

I See You – 2. Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves
Numbers 27:1-11
October 15, 2023
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

We are in week two of our sermon series, *I See You* where we are remembering how God creates, knows, loves, and sees all of us in our full humanity. But as people, we can fall into the habit of assuming everyone is the same or just like us, but these assumptions can be harmful and prevent us from truly seeing other people and listening to their perspectives. It is my hope that this series will help us learn how to listen to, respect, affirm, and act for and with others as we extend God's table even wider to include those on the margins of society. Because I believe that if we can do this, we can come to know and love God even more fully.

Last week, Pastor Bethany began with a message about the importance of listening to others. She talked about the importance of truly listening to people, especially to those on the margins of society and encouraged us to look for one opportunity every day to create belonging. But we know that just listening is not enough. We must also act. That's what happens in our scripture story today.

First of all, I am just wondering, how many of you found yourself doing some light reading in the Old Testament Book of Numbers this past week? That's what I thought you might say. It's a book that often gets overlooked, partly because it has a really boring name. Numbers. Which is a shame because in the Hebrew tradition, the book's name means *In the Wilderness*. It's an epic travel log about Israel's journey through the desert on their way to the land promised to Abraham. It's designed according to the stages of their journey and concludes right before they enter the promised land. In other words, the entire book describes the 40 long, difficult years that the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. One of the commentaries that I read this week referred to Numbers as the book that might have been called *The Grumbling of a Nation*. It is one long, sad story of complaint and discontent.

To better understand what's happening in today's story, let's back up to the chapter right before this one, where we read that there was a census being taken. The purpose of this census was to list all the people in all the tribes of Israel so that the leaders could calculate the allotment of land that each of the twelve tribes would receive in the promise land. Larger tribes would receive larger areas of land. Smaller tribes would receive smaller areas of land. What exact area of land that each tribe would get was determined by casting lots. They did this to help minimize complaints by the tribes. But more importantly to make sure that each family had sufficient means and ways to support themselves. This is land that was promised to the people of Israel, given to them as a gift from God. It was their inheritance to pass on to their sons, and to their sons' sons, and their sons', sons' sons.

But as we heard in this morning's scripture reading, in the story about the five daughters of a man named Zelophehad, we realize that something unexpected has happened. Back in this time, ancient Israelite tradition gave the right of inheritance to sons only. Therefore, women were not able to inherit property. However, Zelophehad had no sons, only daughters, and they were not having any of this. When their father died, they mustered up all the courage and bravery they could find and challenged these cultural traditions asking Moses and the other Israelite leaders for their father's property. When the women spoke to the leaders, the leaders also acted outside of laws and tradition and did not dismiss their request but instead listened and the acted, taking their request to God.

Now, in the Hebrew Bible, it is interesting to note that almost always, in the instances where God speaks, it involves a matter of change of tradition that then leads to social change. And we see that here. God listened to the daughters and affirmed them by saying, *what the daughters are saying is right*. Because of this, the laws were changed to give a deceased father's inheritance to his daughters in cases where he had no sons. These five sisters took it upon themselves to act, not only on their behalf, but setting in place a social change that would impact women for generations to come.

Our faith should be a driving factor in how we respond to injustice. From the beginning, John Wesley and the early Methodist expressed their oppositions to societal ills such as slavery, smuggling, inhumane prison conditions and child labor. And that work continues still today. In fact, this is why I am a United Methodist. I am inspired by the United Methodist Church's call to social holiness, the conviction that we live our lives together with all of God's creation; that we walk with one another, including those who are poor, vulnerable, and marginalized. And that we commit to making life better for our neighbors and all God's people.

As I prayed about the horrific acts of violence between Israel and the Palestine this week, I am reminded of how very complicated of an issue this is. Regardless of our political beliefs, we lament for the countless innocent civilians who have lost their lives, been injured, or are being held captive on both sides. Our differences can heighten during times of crisis and conflict but let's support each other by sharing empathy and compassion as we navigate this difficult time remembering that all of God's people are hurting and heartbroken, scared, afraid and angry, the Israelites and the Palestinians. There is no more important of a time for us to be kind to one another, pray for all people and for God's peace to come.

Here at home, I see many ways that you, Messiah Church, act as faith community to address injustices. The work that we do often begins when someone in our church who sees a need and comes forward and says, "I'd like to do something about that." And we, the church say, "How can we help?" In recent years we've seen this happen in the sponsoring of our two refugee families, through our many mission trips to Kenya, Nashville, Sisseton, SD, the community of New Prague and the Pine Ridge Reservation. We see it in our community partnership with Oakwood Elementary School, and in our Totes for Hope mini food shelf ministry that supports our Bloom families and staff. And today, immediately following this worship service, you are invited to join in a packing party with a goal of packing 500 school kits for children of families around the world who do not have the means to purchase school supplies, place like Honduras, Guatemala, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. I invite you to join us after worship today and pack a kit or ten.

These are just a couple of examples of how Messiah Church engages in addressing injustices in our world. And in all these instances, there is a common thread, when a need or injustice arises, God touches the heart of someone and compels them to act on behalf of our neighbor. As it turns out, this pattern is not unique to us.

Throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus openly challenging laws and traditions that were exclusive by nature. When Peter asked him how many times he should forgive, Jesus went beyond the prescribed Jewish law of three times. Jesus even exceeded Peter's suggestion of seven times. He said you should forgive 70 times seven. When the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in adultery, they said the law commanded them to stone her to death. Jesus said, *let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone. And to the woman he said, I don't condemn you. Go on your way.* He saw the image of God reflected in those whom society deemed unworthy and enthusiastically invited them into the kin(g)dom/community of God. God will step in to break tradition to bring justice to those who, up

until now, have been excluded or deemed unworthy. But the key thing to note is that God includes us in bringing about justice.

Martin Luther King in a 1965 commencement speech at Oberlin College said, *"Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be - this is the interrelated structure of reality."* The interrelated structure of reality. In other words, we are all connected to one another.

Do you know the name Pat Bellanger? Pat was a member of the White Earth Ojibwe tribe here in Minnesota, an Ojibwe activist and a cofounder of the American Indian Movement or AIM. She spent over fifty years fighting for Indigenous rights on a national and local level. She participated in many protests including the occupation at Wounded Knee (1973) and the protest at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC (1972).

In the 1970's, Bellanger worked behind the scenes for the welfare of Indigenous people. This was at a time when US authorities were taking Native children from their families and placing them in foster care, often because the families had difficulties keeping their children in public school—where non-Native students and teachers harassed and discriminated against them. Native children were frequently placed in white families and removed completely from their tribes. Bellanger was a leader in the survival school movement in the Twin Cities. Are you familiar with Survival schools? These were established to give Native American children places to learn without the racial prejudices, social barriers, and academic struggles they faced in the public school system.

She lobbied for the Indian Child Welfare Act, which became law in 1978. This legislation gave tribes jurisdiction over their own children, including adoption cases. Bellanger's continuous, passionate advocacy for Native women and children earned her the name "Grandmother AIM." She saw an injustice that tugged on her heart and was compelled to act.

So where are you seeing injustices that are tugging at your heart? I don't have to tell you that we have a lot of rules, laws, and traditions in the world today. They are present in our churches, in our communities and in our world. New laws, new rules and new regulations are being discussed, added, and amended every day. Some of the things that tug at my heart and compel me to ask God, "What can I do?" are: New voters' rights that are being considered or implemented in many states across our nation. Rules and regulations that are in place/or needed to protect our climate and environment. The need for legislation that addresses gun violence in our schools. Laws that have been written about women's reproductive rights I can't begin to understand all that is involved in each of these areas, but I do know there are some things that keep me awake at night. What are the things that keep you awake at night, calling you to act for and with others?

As we saw in the story of the five sisters, God extended the table even wider to include those at the margin. And we are called to join in that work. We have a lot of traditions in our church and in our community and there are many ways that the traditions of the church have gotten it wrong over the years. We know that we still have a long way to go but thankfully, God is still speaking among us.

So, here's my question for you today. How is God calling **us as a community** to widen our table to include people's voices that have traditionally been excluded? Our Servant Steering Team is in the initial stages of a strategic plan for the next 3 years of ministry together. I'd love to hear

how you feel God is calling Messiah Church to widen our table so to include voices of those who have been left out.

More importantly, how is God calling **you** to act for justice? Micah 6:8 reminds us what God expects from us. *To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.* Where are you being called to do justice and what will that look like? Will you contact an elected leader? Will you make a sign and walk with others? Will you share in acts of mercy? Will you stand with the marginalized? Will you organize a community forum to bring greater understanding to a topic? God will break in and break tradition to bring about justice. But God needs us to partner in that work. It is not enough to just listen; we must do something. What will you do?

Let's pray. Holy One, you said, follow me. And so we come but sometimes our heavy hearts, worries, anger and assumptions get in the way and prevent us from truly seeing other people and listening to their perspectives. Help us learn how to listen to, respect, affirm, and act for and with others. In doing so, may we also come to know and love you even more fully. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 15, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Gracious God, as I study your word today, break my reliance on the things of comfort. Break my desire to turn to the things of tradition that exclude and push away. Help me to see every piece of what I do as full of possibility. Help me to work towards inclusion and justice, where all means all. Amen.

Monday, October 16

Scripture: Numbers 27:1-11

The daughters of Zelophehad, Hephher's son, Gilead's grandson, Machir's great-grandson, and Manasseh's great-great-grandson, belonging to the clan of Manasseh son of Joseph, came forward. His daughters' names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chiefs, and the entire community at the entrance of the meeting tent and said, "Our father died in the desert. He wasn't part of the community who gathered against the LORD with Korah's community. He died for his own sin, but he had no sons. Why should our father's name be taken away from his clan because he didn't have a son? Give us property among our father's brothers." Moses brought their case before the LORD. The LORD said to Moses: Zelophehad's daughters are right in what they are saying. By all means, give them property as an inheritance among their father's brothers. Hand over their father's inheritance to them. Speak to the Israelites and say: If a man dies and doesn't have a son, you must hand his inheritance over to his daughters. If he doesn't have a daughter, you will give his inheritance to his brothers. If he doesn't have any brothers, you should give his inheritance to his father's brothers. If his father had no brothers, you should give his inheritance to his nearest relative from his clan. He will take possession of it. This will be a regulation and a case law for the Israelites, as the LORD commanded Moses.

Observation

Ancient Israelite tradition gave the right of inheritance to sons only. Women were thus not able to inherit property. However, despite this cultural practice, Zelophehad's daughters challenged the tradition of their time by speaking to the leaders. When their father died, Zelophehad's daughters, all named in the text, asked Moses and the other leaders for their father's property.

Application

The daughters' case was unprecedented and required Moses to receive divine intervention. Can you recall a time in your life, or perhaps you are in such a time right now, where you needed God's intervention to show you the way forward?

Prayer

Holy One, these women remind me that you hear, and you act on behalf of, those who turn to you for help. May I always remember to always turn to you first in faith, trusting that you hear and will act on my behalf as well. Amen.

Tuesday, October 17

Scripture: Micah 6:6-8

With what should I approach the LORD
and bow down before God on high?
Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings,
with year-old calves?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with many torrents of oil?
Should I give my oldest child for my crime;
the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?
He has told you, human one, what is good and
what the LORD requires from you:
to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

Observation

The prophet Micah spoke to the kingdom of Judah's urge to keep religious ritual and "conspicuous consumption" side-by-side. On God's behalf, he urged a different agenda: "Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." At Messiah Church, we serve the same God as Micah did and agree that pious rituals matter less than simply treating people justly.

Application

In what ways do you fall short of doing justice, embracing faithful love, and walking humbly with God? Micah's delineation of God's requirements includes no negative statements about what is forbidden to the Israelites. It presents a positive case of what God thinks is best for humankind. How can you actively move yourself, your family, your workplace, and community toward God's best for humankind?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, my goal is to walk humbly with you. Lead and guide me into the newness of life that you died and rose again to offer me. Amen.

Wednesday, October 18

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. "He deserves to have you do this for him," they said. "He loves our people and he built our

synagogue for us.” Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, “Lord, don’t be bothered. I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn’t even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I’m also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and the servant does it.” When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, “I tell you, even in Israel I haven’t found faith like this.” When the centurion’s friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

Observation

Although the centurion was not Jewish, some of the Jewish town leaders apparently owed him a favor and were willing to contact Jesus on his behalf. The centurion was a Gentile and may have thought that Jesus, who’s Jewish, would hesitate to accept his request. But he believed that if Jesus asked God to heal his slave, God would do it. This encounter with a Gentile shows how the good news is for “all nations.”

Application

Was there a time when a long-held tradition or belief discouraged or intimidated you from acting on behalf of someone else, particularly someone excluded by that tradition?

Prayer

Gracious God, into the hopeless situations of life, you bring hope and healing. You are the God of despair. Give me strength to cling to you, faith to believe that you love me, and grace to carry on even in my darkest of hours. Amen.

Thursday, October 19

Scripture: Luke 7:11-35

A little later Jesus went to a city called Nain. His disciples and a great crowd traveled with him. As he approached the city gate, a dead man was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her. When he saw her, the Lord had compassion for her and said, “Don’t cry.” He stepped forward and touched the stretcher on which the dead man was being carried. Those carrying him stood still. Jesus said, “Young man, I say to you, get up.” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Awestruck, everyone praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding region.

John’s disciples informed him about all these things. John called two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord. They were to ask him, “Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?” When they reached Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you. He asks, ‘Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?’” Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. Then he replied to John’s disciples, “Go, report to John what you have seen and heard. *Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled now walk. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. And good news is preached to the poor.* Happy is anyone who doesn’t stumble along the way because of me.” After John’s messengers were gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who dress in fashionable clothes and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you,

and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it's written: *Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.* I tell you that no greater human being has ever been born than John. Yet whoever is least in God's kingdom is greater than he." Everyone who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged God's justice because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and legal experts rejected God's will for themselves because they hadn't been baptized by John. "To what will I compare the people of this generation?" Jesus asked. "What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace calling out to each other, 'We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. We sang a funeral song and you didn't cry.' John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' Yet the Human One came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved to be right by all her descendants."

Observation

To lose a child is among the most painful of human experiences. As the woman Jesus met in Nain walked with her community in sorrow, Jesus had compassion for her. In prison (Luke 3:19-20), brave John the Baptist faced doubt. Jesus' reported acts (v. 18) were praiseworthy but differed from the expected baptizing in fire (Luke 3:16-17). If Jesus was "the one," as John had said, when would he deal with evil Herod? John sent the question directly to Jesus.

Application

In Jesus' day, losing an only son was an utter disaster for a widow. Only through a male relative could she legally own property or funds. Jesus saved the widow, not just from emotional loss, but likely from poverty and marginalization. What has Jesus saved you from? In what ways can trusting his loving power give you strength and comfort for each day?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you that whether I'm full of thanks like the widow or filled with questions like John, I always find in you the loving person who truly was "the one." Amen.

Friday, October 20

Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner. Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher, speak," he said. "A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for fifty. When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled." Jesus said, "You have judged correctly." Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other table guests began to say among themselves,

“Who is this person that even forgives sins?” Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Observation

Jesus was famous (or, in some circles, infamous) for forgiving. In this story, his Pharisee host Simon saw only the woman’s shameful past, but Jesus said her “many sins” were forgiven. It’s too often true that self-righteous people, like Simon, want people who have done wrong to live in shame and disgrace for the rest of their life. But not Jesus—he saw Simon (who felt no need for forgiveness) as in much greater spiritual danger than the woman grateful for forgiveness.

Application

Freedom from her guilt before God also gave this woman freedom from feelings of shame before others. If not, she would not have been able to act out her gratitude in such a bold act of love to Jesus. Have you ever had a time when you felt “ashamed to show your face”? How can opening your life to God’s love and forgiveness set you free to live more fully?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you had something important to say to Simon. Maybe today you have something to say to me, too. Give me a listening heart, to hear my need for your forgiveness and the loving reality that you give me that gift. Amen.

Saturday, October 21

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42; Galatians 3:26-29

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me.” The Lord answered, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won’t be taken away from her.”

You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

Observation

Jesus treated women as people! Most rabbis thought women couldn’t learn and wouldn’t teach them. Dorothy Sayers, the first woman to earn an Oxford degree (with highest honors), was a devoted Christ follower. She called Jesus “a prophet and teacher who never nagged at [women]; never flattered or coaxed or patronized...who rebuked without [demeaning] and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them...who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend.” In Galatians, Paul followed Jesus. He boldly wrote that, in Christ, old divisions between male and female no longer applied.

Application

Jesus teaching Mary may seem normal to us. In his day, it was most unusual. It was not an isolated incident, either (Luke 8:1-3, Matthew 27:55-56, and women as the first resurrection

witnesses, as in Luke 24:10-11). How does Jesus' model speak to attitudes and actions that still undervalue (and often underpay) women in homes, workplaces, or other settings?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we're enlightened, but we still too often hear jokes about women's driving or emotionalism. Guide me to discern and live beyond any gender labels that my heart still harbors. Amen.