

## **“A Daughter’s Inheritance”**

*All in the Family, part #5*

### *Numbers 27:1-11*

This past week my family got to enjoy the beauty of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. One of the locations we visited was the National Pictured Rocks Lakeshore along Lake Superior – a 50 mile stretch of impressive cliffs and sand dunes, with many hiking trails and waterfalls. One of the sights we took in was Chapel Rock, an impressive tower with a giant white pine tree sitting atop of a stone formation that has been gradually eroded over the years by the waves from the shore. Near the viewing platform was this sign, [which you can see here](#). It reads, “By order of the Lakeshore Superintendent Chapel Rock and the surrounding area are closed to preserve this magnificent geological icon for the enjoyment of future generations.” The National Park Agency found it worthwhile to protect this feature for future generations to enjoy. In fact, almost every place that we journeyed to had some form of protection for the sake of future generations: Tahquamenon Falls States Park, the North Country Trail, Hiawatha National Forest – many of these places are gifts by private individuals, who saw the need to protect them for the sake of people who would come after them.

Have you ever thought about inheritances and legacies before? This week, I was pretty sure I had given my family a legacy. My children, especially my daughter, were constantly asking me if we could have some ice cream. I think that’s a good legacy to leave your children – the love of ice cream.

Although I know that I will probably receive some sort of financial inheritance from my parents when they pass away, I do not think about that often. But I do think about the legacy that my parents have given me in terms of

confidence, faith, education, ethics, and character. Those things, like the State and National Parks, are much more valuable.

How often do you think about the generations that will come after you? What do you think about when you encounter younger people? When we see children, we think, "Oh, how cute. They are so funny! They say such cute things." Or, perhaps, we see them as a burden. They can be a literal, physical burden – I carried my son Jonah after he bruised his foot this week. We can even see children as a financial burden. It costs over \$200,000 to raise a child until they are 18.

Some of us are intimidated by youth. They know so much more about computers and tablets and smart phones than we do. Youth culture can even be frightening to some.

Our view of younger generations is impacted by what they mean to us. The Millennials – those who are about 20-30 years old – will have a huge impact on our future, in terms of taxes and social security, political, social and economic trends. Often times we think of younger generations as resources that exist for us, instead of the other way around. We want them to learn our traditions, our expectations, our way of doing things. Sometimes that might be good, and then again, sometimes it is not.

I submit to you today that there is a partnership that needs to happen between younger and older generations, no matter which one you identify most with. The current generation's duty is to PREPARE - prepare an inheritance for the next generation. That is what the lakeshore superintendent was thinking when he placed that sign by the Chapel Rock. And the next generation's duty is to

PROTECT - protect that inheritance that the former generations worked hard to secure.

We see these two duties play out in the case of Moses and Zelophehad's daughters. It is an interesting, but slightly obscure story where the traditions and customs of two different generations collide.

First of all, let me give you a little background, because I am willing to bet that most people haven't read much of the book of Numbers. In fact, in 14 years of ministry, this is only my second sermon using it! The Hebrew title of the book is "in the desert." That's a pretty accurate description. Numbers describes 38 years of the Israelites wandering between Egypt and the Promised Land. The Lord had redeemed Israel from slavery and made them his covenant people. The book of Numbers describes the goals God had for Israel to "effect the redemption of creation." (HBC) But Numbers also describes the constant rebellion and murmuring of the people against God. The people who were led out of Egypt did not uphold their covenant with God and did not enter the Promised Land. Instead, their children did.

When you read the book of Numbers, it can display an angry God. God's wrath comes upon several groups, including Korah, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The thing is, God tries to correct and discipline Israel. But a sense of stubbornness permeates the whole people. In the end, one generation is supplanted by new one.

Numbers has some great stories in it, though. For instance, there is the story of Joshua and Caleb, models of faith in the presence of adversity. God provides multiple times for the people. Moses brings water from the rock. He

lifts up a snake is lifted up in the desert to heal the people. And of course, there is the funny story of Balaam and the talking donkey.

The over-arching theme in Numbers is that God displays righteous anger against an errant people, but God still is gracious. God still intends to redeem. Numbers 14:18 really sums up the whole book. “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...”

In the midst of this cultural turmoil and transition that five women approach Moses looking for justice. This passage is unfamiliar to most. It reminds me of a friend who liked to ask, “How many sisters did Noah have?” The answer: She had four. Obviously, this is not the same Noah of the flood in Genesis. The main concern of Noah and her sisters was over the inheritance of land. Tribal land was a big deal in Israel. It was always passed down to the eldest son. The stories in Genesis of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau illustrate this.

But this is not a simple story about land acquisition. The issue was about belonging. If your family name was on the lists in Numbers, that proved that you belonged in God’s covenant community. Unless you could trace your name to these lists, you were not part of God’s people in this time.

These women belonged because their father was part of Manasseh’s tribe, but there was another issue complicating the matter. In biblical times, women could not own land. So their father’s family land was at risk of disappearing. These women were pretty bold to confront a patriarchal society that had basically not allowed women to have possessions. They did their homework; they knew their history. They even anticipated an objection and answered it. Their father was not part of a previous rebellion. His only fault was the original sin of all the

Israelites – they refused to trust God to lead them into the Promised Land. These women, however, were part of the new generation that had not rebelled. As they brought their case to Moses, they appealed to the common thinking of their people – the land was not for them, but for their dad’s legacy.

Moses knew this was a huge deal, so he took this request to God for a decision, rather than making it himself. Why was this so big? It was a matter of justice versus custom. If Moses had said, “No, we aren’t breaking our custom; you cannot have the land,” justice would not have been served, and a dead man’s family would have been dishonored.

But Moses did not say no. God, in fact, did not say no. God said, “This is the right thing to do. Let the women keep their father’s land.” Moses changed the laws concerning inheritances. The women were rewarded for their boldness, and for doing things the right way – not by complaining, but by trusting the leadership to do justice.

This was the first major dilemma faced by the new generation of Israelites, and the way it was resolved gave the rest of them hope. Maybe this new generation would not complain like their ancestors did. Maybe they would obediently follow God.

Sometimes our children do something new that could not be done in our generation, and it ends up being very good, even better than what we had done. Numbers, and this story in particular, show us that the older generation can make new paths for the new generation to follow. They can transfer leadership. They can make a good decision that will have long-term effects. God told Moses, “From now on, this is how inheritances will be done.” The former generation left an impact and precedent for justice.

What does this mean for us? First of all, customs should give way to fairness and justice. It was not wrong for Israel to say that the men would receive the inheritance. It was simply how their culture operated. But it turned out, that custom could not address every situation. These women addressed the injustice in the custom, and the leadership changed. Moses prepared the inheritance for Zelophehad's family.

But it was up to the daughters to protect that inheritance. Later on, in the book of Joshua, these women agreed to marry within their own tribe, so that the inheritance they had worked so hard to receive would remain in their family after they married. Noah and her sisters passed on this inheritance to the generation after them.

To reiterate: the current generation's duty is to prepare an inheritance for the next generation. The next generation's duty is to protect that inheritance.

The other thing to realize from this story is that people are more important than traditions. There are many traditions that we hold dear to our hearts, especially in the church. They are not inherently good or bad, they just are. But what is needed from this generation is an understanding of how those traditions will impact those who come after us. It might be something as simple and yet personal as musical tastes. That is why I believe it is very healthy for us to have multiple services in this church with different style of music and liturgy.

But preserving an inheritance of faith goes beyond Sunday morning. If we are to reach the next generation, we have to empathize with them. It might mean finding ways to interact with families that cannot or will not attend on Sunday morning. It might be putting rocking chairs, coffee urns, and children's play areas in our sanctuaries. It might mean looking at new ways of building

churches, new types of architecture, new computers and sounds systems, new websites and social networks that reach new people. It might mean building a new building in a different location. It might mean starting new small groups, new mission projects, new community outreach events. I really don't know, but I know that it is healthy for an organization, be it a church or a coffee shop, to adapt to changing culture.

But I can tell you one thing: the purpose of the church will never change. We are here to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and make disciples who change the world. That message is the same whether you are singing Amazing Grace, Handel's Messiah, a Gregorian chant, or a Christian hip-hop or alternative song. The message will be the same whether you are praying with hands folded or unfolded, or lifting them up to the ceiling, with or without a coffee mug in your hand. The focus of our worship is God who loves the down and out, the lost and last, the daughters and sons without a way to protect their families, the rich and poor, the college graduate and the high school dropout. When our focus is on worshipping God, and not our traditions, God will show us what to do.

I challenge you to act and lead in such a way that blesses the next generation. Protect something beautiful that future generations can enjoy. Honor and encourage the boldness of those younger than you. Help them claim what God has for them by your love and your words, so that God will get the glory, and not us.

Memory verse

Isaiah 1:17 - "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

Reflection questions

1. If you could change one thing about the church, what would it be?
2. Who do you know that is younger than you? What are some of their needs? How could the church provide for them?
3. Think of a custom in the church that has changed over the past generation. How has that impacted you and future generations?
4. How is the story of the grace of God timeless?