



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Family Matters*

*Part 4*

*Holy Chutzpah!*

Numbers 27.1–11

By Pastor Pam Reist

Message from September 30, 2018

777 South Mount Joy Street  
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022  
717-367-1000  
[www.ETOWNCOB.ORG](http://www.ETOWNCOB.ORG)



When we decided to do a series of sermons on “Family Matters,” I chose to preach about siblings. Many of us have siblings, or people in our lives who are like siblings.

And I thought about some of the usual suspects in scripture, like Cain and Abel, sibling rivals even to death. Then, I remembered a story, an obscure scripture from the Hebrew Bible that I had read a long time ago but never forgot. It’s about siblings. It’s almost hidden in the 27th chapter of Numbers and is very briefly referred to only in a few other places in scripture. Hear this story about five daughters, five remarkable women, five sisters.

### **THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD**

*The daughters of Zelophehad showed up. Their father was the son of He-pher son of Gilead son of Makir son of Manasseh, belonging to the clans of Manasseh son of Joseph. The daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.*

*They came to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. They stood before Moses and Eleazar the priest and before the leaders and the congregation and said, “Our father died in the wilderness. He wasn’t part of Korah’s rebel anti-God gang. He died for his own sins. And he left no sons. But why should our father’s name die out from his clan just because he had no sons? So give us an inheritance among our father’s relatives.”*

*Moses brought their case to God.*

*God ruled: “Zelophehad’s daughters are right. Give them land as an inheritance among their father’s relatives. Give them their father’s inheritance.”*

*“Then tell the People of Israel, If a man dies and leaves no son, give his inheritance to his daughter. If he has no daughter, give it to his brothers. If he has no brothers, give it to his father’s brothers. If his father had no brothers, give it to the nearest relative so that the inheritance stays in the family. This is the standard procedure for the People of Israel, as commanded by God through Moses.”*

The story opens by naming the five daughters. Their father had just died while wandering with the Israelites in the wilderness.

2 This was a critical time for Israel. A new census had been taken, as the people prepared to enter the Promised Land. The new land would be distributed according to that census taken. The daughters of Zelophahad had been numbered among all those in the tribes who were 20 years of age. But they knew...according to the existing Torah law, only sons could inherit their father's land. And Zelophehad didn't have any sons. He had five daughters. Recognizing the law, and feeling frustrated at not receiving an inheritance from their father, they went before Moses, Eleazer the Priest, the chieftains and the entire community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to challenge the system that was clearly discriminatory.

We can only imagine the scene—the Israelite camp was formed of tribes, each in their place with the Tabernacle in the middle. And in the center of it all stand the main authority figures, all of them men. Imposing as this may have been, the sisters enter. They left their tents, without being summoned, to go the place where only the high-ranking men congregate—to the place of holiness and power and where women did not have a place.

Five vulnerable women, still grieving their father's death, approach the entire community...in public...and they challenge the law. Jewish sages are said to have paid them one of the highest compliments in Judaism: they are called wise and pious. One Jewish commentary I read said it best: these women had holy chutzpah! That Yiddish word, implying shameless audacity, impudence, maybe a bit cheeky! At a time when women in Israel were considered property, who lived like prisoners in polygamous households, the daughters of Zelophehad were something out-of-the-ordinary.

It makes us wonder why these daughters were different—we just don't know much about them. As little girls, they must have spent lots of time outside their tent. We can imagine that they were curious, resourceful children. Somewhere they learned that they did not have to be confined, or defined, by the limitations of their culture. Maybe Zelophehad told them stories about the exodus from Egypt while he tucked them into bed. We don't know anything about their mother, but we wonder

if she, along with Zelophehad offered these girls overwhelming validation and encouragement, nurturing in them a sense of empowerment and personal destiny and worth. They knew their value as God's beloved. It is certain that sometimes they, too, argued and fought like siblings do, as they worked through their differences, polishing each other.

As the girls blossomed into women, it is clear that their confidence grew with them. They must have talked about the problems around them, where many suffered in that patri-lineal society, especially women and children and outcasts.

These sisters banded together, granting each other strength and solidarity. They weren't a hierarchy. We don't even know which one is the oldest—each time their names are mentioned in scripture, it's in a different order.

They were very intentional about the way in which they presented their request. In a non-threatening, intelligent manner, they used language that reflected both a deep respect for the law as well as a strategy for a better way forward. Perhaps we can't fully understand how bold and audacious their request was. Women in Israel did not ask for rights. Yet the daughters of Zelophehad risked their reputations by asking for something revolutionary.

In reality, the daughters of Zelophahad had filed one of the earliest reported lawsuits on record. Jurists still turn to it today and have declared it the oldest decided case "that is still cited as an authority." In the *American Bar Association Journal*, there appears an article in which this decision for the daughters of Zelophehad is quoted. It is described as an "early declaratory judgment in which the property rights of women...are clearly set forth."

The decision handed down in the time of Moses was a great victory for these women. At last a woman had rights, because these five had declared theirs and they had the courage, the holy chutzpah, to make themselves heard. Their request made a difference for them and generations to come. Now women were numbered and counted as human beings. Now they had

4 stood up for their rights and in so doing, extended justice beyond their own generation.

Our work is not done. We have much to learn from Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirza. Like these five women, we, as followers of Jesus, have the capacity, the ability and the responsibility to stand up for what is right. We are called by our tradition to take action. The daughters of Zelophehad offer us an important message: holy chutzpah can change the world.

Whether it's addressing gender-based violence that continues around the globe. Or food security for all of God's people. Or providing childcare for victims of disasters. Perhaps it's making our voices heard by our leaders on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters. Or challenging the proposed discriminatory practices of a church district. When we come to understand our own capacity and responsibility to change the world, to shape history, to make this world the kind of place we wish to leave to our own children, and our own grandchildren, we honor those ancient daughters: Noah, Mahlah, Milcah, Tirza and Hoglah. Their story is our call to engage in holy chutzpa together.

This morning we are offering anointing to anyone who wishes to come forward. Perhaps you are seeking the chutzpa to make a difference. Maybe you have a heavy week ahead with life-impacting decisions. Maybe you are feeling the weight of a potentially contentious district conference. Perhaps health issues are a reality—for you or someone you love. Perhaps your relationship with a sibling is broken or damaged. Or maybe a sibling has estranged him- or herself and you are seeking peace, when it seems that there is nothing else to be done. Or maybe you yearn for a deeper sense of God's peace in what can at times be a chaotic world. Whatever your reason, you are invited for anointing. We will be here as you come forward. If you are unable to come for mobility issues, please signal us and we will come to you.

*May God's tender love surround you;  
may the Spirit's boldness set you free.*



