

## ***What about Zebedee?***

Mark 1:16-20

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June 16, 2013, Father's Day

Who is this guy Zebedee? Don't you like saying his name? Try it! (I *do* know his last name—DooDah, of course! Zebedee DooDah!) The two disciples James and John are called “the sons of Zebedee.” Zebedee must have been someone the early church knew. Even when their mother appears later in the story she is called “the mother of the sons of Zebedee rather than the mother of James and John.” It was customary to call men by their father's name—James bar Zebedee and John bar Zebedee. If we kept up that custom, my name would be Stephen Ernestson. In a traditional society few things are more important than your father's name.

When I was dating Becca, I made a trip with her to visit her parents in Arkansas. By a strange coincidence, Becca's father was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Arkadelphia, Arkansas, the town where my mother's parents had lived and where my parents went to college. Becca's Mom took us to Wednesday night supper at the church. When they asked about visitors, she stood up and introduced me as “Steve Hollaway from Princeton, New Jersey.” Immediately someone yelled out, “He's not from New Jersey! That's Ernest Lee and Ida Nelle's boy, and Dr. Daily's grandson!” You never stop being your parents' child no matter how far you roam. James and John never stopped being the sons of Zebedee.

We don't know a lot about Zebedee except that he had these famous sons, a boat, and hired hands—which meant that he was pretty well off, like the guys who own fishing boats on Block Island. Zebedee must have taught his sons how to fish. While he was teaching them to mend nets, what else did he teach? Did he teach them loyalty and commitment? Did he teach them about the Messiah—and about putting first things first? We learn so many lessons from our fathers, and they teach us often whether they want to or not.

In Proverbs 4 (1-5 NLT) a father speaks: “My children, listen to me. Listen to your father's instruction. Pay attention and grow wise, for I am giving you good guidance. Don't turn away from my teaching. For I, too, was once my father's son, tenderly loved by my mother as an only child. My father told me, ‘Take my words to heart. Follow my instructions and you will live.’”

If our fathers have been taught well, they teach us well. If they have not been taught well, they teach us poorly, but they usually do what they can. If they have not gained wisdom, they may lead us down other paths. But if they were tenderly loved by their mothers and listened to the wise, they will put us on the path that leads to life.

An old song by Graham Nash says:

*Teach your children well  
Their father's hell did slowly go by  
And feed them on your dreams  
The one they pick's the one you'll know by.  
Don't you ever ask them why  
If they told you, you would cry  
So just look at them and sigh*

*And know they love you.*

The dream that your children pick is what will reveal to you the value of your teaching. That's how you'll know—when you see what dream they go after.

Zebedee's sons picked the dream of Jesus—the dream of the kingdom of God, of God's power breaking into the world, of truth breaking through religion, of freedom breaking through a history of restriction, of love breaking down walls of hate. When the dream appeared at lakeside, they chose to follow. That tells us something about what Zebedee had taught his children.

It was not a dream without risk. Mark makes that point by starting his account of Jesus' ministry with the words "Now after John was arrested." Jesus' cousin, who prepared the way for him, had been arrested—literally, "handed over," a verb that is used of Jesus in his predictions and in the passion story. The call to follow Jesus was, as Bonhoeffer said, a call to die. In another bit of foreshadowing, when the sons leave their father the verb Mark chooses is more literally "to desert." The word appears only once more in the book, and it is after Jesus is arrested. The first thing the disciples do in the book is to desert their father, and the last thing they do is to desert Jesus.

Zebedee was left in the boat with the hired men. Let's not preach against him for not following Jesus. It was not his calling. It was not his time. It was not for him to follow his sons, even if the dream attracted him, too. He had to let them have their own lives, take their own risks, throw their lives away if they chose to, or become coworkers with the Chosen One of God. It was their decision.

He could not have known at that moment what would become of his boys. That brief picture at the beginning of the story of Jesus, of Zebedee standing there in his boat, left with his hired men but watching his sons walk away, is a poignant image for Father's Day. It is an image most of us fathers can understand, or will understand someday. Zebedee trained them to be fishermen. He planned to pass the business on to them. But Jesus came by and said he would teach them to fish for people—so Zebedee had no choice but to let his sons go.

In an age of individualism, we may find it hard to understand how difficult and disruptive that was—although I dare say some islanders are traditional enough to understand what it means to pass down the family business, the family land, and the family house. It's bad enough that the two sons seem to have left immediately. There is no mention of goodbyes. They don't even help finish up their work for the day, dropping their nets unmended, and leaving the hired help to do what sons ought to do. Many in their community would have thought that leaving their father in the boat was morally wrong and selfish. They would have said it wasn't fair to Zebedee. But Jesus calls these men away from their family to join him on his mission of announcing the coming of God's reign.

On Father's Day each of us remembers not only that our fathers gave us life and taught us a way of life, but also that there came a time when we left our fathers—we left them standing, as it were, in the boat. "We're all in the same boat" was no longer true. And every one of us who is a father or mother knows that there is a day when we ourselves will be left standing in the boat, doing our job, watching the kids walk away. Maybe this is just the meditation of an empty nester reflecting on the change in my own life, one many of you experienced long ago. Do you know where the word "father" first appears in the Bible? It does not refer to God. It comes near the end of the creation story in Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother." It is a biblical principle, one of the very first, that a man shall leave his father—and, we would add, that a woman shall leave her father, which may be even more difficult.

James and John left their father, but they were always known as the sons of Zebedee. Their lives were shaped by Zebedee as well as by Jesus. My life has been shaped by my father. Your life has been shaped by your father. Not everyone has a loving father. Not everyone knows his or her father. But we are all shaped by a father—his presence, his absence, his memory, his ghost, his shadow. Kent Nerburn, whose writing combines Christian themes with Native American ones, wrote a book twenty years ago called *Letters to My Son* [New World Library, 1993]. In the first chapter, he writes:

*None of us can escape this shadow of the father, even if that shadow fills us with fear, even if it has no name or face. To be worthy of that man, to prove something to that man, to exorcise the memory of that man from every corner of our life—however it affects us, the shadow of that man cannot be denied...we labor under the shadow. It makes us who we are and shapes the man we hope to be.*

*To become a father is to understand that power of that shadow from the other side. You realize that the touches you make upon your son will shape him, for better or for worse, for his entire life.*

*And who can know which touches have meaning? A word here, a glance there, a time together, a time apart—which will be the moments that will rise up in memory and shape the child that looks without judgment on all you do and say?*

Sometimes it is just any touch that we need. We just need a father to reach out and touch us and let us know he's there. Back when James Dobson taught about parenting and not politics, in one of his early books, we wrote about his own childhood: *I'm told that when I was a small child, perhaps three years of age, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment. My little bed was located beside the bed of my parents. Dad said it was not uncommon during that time for him to awaken at night and hear a little voice whispering, "Daddy? Daddy?" He would answer quietly, "What, Jimmy?" Then I would reply, "Hold my hand!" My dad would reach across the darkness and grope for my little hand, finally engulfing it in his. He said the instant he encompassed my hand, my arm would become limp and my breathing deep and regular. I had gone back to sleep. You see, I only wanted to know he was there!* [Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives]

I know well that many of us had fathers who were gone, so we faced our night fears alone. Some of us had no father to speak of, or fathers who failed us.

Do you remember the movie *On Golden Pond*? There is a scene in which Katherine Hepburn pulls Jane Fonda aside. Jane has a very tense relationship with her father in the movie, made more tense because the father is played by her *real* father, Henry Fonda. The family spent every summer at Golden Pond, New Hampshire. This was their 48<sup>th</sup> summer there. Dad had been an outstanding diver in college and wanted his daughter to follow in his footsteps. Every summer he tried to teach her to do a back flip and every summer she failed. He was constantly disappointed with her. 40 years later, she was still angry about that. After one especially tense verbal exchange between father and daughter, Katherine Hepburn, the mother, pulls Jane aside and says in her quavering voice, "Try to understand, your father did the best that he could."

Most fathers—however terrible they were, however lacking they might be at this moment—most fathers are doing the best they can. The tragic truth is that they were shaped by their *own* fathers, their own culture, religion that warped them and addictions that took hold of them. In the midst of all that, with all the baggage and the heavy load they are carrying through this life, they are doing the best they can. So we learn as we grow up to forgive, because we see how much baggage we carry ourselves.

God asks us to call him our Father. It is easier if you had a good, faithful Dad as I did. But if you didn't, God will be your Father. The Bible says he is "a father to the fatherless." "Even if my father and mother abandon me, God will hold me close." One of my favorite pictures of God in the Old Testament is in Hosea 11 (v. 3 NLT): "It was I who taught Israel to walk, leading him along by the hand." God takes us by the hand, teaching us to walk in his ways. He leans down like a father in love with a toddler, never expecting us to do more than we can, never rushing us, just leading us by the hand.

Maybe we don't know how to grab onto our heavenly Father when he's up there, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise," but when he walks alongside us on the road and he is Jesus Christ in the flesh and we know he's endured everything that we've endured, we can take him by the hand and walk with him. That's what he wants. *By His own hand He leadeth me; His faithful follower I would be, for by His hand He leadeth me.*