

Biblical Women: Claiming Justice for Ourselves and Our Children

Numbers 27:1–8, Matthew 15:21–28 and Luke 18:1–8

Introduction

Today we'll explore three texts. Some are likely quite familiar; others may be new. All tell powerful stories about women claiming justice for themselves and their children in the face of broken and frustrating systems.

- The Daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1–8)
- The Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21–28)
- The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8)

Our text from Numbers 27:1–8 tells the story of Zelophehad's five daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. Zelophehad dies without sons, but his daughters are unable to inherit their father's property – until they petition Moses to make change!

The Canaanite woman likewise sticks up for herself and her child, crossing lines of social hierarchy and polite convention to seek healing for her daughter who is being tormented by a demon (Matthew 15:21–28).

Such persistence is lauded as a key virtue in Jesus' teaching. Jesus gives us the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). The widow is repeatedly denied justice in court, yet she continues to come back again and again. She persists in the face of injustice until the judge, worn down by her constant asking, relents and grants her the justice she deserves.

A far cry from the silent and submissive stereotype, these biblical women live in unfair societies and situations and yet continually speak up and push back. They persevere in seeking justice for themselves and their children, and their faithful work is rewarded.

In October 2015, Shakara, a 16-year-old Black student at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina was asked to leave the classroom as punishment for using her phone. She refused. School Resource Officer Ben Fields confronted her and told her to leave. Officer Fields then grabbed her by the neck, flipping her desk to the ground and dragging her across the classroom. Niya Kenny, Shakara's classmate, spoke up and recorded the assault. Both Shakara and Niya Kenny were arrested.

Niya Kenny offered these reflections:

"I felt like I had to stand up for my sister. It could have been any one of us. It could have been me. When they arrested us and took us out of the classroom, I felt like God had forgotten about us. I was embarrassed and scared. They detained me for eight hours."

"That day everything was going down, I felt like I did the wrong thing. I kept telling myself, 'You should have just sat down and just been quiet.' But speaking up and being arrested and everything, it just brought so much awareness to the school-to-prison pipeline. Honestly, if I could go back, I wouldn't change anything. It was like the universe brought me there that day."

Excerpted from the Advancement Project's *We Came to Learn* (September 2018)



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Opening Prayer

Dear God, we give thanks for the ways that you have worked through faithful, strong and persistent women to make our world more just and more loving. It is not always easy to speak up, push back or act out. For many of us, it can feel uncomfortable, frightening or frustrating. We may face ridicule, rejection or worse. And yet we know that as we step out in faith, you carry us forward. Even if our voices may shake, we pray that you fill our mouths with your words, so that we, too, may seek righteousness and pursue justice for our children and ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Bible Study

Part 1: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah (Daughters of Zelophehad)

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher 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..." (Numbers 27:1-8)

Discuss

Our passage begins with a listing of lineage that follows the familiar Numbers pattern of "son of...son of... son of..." However, it ends in listing Zelophehad's five *daughters*: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. Think back on your own family tree. Which was more important in your family: the lineage of fathers/sons, mothers/daughters or both? How did you know?

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah go to the tent of meeting, a holy space set aside to commune with God, in order to present their case. They approach key leaders including Moses, Eleazar the priest and the full community. In a few words, how would

you imagine they felt approaching the tent of meeting? How would you feel in their circumstances?

The women use Moses as an intermediary to bring “their case before the Lord.” Why do you think the women weren’t able to approach the Lord directly, given the cultural, social and religious context? What are the pros and cons of this intermediary approach? Have you ever had experiences where you had to use an intermediary in your pursuit of justice? What happened and why?

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah win their case! The Lord tells Moses, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying” and instructs Moses to let them take their rightful inheritance. But the Lord also goes one step further, generalizing beyond the specifics of this case to make a new rule for the Israelites: if a man has no sons, his daughter(s) will inherit his property. In other words, this is a precedent-setting case. Can you think of other examples from recent history where people fighting for their own rights set a broader judicial precedent for others? What comes to mind?

This is a significant victory for these women. But it didn’t solve the problems of all women or change all of Israelite society; women and children were still very vulnerable after the death of the father/husband. What groups can you imagine whose concerns may have been left out of this ruling? What work was left unfinished?

Part 2: The Canaanite Woman

Jesus left the place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21–28)

Discuss

In this passage, a non-Jewish woman approaches Jesus with a shouted request for mercy. Her daughter is being tormented by a demon, and she believes that Jesus, whom she calls “Lord, Son of David,” can help her. Jesus ignores her. She keeps shouting. Jesus’ disciples try to get Jesus to send her away. Can you imagine the start of this scene? How would it have appeared to a bystander watching this interaction? Describe it or act it out.

Jesus denies her repeatedly. First, he does not answer. Then he says he was sent only to some people — and she is not one of them. Finally, he stoops to a provocative insult. Yet she continues to seek his help. What motivates her to be so persistent? How would it feel to be the Canaanite woman in this interaction?

The words of the Bible are powerful. But unfortunately, there's much that gets lost in storytelling when they become only words on a page. Among other elements, we lose all that might be conveyed in one's tone of voice. Consider this line: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table." Speak those words aloud. Try saying the words with different emphases and attitudes, as if you were an actor practicing. Are the words sad or angry? Is it a no-nonsense argument or a gentle suggestion? Persuasive or defiant? Which word is stressed? Dogs, crumbs, Lord — or something else? How does inflection and tone of voice impact the different interpretations we might make about what the Canaanite woman sought to convey in the line?

Ultimately, despite his initial resistance, Jesus agrees to her request and heals her daughter, giving her what she needed and asked for all along. This is a very rare passage in Scripture for the way it presents Jesus in an unflattering light, acting out but ultimately relenting after a losing argument. This Canaanite woman did something powerful and unusual. What do you think happened here? Why do you think Jesus relents? Does she change his mind? Did he get tired and give up? Was he just testing her all along? Or is it something totally different?

Part 3: The Persistent Widow

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming,'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1–8)

Discuss

In Jesus' parable, the legal system (in the person of this judge) is broken, showing neither a reverence for God nor a concern for others. Where and when have you encountered a similarly broken justice system?

In Jesus' day, widows were economically, culturally and socially vulnerable. Who are the "widows" of our day? How do they fare in our justice system? Are we better? Worse? The same?

The widow does not get justice right away. Rather, she must return to the judge again and again. Imagine you're the widow. What gives you the strength to persevere in the face of failure?

The judge "neither feared God nor had respect for people" and yet he finally relented to the widow's cause. How does the widow finally get the justice that she deserves? What lesson does this teach us about organizing in contexts where decision makers are not sensitive to the moral call to justice?

What wisdom might this parable bring to our current efforts to address the school-to-prison pipeline?

Making Connections

We explored a few examples of biblical women who stood up and spoke out for themselves and their children despite intimidation, custom, frustration, ridicule and danger. These are only a few examples. Take a moment to share what other examples of outspoken women come to mind for you.

- What other biblical women?
- What other women in history and/or in the present day?
- What other women (family, friends, role models, etc.) you have known in your own life?

Creative Thinking

Imagine that you're the persistent widow, but fast forward a couple millennia. You are trying to get justice from a justice system that disrespects people and ignores God. What do you do? Act out a short skit to illustrate your strategy.

Reflecting Back

Do these Scriptures reinforce or challenge our stereotypes about biblical women's roles? What, if anything, surprised you about these texts?

Life Application/Mission Focus

What organizations in your community empower women to act out and speak up for justice for themselves and their children? How can you connect more deeply with these

organizations to strengthen your work? Consider inviting a representative from one or two such groups to speak and share what, how and why they do what they do.

Inviting and Including Others

Do you know any women searching for opportunities to grow more confident in their own voice for justice? Do you know any women who already exemplify this biblical virtue? Consider inviting both groups of women to join you for this session. It is a wonderful opportunity to teach and learn together.