

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**June 18, 2023**  
**Genesis 1:26–27, Numbers 27:1–11**

Let us pray for an awareness of an inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Everlasting God, whose tenacious love holds us: make our hearts the house of your truth and make our minds the realm of your wisdom so that our fellowship will become your dwelling place, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Genesis 1:26–27**

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created humans in God’s image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them.

**Numbers 27:1–11**

<sup>27</sup> Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, of the clans of Manasseh, son of Joseph. The names of his daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. <sup>2</sup> They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, saying, <sup>3</sup> “Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the congregation of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the

congregation of Korah but died for his own sin, and he had no sons. <sup>4</sup> 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."

<sup>5</sup> Moses brought their case before the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>7</sup> "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. <sup>8</sup> You shall also speak to the Israelites, saying: If a man dies and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. <sup>9</sup> If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. <sup>10</sup> If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. <sup>11</sup> 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."

There are some things that Presbyterians are known for. Committees of course are at the top of the list. In all seriousness, our form of government, how we order ourselves is, I think, one of the beautiful, albeit nerdy, things about Presbyterianism. We are structured so that voices can be heard and that there is no preference given to clergy or laity. The congregation is the smallest organized gathering of Presbyterians. Each congregation is led by a Session, or board, that is comprised of Elders that have been nominated and elected by the congregation. The clergy sit on and moderate Session, but they are always outnumbered by the Elders. Every congregation is a part of a group of congregations for a region, this is known as a Presbytery. We belong to the Presbytery of the Twin Cities. Each Presbytery is part of an even bigger organization, the Synod. Which usually encompasses

several Presbyteries set across a number of states. We belong to the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. And then above Synods is the General Assembly, which is the highest governing body of the Presbyterian Church USA. The voting members of the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly are as equally comprised as possible of Teaching Elders (or clergy) and Ruling Elders (laity).

In all of these meetings where we decide what it looks like to be church, where we order our life and worship together, we primarily use Robert's Rules of Order, a set of rules and procedures to make sure things are done "decently and in order." You see, that's the other thing someone might say when you ask them what makes Presbyterians Presbyterian. You might hear the phrase "decently and in order." Although that phrase is not in our Book of Order, that document that tells us how to go about our worship in business, it is in scripture, in 1 Corinthians. Paul is encouraging the church in Corinth but wants to make sure they aren't too willy nilly so he reminds them to conduct themselves decently and in order.

Order was also important to the ancient Israelites. After they had left Egypt and as they wandered in the desert, they were organized by their tribes. Moses would moderate any disputes. That job became too large just for one person, so on the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses appointed others (men) of good judgment to help settle disputes among the people. And we get this remarkable story from Numbers about the daughters of Zelophehad.

In that time, when a man died, the sons would inherit the property. But Zelophehad had no sons, he had five daughters: Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Zelophehad dies. The daughters, going against the laws and customs of the time, one might say being out of order even, go before Moses, Eleazar, and all the male elders and demand that they

should receive the inheritance. They question the practice and indicate that it is not right that their father's name be erased and that they get no portion of their inheritance just because they are not men.

Moses does a remarkable thing. He does not say "no," he does not cite some law rather he decides to take the case to God. And what Moses hears back is equally remarkable. God says the daughters are correct. They are right, they should get inheritance. And further, a new law should be made so that if there is a man who dies who has no sons and has daughters, the daughters should be the ones to get the inheritance.

These women were bold and brave. But more than that, as author Cole Arthur Riley says, "Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah – these were women who knew their worth. And they stood in power in front of the powerful because of it. They didn't sulk around waiting or someone to recognize their worth, they walked in it." She goes on to write, "Moving in your liberation does not, of course, mean people will always recognize it. God told Moses, 'You better give those women their inheritance.' And it was given. But we do not know what would've happened in the story without the voice of God. Still, the very act of the daughters of Zelophehad believing in their dignity and demanding their inheritance conferred freedom on them."<sup>i</sup>

What the daughters knew, deep in their bones, was that they had value and worth. Perhaps it came from hearing the story of Genesis and hearing that even they were made in the image of God and that that was a good thing. Maybe their father taught and told them stories as they went to bed each night of how God commanded God's people to care for the widow and the orphan. Perhaps they remembered the escape from bondage and the promise of God to be with them always. Maybe they heard stories of the brave women of faith that came before them. How Miriam rescued her brother Moses's life. Or maybe the stories about the

midwives Shiprah and Puah who defied Pharaoh. Whatever it was, they understood justice, they understood their worth, and they knew the system they faced was not right, was not just, and they decided to do something about it.

This highlights another important attribute or distinctive of the Presbyterian Church, that is, that we are a denomination born from protest. It is part of our DNA. John Calvin, the forefather of the Presbyterian Church, and other Reformers were upset with theological interpretation and practice of the Catholic Church. Some worked to reform it from within, while others believed the reforms would not go far enough.

The underlying theology and conviction behind this protest is that God alone is Lord of the conscience. This phrase comes from the Westminster Confession which was written and adopted by Presbyterians in Scotland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The fuller phrase and meaning in the confession, what these Presbyterians were wrestling with, points to the desire to have order on the one hand and knowing that sometimes our rules and laws are unjust on the other. We look to the word of God, and we discern in our conscience what is the way forward. This foundational belief can also be found in Corinthians as Paul struggled to know how best to live in a multi-cultural, pluralistic, and sometimes divisive world. Sometimes, in order to live fully into God's grace, mercy, love, and justice, to love God and neighbor, it might mean some rules shouldn't be followed. Some laws should be overturned. In such a diverse society, how do we live and make moral decisions? How do we create a more just and liberated world?

The heart of our faith, as much as some would like to believe it to be so, is not some list of rules. The heart of our faith is grace and relationship. In our long history, Presbyterians have fought against having a faith that adheres to particular beliefs in order to belong, because we recognize the life of faith is more complicated than any set of static, unchanging rules. The life of faith is a dynamic and ever-changing relationship with God and with others; with all people who are also made in the image of God; with people who have worth and beauty and dignity.

This month is Pride month which is meant to celebrate and acknowledge LGBTQ history, rights and love. The observance of pride was born out of protest and resistance. When LGBTQ people rose up in 1969 in the Stonewall riots after years of attacks and oppression. As a “More Light Church” in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Oak Grove strives to be inclusive by being a community that is open and welcome to all people – without regard for nationality, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or socio-economic status. We are committed to the full participation of LGBTQ people in the life, ministry, leadership, and witness of our church, seeing all people as the beloved children of God that they are who are made in the image of God.

While nearly 54 years have passed since the Stonewall riots, the LGBTQ+ community finds itself still under attack and targets of hateful rhetoric, false narratives, and harmful policies and legislation. Trans people, and youth especially, bear the brunt of this assault.

Much of the rhetoric and reasoning behind these attacks and harmful legislation is grounded in the name of religious liberty and Christian values. But these types of attack and legislation are not in line with our Christian values, the teachings of Jesus Christ, they are not just, and they do not represent an understanding of the worth of all people. These pieces of legislation are based on fear, hate, and false narratives.

As Christians we are called to bear witness to the teachings of the gospel which are based in love, mercy, and justice. And in this month of Pride, we harken back to Pride's spirit of protest and resistance: to resist hate, to resist fear, and resist the assertion that people who are Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and queer, are not worthy of God's love.

As the daughters of Zelophehad demonstrate, sometimes rules need to be challenged. Sometimes it requires a person, or persons, to stand up and demand change and to question how the world operates in an unjust manner. Jesus did the same. He was constantly getting in trouble for eating with the undesirable people, talking to the wrong people, breaking rules about Sabbath. Jesus cared more about people than rules. Jesus wants systems of oppression and injustice to be dismantled and erased.

And it is important to note that we are talking about systems and structures, not individuals. As one popular meme on social media states, "the target is not Christians, it's Christian Nationalism. The target is not men, it's patriarchy. The target is not white people, it's white supremacy. The target is not heterosexuals, it's homophobia. Don't take it personally; join the work and dismantle the oppressive systems." Our call as people of faith is to join the work of creating a more liberative world. And our liberation, paraphrasing activist Lilla Watson, is bound together.

Again, Cole Arthur Riley says this, "In pursuit of liberation, we do not need to pine after the power of our oppressor, we have to long for our own power to be fully realized. We don't want to steal and dominate someone else's land; we want agency in reclaiming and establishing our own spaces. We don't want to silence the voices of our enemies; we want to be able to safely center our own voices and be believed. Liberation recognizes that I won't get free by anyone else's bondage."<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus said that he came to the world to give life and give it abundantly. His ministry and life were always and ever about expanding the boundaries of God's unending, unrelenting, liberating love. We are called, as people of faith, to join in that task. Amen.

I invite, those who are able, to stand and join in our affirmation of faith.

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<sup>i</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, "This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us," page 190-191.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, page 194