

## *Daring Questions*

*By Ann Evankovich*

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Christian Community Presbyterian Church  
Bowie, Maryland

I was honored to be asked to speak again this year on Women's Sunday. Thank you so much for the support. I want to especially thank all the men who came today, even though today is what my brother-in-law, who wishes to remain anonymous, calls "Chick Sunday."

One of the differences between me and James preaching is that, rather than time my sermon by looking at my watch, I have to wind up my sermon before these high heels pinch all the blood out of my pinkie toes. "Chick Churches" understand that.

Women's Sunday, celebrated in the Presbyterian Churches for 14 years, is a great opportunity to recognize the gifts that women offer this congregation and the world. By having women serve in so many capacities, and not just one day a year either, we are a living example of Paul's statement to the Galatians that we are all one in Christ. Thank you for inviting me to be part of such an example.

I had to ask my children for permission for the upcoming examples:

My oldest child is halfway through her first year of being a teenager. As she and I are learning how that affects the privileges, responsibilities, and boundaries that go with her increasing maturity, she often precedes her requests to me with, "You're probably going to say not, but..."

Sometimes she's right. Sometimes I surprise her and say yes. Sometimes we can find a compromise that works for both of us.

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Recently I helped my son switch his room and the guest room. The process took several days of organizing, furniture lugging and rearranging. After it was all done and his new space looked like a cool room, my youngest daughter whined, "Mommy, why does Mik get the biggest room?"

She was trying to trap me in preferential treatment. I answered simply, "Because he asked."

Although that was not the answer she had expected, she couldn't argue. It had never occurred to her to ask.

I remember regretting some things I never asked for. I felt just like Lexie when my younger brother got accepted to Pepperdine in Malibu, California. His dorm room overlooked the Pacific Ocean. He could take surfing for a PE credit. I whined like my daughter did to me:

“Why does David get to go to Pepperdine!” I hadn’t realized Pepperdine was even on the table.

My mom answered the same way I had: “He asked.”

Rhia just read to us a passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

*“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”*

Jesus goes on to compare God to a parent who likes to give his child good things. Even though I am a very imperfect parent, I like to give good things to my children. Obviously God is even better at giving good things to us, but often He’s waiting for us to ask.



The problem is that we don’t know what is best for us. Just like children, we ask for things we don’t need. Sometimes God seems to deny our requests. Sometimes, and often to our chagrin, he gives us exactly what we ask for. Sometimes we get blessings we never asked for and maybe aren’t even aware of.

Rhia read us a story from the book of Numbers about five sisters who had the courage to ask for what they wanted: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah. (PP Slide with sister’s names)

There are a lot of women in the Bible, whose stories you know better, who aren’t named. You are probably much more familiar with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, or of the widow who gave her last coin than you are with these 5 sisters. The fact that all five of their names are recorded is historically significant. Their boldness has preserved their names for three thousand years. Even better, their courage to ask a daring question improved the conditions for fair treatment for half of their nation’s population. We should know these women.

Although we don’t know their ages, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah were all unmarried, which likely means they were pretty young. Their story is told near the end of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Most likely, none of them had lived in Egypt, although they were raised on stories about slavery and freedom. We know they never had a brother. Maybe their father wanted a son so badly that he named one of his daughters Noah.

The Israelites had taken a census and were determining how to divvy up the land among the tribes. These five young women had no father, brother, or husband to speak for them. Women did not have property rights in most ancient cultures.

In many parts of the world today, women still have no voice. Here today, we are so accustomed to the combined gifts of women and men that it is easy to forget that we modern Americans are not the norm for humanity. Freedom to use your gifts to serve God, no matter your gender, is still a new freedom, historically speaking, as are property rights, voting rights, marital rights, and medical rights. As human beings, we still have a lot of details to smooth out on human rights.

According to the ancient Codes of Hammurabi & of Lipit-Ishtar, rulers in the same period of history as these 5 sisters – women could be counted as Heirs only if they chose to become a priestess for a god; however, if she received a dowry & married, then she was no longer counted as an heir.

So when Zelophehad died with no sons, according to tradition, that was the end of his branch of the family tree. His daughters would become members, and essentially property, of the tribe they married into.

That didn't seem fair to Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah.

Can you imagine these girls talking in their tent after their father's burial? They must have been discussing their uncertain fate, complaining about the unfairness of the status quo. I wonder which one of the five was most adamant. Who was the catalyst into action? Was there a voice of caution among the sisters, urging them not to rock the boat? Did they all nominate Mahlah to speak since she was the oldest? Was Mahlah reluctant? Had they stayed up all night, or for days, rehearsing their speech and steeling their resolve?

Not just anyone approached Moses and the high priest. I get nervous standing up here in front of friends, but they were planning to speak to their nation's leader.

But they did it, nervous or not. They went to Moses, all five of them together, and presented their case.

(5 girls in descending ages come forward and recite Numbers 27:3-4.)

*3 "Our father died in the desert. He was not among Korah's followers, who banded together against the LORD, but he died for his own sin and left no sons. 4 Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father's relatives."*



Last year on Women's Sunday I started with a quote from Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, an organization defending the concerns of America's senior citizens.

One of her many inspirational quotes was  
“...speak your mind – even if your voice shakes.”

I bet Mahlah's voice shook.  
(PP slide of stained glass window)

Traditions and long standing policies are difficult to change.



Have you heard the one about the young husband who, when preparing a roast for the oven sliced two inches off the end and threw it away? His new wife complained and asked about the waste. He couldn't explain other than that was how his mother had made the roast. So, he called his mother for an explanation. She said that her mother had always done that and she had followed without question. So the young man called his grandmother and asked about the roast. Grandma laughed. She always trimmed up the roast because she had a small roasting pan and it never fit without trimming.

Traditions and the status quo are heavy; they don't change easily. If no one ever questions the purpose and implications of a tradition, then the tradition remains in place. Traditions are not in and of themselves wrong. Traditions are a comforting connection to our ancestors and often serve the purpose of memorializing an event, such as our two thousand year old tradition of communion, three thousand years of if you trace it back to its roots in Passover.

But even such a noble ritual as our communion service falls prey to the weight of tradition. Countless people died over the proper interpretation and implementation of the communion ritual, defiling its original purpose.

Standing for justice against the weight of generations of tradition is intimidating. It could cost you your life. In many parts of the world, it still does.

Although Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah didn't have much to lose, they did have their lives. They probably remembered what happened to Moses' sister Miriam when she questioned Moses. When Miriam questioned her brother, she was afflicted with leprosy, usually a death sentence. More recent in the sisters' memory was the plague that wiped out Korah and his rebels after a failed coup attempt.

These frightening possibilities did not stop the sisters.  
Perhaps their youth aided their nerve.  
Certainly they drew strength from each other.

The great ending to this ancient account is that, when Moses asked the Lord about it, God said, "They're right." A new policy was formed. Now, granted, it was not as far along the spectrum of women's rights as we are today, but it was a step.

Three thousand years later, we are still advancing, although not at an even pace around the world.

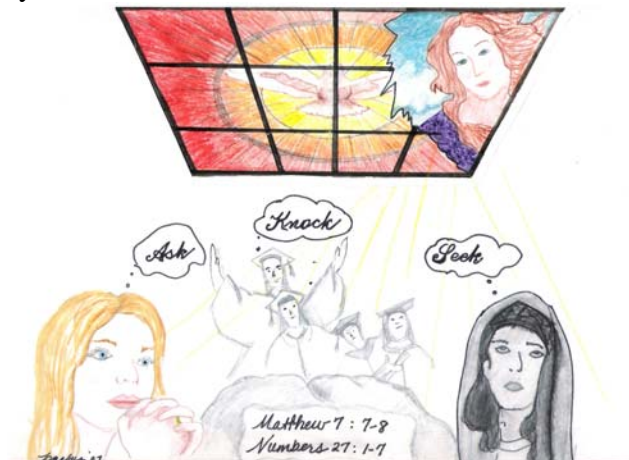
We in this congregation are as far away from the time when women were not allowed to participate in public worship as Zelophehad's daughters were from slavery in Egypt. The year I was born, this church installed Marie Little as the first female elder, shattering the stained glass ceiling.

In the corporate world, the invisible barriers to women are referred to as the glass ceiling. Institutionalized religious barriers to women have been called the stained glass ceiling.

If I had grown up in this congregation, I might have heard tales of those barriers and their breaking. I don't know how that transition felt here, but I imagine there were some shaking voices squished up against that stained glass.

Theses glass barriers are shattered by questions.

I asked our talented Tracy Backus to illustrate this idea, and she did so beautifully. (PP slide)



Some of my favorite glass-shattering questions begin with Why...? Or Why not....? Or could it possibly be...?

Some people don't ask questions because they don't know another way. Is there someone who would benefit if you would stand with them like Mahlah's sisters, lending your strength when his or her voice shook?

Some of my sisters and I, like Mahlah and her sisters, were discussing the stained glass ceiling not so very long ago, in a galaxy not so very far away. First, we formulated our questions and rehearsed our arguments privately. We finally banded together and asked our questions more formally, to the leaders. I wonder if Marie Little had conversations like that 45 years ago with Nancy Phillips, or Margery Tanner? With Susan Mather, Judy Frank, Audrey Scott or Beverly Clemence.

The initial shattering of our stained glass traditions is messy. Someone will need to sweep up the bits of broken glass. People will be wounded.

But the shattering of injustice brings freedom to everyone, not just those immediately oppressed. When that stained glass window is opened, everyone benefits from increased light and fresh air.

Shattering the limitations on women sheds new light and fresh air on all of our gifts. It changes how we perceive women of the past. It changes how we interpret our own gifts. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Amazingly, my questions have led me to this moment, one that if you had asked me twenty years ago I would have thought was not possible in my lifetime. Today I am Mahlah and you are my Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah

Everyone benefits when we are allowed to use our talents to worship God. When others see you stand, they will have the courage to do so when their time comes. Mahlah needed Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah beside her. Even if your voice is shaking, you can still stand together.

I recently saw some intriguing graffiti in Annapolis. If you park in an upper level of Noah's garage you'll see it: "Doubt your Dogma" sprayed in blue paint on a purple building. Interesting that I saw that particular graffiti in a garage named after one of these bold sisters.

Now when someone asks if you know the story of Noah, you can say that you know both of them.

What aren't we asking? What injustice should we be standing against?

Who are you in this story? Are you Moses? Is it your turn to be Mahlah? Or is it your turn to be Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah?

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