

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 2nd, 2018
Mark Aquino
Lift Every Voice

A minute ago you heard the first verse of the hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. Some of you may have heard this song before, but if you haven’t, I offer some background on this heartfelt and symbolic song: In 1899, a young poet and school principal named James Weldon Johnson was asked to address a crowd in Jacksonville, Fla., for the coming anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. Just two decades had passed since the Reconstruction era, and racism still ran strong in the segregated South.

Instead of preparing an ordinary speech, Johnson decided to write a poem. He began with a simple but powerful line, a call to action: “Lift every voice and sing.” He paced back and forth on his front porch, agonizing over the lines of the poem. After finishing each stanza, he handed over the lyrics to his classically trained brother, John Rosamond Johnson, who put the words to music. As he wrote the words, evoking the struggle and resilience of his ancestors, he began to weep. “I could not keep back the tears, and made no effort to do so,” Johnson recounted.

The following year, a chorus of 500 schoolchildren performed the song at the Lincoln celebration. The song quickly took off, becoming a rallying cry for black communities in the South, or as one observer noted at the time, “a collective prayer.” Within 20 years of its original performance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People adopted “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” as its official song. For generations to come, it would be known widely as the “black national anthem.”

This beautiful poem put to melody has also been unofficially adopted as a song that lifts the voices of all those who are discriminated against and misunderstood. Near the end of the first verse come the words “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us. Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us”. These are such true words and powerful statements that invoke the essence of what this song stands for and why it still makes such a profound impact on society today.

This hymn was also the theme song at the Montreat Youth Conference in Montreat, North Carolina this past summer where 800 Presbyterian high school students gathered to nurture and discuss their faith in today’s chaotic and problematic world. The youth spent the week looking at ways to lift their own voice and the voice of others to be respected and heard. Throughout the week we discussed four types of voices: God’s voice, silenced voices, difficult voices and our own voices.

Now, while I was at Montreat, I met some amazing women who have made a huge impact on my life. You were just introduced to these five brave and remarkable women in today’s scripture reading. In case you don’t remember, their names are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Some of you may have already met them previously in reading or hearing this story

before today but I'm guessing many of you are meeting them for the first time today. In any case, their amazing story unfolds in the Book of Numbers in just 11 short verses.

The text opens by mentioning the five daughters by name – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Their father has just died and the Israelites were about to enter the land of milk and honey (the promise land) and Moses was in the process of dividing up this land for each tribe. According to the existing laws, only sons could inherit their father's land. But Zelophehad didn't have any sons; he only had the 5 daughters. The daughters, recognizing the law, and feeling dissatisfied with receiving no inheritance from their father, go before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the entire community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to challenge the system that was clearly set to exclude women from ever receiving an inheritance. Once Moses and the leaders and the congregation were listening, they made their plea. I am sure they had butterflies in their stomachs and a tinge of fear, but these women were very wise.

The daughters made it clear, there were no sons to inherit the father's land and asked if they could have their father's inheritance. Moses listened and had compassion on these women. Moses being a man of faith and also a servant of God knew their voices should not be ignored but was conflicted to uphold tradition and law. He did something we can all do, he prayed to God for guidance. The Lord declared: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying" The creator of the universe heard the plea of these women and declared them as right and gave this rule for all of Israel: "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter."

You heard correctly, five vulnerable women, whose father has recently died...approach the entire community, in public, and challenge the law! But they do not just go around complaining to whomever would listen, they go straight to the top and get the law changed!! This was completely against the grain and definitely rocking the boat. Women going before the leadership to question the law of inheritance – just did not happen. The daughters banded together, granting each other strength and solidarity. It took great faith for the five daughters to approach Moses before all of the congregation of Israel! Like these five women, we have the capacity and ability, and perhaps even responsibility, to stand up for what we believe is right. The daughters of Zelophehad stood up for their personal rights and beliefs and in so doing, extended justice beyond their own generation. Indeed they contributed to make their society, their world and our world a more just place to live.

The daughters of Zelophehad offer us an important message: Our voices can change the world!! For me, this story sums up true leadership and true personal responsibility. It serves as a model for the way in which each one of us can contribute to making the world a more just and loving place to live. Our job is not always to complete the work, but we must never shy away from playing a part. Numerous times when I've asked why we do something a certain way, I've heard the same response of "well we've always done it that way". Or "well it's sort of tradition so why change it?" or the familiar "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". And to everyone except these five daughters, the law was not broken and did not need to be changed because that's how

they've always done it. It's tradition!! Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah remind us that tradition is important, but justice is more important. What isn't directly spoken in their story is that until they advocated for themselves, they were discriminated against and left out of privileges that others were receiving. It took someone speaking up and pointing out that something was an injustice for it to be changed. This is still true today. We are still learning how to include people who are left out, how to speak up for the disenfranchised, and how to help others find their voices. We still often fall short.

One topic that brings about a lot of conversation is *privilege* and how it is used or misused. I urge you to watch Michael Kimmel's TED talk titled "Why gender equality is good for everyone — men included". In this insightful presentation, Michael states that "Privilege is invisible to those who have it". It's not enough to just be thankful for what we have, but we need to share and be like the widow who only gave two small coins, giving everything she had in faith that it will make her world a better place to live. Many of us are very privileged. Whether we inherited favorable circumstances or worked to create it we are called and commissioned to use our privileges to not just lift the voices of others but listen and truly hear what they are saying.

This past March, there was a national school walkout planned where students across the country would turn their grief into activism and advocacy against assault weapons and requiring universal background checks on all gun sales and stricter laws against violent individuals owning guns. It was scheduled one month after the 17 students and faculty members lost their lives in the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. While I discussed the walkout with a few other teachers, one teacher started complaining about how the kids are using this as an excuse to skip school and they have no idea what they are doing and how every kid who walks out should be arrested on the spot. It shouldn't come as a surprise that I was getting irritated and as they went on about how hopeless kids are these days, I was getting pretty angry. This teacher said "these kids today are such idiots" I couldn't stay silent any longer and snapped back at them "that is exactly what the youth are saying about us. Society and so many adults marginalize the youth and constantly oppress their voice. We hold the lit candle and never want to share with our youth and wonder why they are hesitant to use their voices".

This teacher looked at me like I had just grown a third eye and asked what I was talking about. I explained that our youth have a voice and have huge hearts and want to help others and make the world a safer and more loving place but are never given the chance. If we have a lit candle and the youth have an unlit candle, it takes mere seconds to light their candle which empowers them to now take action and lifts their voice. Your candle is still lit, you haven't lost anything but you've inspired and emboldened others to be strong leaders in their own way. Needless to say, this teacher and I are not the best of friends but I'm slowly making progress in helping them see the voice in our youth.

So what do we do when there are so many negative voices and so much evil and anger in this world? Presbyterian Minister Fred Rogers of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood said it best in his quote "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."” Helpers like Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in prison because he fought against apartheid in South Africa, and was imprisoned for sabotage. Or Aung San Suu Kyi who spent 15 years under house arrest in Myanmar for advocating for democracy. She was offered freedom if she left the country but refused to abandon her party and stayed. Or Candy Lightner who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in her home on March 7, 1980 after her 13-year-old daughter was killed by a repeat DWI offender. Before MADD, there were little to no legal consequences for driving while intoxicated; her organization transformed American attitudes about drunk driving and successfully fought for stricter laws across the country.

Immigrants, refugees and migrants, females, mental illness, children and youth, LGBTQIA, people of differing religions, people with learning disabilities, incarcerated people and people released from incarceration, people of low socioeconomic status, people of a particular ethnicity or country of origin, people of differing political beliefs and the physically disabled are just some of those who are consistently marginalized and excluded. We must stand up for what we believe is right. We can no longer sit in the shadows and either spend all our time only planning to help or hoping that someone else helps lift their voices. I'm willing to bet that each one of us has been excluded at some point in our lives and we all know how it feels to be left out, discriminated against and unjustly treated. We need to listen and be aware of those voices which are being persecuted. Henry David Thoreau said "It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak and another to hear"

The five daughters of Zelophehad lifted their voice to bring about change that echoes even in today's society. As a result of their faith, they also set the stage to help lift other people's voices for generations to come. Life had dealt them a difficult hand as they had suffered a huge loss without their father's protection. But clearly, this father had raised them to walk with the Lord and to have faith. It reminds us to look for the voices we may have forgotten or overlooked and to refer everything back to God, who both listens to every voice and lifts every voice. Just like the daughters in our text, we have the ability to know what is right, and speak out against what is wrong. Let's make sure that each of us continues to also lift the voices of those who are excluded and to empower others who are often standing by with an unlit candle. When we truly come to understand our own capacity and responsibility to change our world, to shape history, and make this world the kind of place we wish to leave to our own children, we pay tribute to those ancient daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Amen