughout the history of the Church, the history of churches, local congregations, groups of folks just like us – there have been discussions and differences of opinion. What I have been drawn to so powerfully in the midst of these four Baptist freedoms is the space for diversity within all of God’s creation as we organize ourselves, yet we find company among those who do not necessarily see things exactly the same way we do. It’s with our freedoms that we organize ourselves.

What I have come to learn is... this is very Baptist! To talk about it. And this diversity, this expansiveness of experiences, this shared space is a gift. And so I want to speak to it – our circumstance.

A number of months ago, a letter was authored within our American Baptist family that – to me, a newcomer – seemed to place these Baptist values of Soul Freedom and Church Freedom significantly lower than one might expect in a Baptist letter. The contents of this letter that are helpful to name and point to today comes in one sentence:

“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

I want to name it and talk about it. Here is where I come in:

While the word “homosexuality” was not introduced into the Bible through translations until 1946, queer people have existed in the Church the entire time.

While some believe being queer to be the actions one “practices,” others know and have known for a very long time that being queer is part of how God intentionally and beautifully weaves us together as people.

While some believe that the Church is suffering because queer people dare to exist within its walls, others believe that it is in fact the Church’s homophobia that is suffering from not standing on very stable ground.

I am one of these people. I do not believe the Church is dying, but ultimately it is the unhealthy systems of oppression that have thrived within the Church that are dying.

This is what brings us to Numbers 27.

This story in the Book of Numbers is an interesting one. The title is indicative of what the book can largely be about at times: numbers, numbers of people and numbers of travelers, numbers of fighting-age men, census taking and its related legal business. And this story in Numbers 27 is tucked away in there to my delight.

I would love for us all to get a sense for the pacing of this story, where it's located, what the Book of Numbers can be about at times, and why it is that we are talking about this in particular this morning.

Just one chapter prior, in Numbers 26, we can get some insight into the Book of Numbers on the whole. In Numbers 26:1-4, it's written that the Lord directed Moses to take a census of the people aged twenty years and older. So, Moses gathers up his *executive team* of Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, other unnamed leaders, and takes a census of the Israelites. Humor me for just a minute while I read, so we can get a sense of what Numbers can be like sometimes.

“The Israelites, who came out of the land of Egypt, were:
Reuben, the firstborn of Israel. The descendants of Reuben: of Hanoch, the clan of the Hanochites; of Pallu, the clan of the Palluites; of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites; of Carmi, the clan of the Carmites. These are the clans of the Reubenites; the number of those enrolled was forty-three thousand seven hundred thirty. And the descendants of Pallu: Eliab. The descendants of Eliab: Nemuel, Dathan, and Abiram. These are the same Dathan and Abiram, chosen from the congregation, who rebelled against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah, when they rebelled against the Lord, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up along with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured two hundred fifty men; and they became a warning.

Notwithstanding, the sons of Korah did not die.

The descendants of Simeon by their clans: of Nemuel, the clan of the Nemuelites; of Jamin, the clan of the Jaminites; of Jachin, the clan of the Jachinites; of Zerah, the clan of the Zerahites; of Shaul, the clan of the Shaulites. These are the clans of the Simeonites, twenty-two thousand two hundred.”

(Numbers 26:4-14, New Revised Standard Version)

What continues on all the way until verse 51 is *eleven* more occurrences of this. This person and their descendants, their clans, the number of people – eleven more times. Because it's a census.

What follows and concludes in the census-taking in Numbers 26 is that God once more speaks to Moses and seems to give legal directives as to how land should be apportioned. Numbers 26 is about a census and some land.

This is what comes just before Numbers 27 – one of my favorite stories in all of the Bible. A story that I believe is in the Bible, brilliantly and with sacred stability because the voices of the people that you might least expect remind all of us that justice is at the center of every single conversation.

This is what Numbers 27:1-11 says once more:

“Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, “Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.”

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. You shall also say to the Israelites, “If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.”

(Numbers 27:1-11, New Revised Standard Version)

As Moses and his executive team conclude their census taking, conclude their direction to the people, conclude their business as they believe that the business was concluded... and then five women step forward and speak up. They speak up clearly. They speak up clearly and show that they have indeed been listening intently. They speak up to say clearly: this is not aligned with justice.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

With respect to the way the entire group organizes themselves, these five women came forward with justice as their concern. The ground they were standing on was always going to be stable ground because justice is what they are standing on.

They brought their concern, their voices, and their unified voice to Moses, Eleazar, the priests, the leaders, the entire congregation in fact, and they stood at the entrance of this “tent of meeting.”

And then what?

They said what was true. They did all they could do and they said what was true: this circumstance, with the census and the land, it might be good and just for some, but it is not good and it is not just for all.

While this story itself in the text doesn't seem to slow down, to me, I know that it does. I know that there is an order of operations happening here. There's a leadership system. There's an extended moment that happens in that tent of meeting. Moses hears them, but does Moses act? Moses is responsible for the people, and that means all the people! And five people among tens of thousands of folks are standing before Moses and standing on justice. With respect to the way the entire group organizes themselves, the five sisters did what they could do. They said what was true and they handed it off to Moses.

How does Moses respond? That's where I think it slows down. Step into the shoes of Moses for a second – having just done all the work to take this census and to direct the people. And then being presented with more to do, being presented with mistakes to amend, being presented with an opportunity to re-center justice. Step into Moses' shoes for just a moment. He has plenty of options. And how does he respond? Thank goodness, he brings it to the Lord. The daughters of Zelophehad did all they could do and they said what was true. Redirected towards justice and then they handed it over. And Moses did what Moses could do: bring it to the Lord.

It is the Lord's directive, after all. It is the Lord's justice and the Lord's goodness.

And immediately – immediately – without question and without hesitation, the Lord responds to Moses: the daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying.

They are right in what they are saying! How right are they? How firmly are they standing on solid ground? The commands and ordinances given to Moses by God are amended – amended!

Five people stood before Moses, and Eleazar, the leaders and the priests, all the congregation and directed everybody back towards justice.

I believe this happens because justice is a movement that lives within us. Justice is solid ground that we stand on. Justice is tangibly at the center of every single conversation. The daughters of Zelophehad by centering justice personally, they re-centered justice for everybody. And by centering justice, they found themselves standing on the most solid ground.

Please allow me to say – Grant Park Church, I wholeheartedly believe that in saying that we are all created in the image of God, that we are all welcomed and affirmed in our humanity, that all of our queer siblings are gifts from god, we are centering justice and standing on very solid ground. In fact, if I am being quite honest with you all, I have bet the farm on this being true. From Chicago to North Carolina to Portland, I have bet the farm on justice and I do not plan to take back that bet.

So please allow me to say very pointedly:

I exist,
And we exist,
And our ministry exists because it must.

We will continue to radically welcome every person made in the image of God, full stop. We will continue onward one foot ahead of another on the ground of justice that we find ourselves on.

I would like to conclude with a quote. This comes from the womanist author Audre Lorde. She wrote about the intersections of our identities – the different pieces of us that we carry with us. Whether it is queerness, whether it is a gender identity, whether it is the country you were born in or a nationality that you hold, she spoke on age, race, class, and sex:

“Traditionally, in american society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes.”

(“Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde, 1980)

The daughters of Zelophehad, standing on very solid ground of justice, willing to bridge the gap at that tent of meeting, in front of Moses and his executive team, and willing to say: this doesn't align.

This doesn't align. And if it doesn't align with justice, maybe it doesn't work for us.

Thank goodness for Moses. Thank goodness for biblical leadership that is humble to listen. And moreso, thank goodness for that small group of people who know what it is like to stand on very solid ground based on justice. For those folks who are the voices you would least expect, perhaps – or perhaps exactly who you would hope would speak up about something like this.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

This might be good and just for some, but is it really good and just if it isn't for everybody?

Grant Park Church, we will move forward standing on justice and I believe we will find that is very solid ground to stand on. Thank goodness.

Amen and amen.