Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hepher 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. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. 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.’

Had you ever heard of Zelophehad? The gentleman in this passage from Numbers? I don’t mind admitting: if I ever had until this week, I didn’t remember it.

Not that I don’t regularly carefully read the enthralling book of Numbers from beginning to end, you understand, memorizing its captivating lists of this one who begot that one who begot the other one – I’m just saying that somehow, mysteriously, until this week I seem to have never heard of Zelophehad. So thank goodness, I hear you thinking, for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which has rectified this sad situation.

Because Zelophehad, he really is amazingly and astonishingly – okay, he’s not that important at all. I mean, he’s important in the sense that all God’s children are important, but in the grand scheme of the story of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness and arrival in the Promised Land? Zelophehad is kind of a blip on the screen.

In fact, he doesn’t even MAKE it to the Promised Land. Because quite a while before we arrive at the point in the story where we are today, Zelophehad has apparently died. Somewhere in the wilderness. How and when exactly this happened is something that many talmudic scholars have enjoyed arguing about – there’s significant speculation that references to a man who was executed for gathering sticks on the sabbath actually point to Zelophehad – but ultimately all we really know is that sometime during the wilderness wanderings, Zelophehad died.

And we don’t really know anything else about him. Good guy, bad guy, possibly not really good with planning ahead, if the stick-gathering story is actually about him – but we don’t know. If it weren’t, in fact, for his children, Zelophehad probably would’ve been just another one of the thousands of unnamed Israelites who wandered through the wilderness. One of the presumably thousands who actually perished out there, and were simply left behind.

But Zelophehad had children. Five daughters. No word on whether he also had a very silly wife who made it her life’s work to find husbands for them – if so, she didn’t do a very good job because when we meet them at the beginning of this passage they’re all still unmarried.
Five daughters of Zelophehad, who had no sons. Which at this moment in Israel’s history is a fact of monumental importance because when Moses and the priest Eleazar are collecting all the names of all those who will soon cross over into the Promised Land, so that they figure out how much land to parcel out to each new settler, that’s only going to happen for the sons of each family, of each clan, of the tribes of Israel.

Not for the daughters. Which effectively means, because Zelophehad had no sons, that his name, his legacy, would disappear in the establishment of the Promised Land.

As indeed it would have – he died in the wilderness, he left no sons, there’s no inheritance in his name that needs to be planned for and set aside. Once Israel arrives in the Promised Land it would effectively be like he’d never existed.

But he did. And it’s true that there’s nothing that particularly suggests that his daughters were so attached to him that they simply can’t bear the notion of their father’s life and name being forgotten forever – but whether it was filial devotion or whether it was sheer self-interest, Zelophehad’s five daughters are simply not willing to accept a situation in which their father’s life might as well never have happened.

It did happen. Had he not died on the way, a piece of the Promised Land would have been set aside in his name. Had he had even just one son, a piece of the Promised Land would have been set aside in his name, for his son. There would have been a legacy, a lasting testimony just simply to the fact of his life, to the fact he was part of the wilderness wanderings.

Instead, five daughters – and nothing. No piece of land set aside in his name, no legacy, no lasting testimony to his having either wandered or even lived. And that, to the five daughters – whose names are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah – is not acceptable. They simply can’t accept it, it just isn’t just.

And they’re not wild-eyed revolutionaries, these five women – there’s nothing to suggest they were looking for some sort of complete systemic overhaul or that they routinely badger Moses to rethink the way he’s managing things – if anything what we learn of them later, when they obediently marry the men they’re informed they need to marry, suggests that generally speaking they were pretty much on board with the whole enterprise the way it was and had been for generations.

Indeed, it’s worth noting that they seem to have no problem at all with taking over the Promised Land from the beleaguered folks who are already living there.

But the fact that because their father didn’t have a son, their family’s ‘name’ and ‘legacy’ and ‘realness’ essentially disappears from the history of their people – this just seems to Zelophehad’s five daughters to be fundamentally unjust.

So they take it up with Moses. We think we should receive a parcel of land in our father’s name, even though we’re daughters. And Moses doesn’t immediately react with a No No A Thousand Times No, which in itself is kind of interesting, but in fact takes it up with God.

Who totally agrees with them. It IS kind of a stupid idea, God says, that just because someone didn’t have any sons, his family name and legacy just disappears. The five daughters of Zelophehad are right. They SHOULD get a piece of land in their father’s name.

And not only that, God says to Moses, but if this happens again, I don’t need for you to check in with me. Instead, let’s call it a new and improved rule. We’ll stick with the sons inherit first part, but if there aren’t
any sons? We’ll go with the daughters. These women are right – it IS an unjust rule, to make a whole family disappear just because there are only daughters. They’re absolutely right.

So thus saith the Lord. New rule. In the absence of sons, daughters will do.

Now, I’m likely not going out on a limb here when I say that probably we’re not all presently feeling wowed by this as an amazing triumph of justice. In the grand scheme of the journey toward gender equality this is, at best, a little baby step. And one which readers of Jane Austen and watchers of Downton Abbey will realize had little impact on British inheritance laws, at least, until fairly recently.

But questionable staggering impact aside, I still wish, quite frankly, that it wasn’t so extremely likely that most of us here had never heard of Zelophehad. Or, more to the point, his daughters.

Because no, it wasn’t a monumental systemic change. But still, at the very least, here we have, in these five sisters, a clutch of people who were faced with a situation, and thought about it, and presumably talked about it, and decided it was unjust – and then did something about it.

Could they have done more? Could they have translated the particularities of their situation into a broader campaign of reaching out to other women, gathering in small conversations, sharing their stories of being ignored and overlooked, building over time a more broadly meaningful collective push for systemic healing from the bottom up?

Of course they could have. And maybe it might even have worked. And there’s always going to be a place, and an important place, for that kind of depth of slow and building consciousness raising.

But at the same time, there’s also something to be said for a few like-minded individuals seeing something wrong and then just acting together to make it right. Even just that one specific time, over one specific little piece of the great big philosophical issue -- and bonus if what they did then sets a precedent, or maybe inspires someone else.

We’ve had a strange sort of pendulum-swinging history, it seems to me, collectively as churches, in how we try together to do justice and right wrongs and make positive change. In how we try together to bring to bear the vision made manifest in the life and person of Jesus on the way the world is, at any given time around us.

We seem to swing back and forth, in terms of what’s sort of ‘in vogue’ at any given time, between (to paraphrase Dom Helder Camara) giving food to the poor and asking why the poor have no food. Between, broadly speaking, leaning toward charity and leaning toward advocacy.

And I know those two things can co-exist, and I know that they DO co-exist – but I also know that the prevailing fashionable ethos of the mainline Christian community can also swing, and sometimes fairly judgmentally, largely in one direction or the other.

And sometimes, I think, the immediate and instant and passionate impulse on the part of a few individuals to simply DO something that will help – right now, just in this specific situation – gets squelched in totally righteous and totally justified demands for “a broader conversation” or “a time of deep listening” or a fuller, more philosophical consideration of the web of issues inherent in it.

And I think at this point in our churches, that’s sometimes a problem for us. The conversation about issues – which IS so very important in the grand scheme of things, the lifting-up of layers, the identification of ALL the dots that need to be connected – sometimes, I think, it either enables us to avoid, or if we’re being more charitable to ourselves it weighs us down so much we can’t address, simple responses to simple immediate need.
Which may well be entirely superficial! Which may do very little if anything to change systems or address broader injustices. Which may even allow those systems to flourish.

But at the same time, sometimes, those simple direct responses would just really help. This past Monday, I had a note from a congregation member who had bought an issue of Street Feat outside before church last Sunday, and who’d read in it an article that mentioned how hard it is to put aside laundromat money each month on social assistance. And the congregation member thought, I have quarters! And then she thought, couldn’t those of us who want to help, sort of each partner with a person in need, really get to know what their individual story is, what particular issues they’re facing, and maybe be an advocate for them?

And why not? But as I forwarded her suggestions to the people who are really ‘on the ground’ as far as working with the poor in Halifax, I found myself anticipating in sharing her suggestions, all the “usual” knee-jerk reactions about how “solving” poverty in Halifax wasn’t going to happen with a sort of paternalistic nice-Christians-‘adoopting’-poor-people.

And I get that. I do. But at the same time, what if – just in this specific situation – it would help? What if, in fact, those of us who DO have enough to share, what if it was actually GOOD – instead of simply being confronted by the blurry entity of Poverty In Halifax – for us to really get to know an actual person for whom poverty in Halifax is reality in all their own unique specificity? What if, in fact, we were to recognize – alongside the continued need for broader conversation, and deep listening, and attention to the web of philosophical issues – the simple value of immediate and instant and passionate impulse to do something right now to help? I think those questions are worth asking.

So I think it’s good that against all odds, we’ve finally all heard of Zelophehad. Or more to the point, of his five daughters Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

Because I think there IS a place, in the grand sweep of what we hope for and seek collectively in terms of transformation and justice as Jesus proclaimed it, there IS a place for sometimes, maybe even just a few of us, just noticing something, saying “that’s unacceptable”, and then together doing something specific about it that makes it – even if only it – right. Or better.

The daughters of Zelophehad, after all, they really only acted to change that one situation. But then God took what they did, and turned it into a precedent. Not that it ushered in sweeping change, because it didn’t. But on the other hand, the arc of history has since then bent closer to justice. So who’s to say they weren’t an important step on the way? Thanks be to God. Amen.