

Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

“Too Bad For the Sad Dad” Rev. Charles Schuster June 15, 2008

In pulpits all over the nation today, preachers are talking about Tim Russert and the sudden death that we mourn. To some extent it is because of the way he did his job. He researched the contradictory statements made by politicians. Anyone who could make Democrats as annoyed as Republicans, liberals as annoyed as conservatives, must be doing something right, and he did. What he would do, he would take their words, quoted from previous speeches, and present them on a platter, and make them eat them, and notice the contradictions. But the primary reason we would be hearing about Tim Russert today has to do, on this father's day, is the relationship he had and wrote about with his dad Big Russ, and the pride he took in his college graduate son Luke. Tim Russert's death is sad, but Tim Russert was not a sad dad. He never confused his job with his life.

What do fathers want? What do children need? Richard Speight wrote a book entitled *The Pancake Man*. He tells us truth when he says, "Fathers, we really don't need much at all to be happy. Just a vicarious thrill here and there, a little triumph that we can remember from time to time, magnified beyond belief as the years roll by, to embarrass our children by recounting it at inopportune times. And our children, what do they need? Just a chance to give life a try, for one thing, and a dad who's present while they're trying it, one who is willing to help when he's needed, and most of all, they need a dad whose support and love is there for the taking in equal measure, win or lose."

What does a father need to be a glad dad, not a sad dad? What does a child need? Let me tell you about Zebedee. Zebedee is given to us with very little background information. You hear it in the text, it's so typical of Zebedee. "Then there came to Jesus the mother of Zebedee's children." Zebedee is not given much of a part in the gospel drama. Salome is. She negotiates special privilege for her sons. Zebedee is just known as the father of James and John. We know what he does for a living, and we know what gives him life. We

know he does not confuse his job with his life. He is the father of James and John. He works, he has a job. His job is what we call recreation. Daily routine for him is a hobby for us, but we must remember, it was a main source of income. Our play is his work, and it was hard work. It involved fish and nets and rotting fish and broken nets that needed mending, long hours baked in the hot sun, sea water, salt brine, windswept, a man whose face was burnt by the sun, etched by the foam, hands scaled and dry, a back that ached. You've heard of Zebedee, but you've heard of him only as the father of James and John.

Was he a sad dad, or a glad dad? Perhaps it depended on the day. Maybe it depended on the sun. Zebedee was the father of two sons, each unique, each different in their own way. James was the oldest son, The oldest child lived the adventure, learned to defend himself. James was a fighter. You didn't want to mess with James. The oldest son, in fact, was the prodigal son, in a sense, in this case. There was a lot of fight in him, the son of Zebedee, James, competitor. They called him the Son of Thunder. He was known for his anger. Sometimes, he would offend people. Sometimes, his anger was so quick it frightened even him. It frightened Zebedee. It surprised Jesus. Once there was an innkeeper who wouldn't allow them to stay at the inn, James and Jesus and the others, because they were Jews, and James wanted to call down fire from heaven, and Jesus had to back him off.

Zebedee tried to get to James, told him once, "A very wise person said, if somebody strikes you on the one cheek, turn the other cheek." After a while, maybe something like that got to him, because you come to a point in your life and you learn that you don't have to attend every argument you're invited to. I'm reminded of the sign posted on the rancher's fence, it read, "On the other side of this fence is the biggest, meanest-looking bull in the county. Do not attempt to cross this field unless you can do it in 9.9 seconds, because the bull can do it in 10 seconds flat." There come times in our lives when we realize we don't need to race all the bulls and cross all the fields. We don't have to fight against all the foes.

Dick Evans is a friend of mine, he's the pastor at Washington Park United Methodist Church in Denver. He emailed me this past week, he said he'd gone to a birthday party and while he was there, there were some people who'd just come back from a trip to China, and they told everybody there that they had seen a sign in a dentist's office in Kwanloon China and it read in English, "Teeth extracted by the latest methodist." Maybe we don't need to be fighting Methodists, extracting each other's teeth. Maybe it is the case that our denomination has turned the corner, turned the other cheek to each other. Maybe we have learned that there's a better way to win an argument than to fight them all.

A young man learned something like this while he was in the Navy. He told me the story about a week ago. He's a graduate of U.S. Naval Academy. He was trained for war. He was prepared to fight. And he holds up as one of the most memorable events of his life something that happened, right after the fall of the Soviet Union. His ship went into a remote town in northern Russia, and the people in that town had never seen their enemy before. In this fishing village, the people couldn't have been nicer. And the captain of the

ship decided that the people on the ship would host a barbecue for the people in the town, and they did, a barbecue dinner. This friend said afterward, "After all these years fearing the enemy, I realized they're just people, just as we are people, and you know, there was respect between us."

We can see life as a game, and we have to win it, or we can see life as a gift, and we are put here to share it. We can see people as an obstacle, and we can resist them or use them, or we can see people as potential friends, and we can receive them. We can see life as a threat, and we have to be protected from it, or we can see life as a promise, and we can strive to participate in it. But you see, you can't shake hands with a clenched fist, and you can't keep the faith if you exclude some of the faithful, and you can't claim to believe in the God of love, if you think the love of God is limited only to you. James was transformed. He ended his life not driven by hatred but drawn by love, transformed by caring. He was as Brennan Manning said "seized by the power of a great affection." More important than what we're against is what we're for. More important than whom we fight is on what we stand. And James was transformed. He was known for his faith, and Zebedee had an influence. And Zebedee was proud, so proud, of James.

Zebedee had another son, a very different son, named John. He was mostly flight, not fight. Second son was quiet, shy, almost cowardly, almost apologetic in his approach to life. He was almost a hidden figure in the drama. Probably by his own choice. He was afraid of life, and when there was trouble, he would run. And when there were people around, he would try to please them, whoever they were. John always put himself down, had little self-esteem. Scholars aren't even sure who he was, this son of Zebedee. It is debatable. It is debatable because John was so gullible, so ill-equipped for what life threw at him, most of his life. John had always been a slave, a doormat sort of person. John had always been shy and timid and easily forgettable, always in the background. Maybe that's why people loved him. Maybe that's why he was called the "beloved disciple," because people felt sorry for him. From an early age, he had this need to be liked. If you were around John, you would have felt a sense of sadness, because there was a vulnerability, a gullibleness, a naivete. People used him, people manipulated him. He was servile, and his desire to be liked made him slave to people who treated his vulnerability as an invitation to use him and mistreat him. He was everybody's slave, because he couldn't say no.

Zebedee tried to tell him, "I heard someone say once that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, but as I watch you and listen to you, it seems to me that the premise you live by is that the last shall be least. Maybe that's what he finally understood, because there came a time in his life when he was transformed by hope, transformed by what his father said, or by the presence of Christ, that the idea came to him that there is more to life than being afraid of it.

Her name was Sventlana. I met her a week ago. She was from Bulgaria. She left her country to make a life for herself here. She graduated from college. Her life was drifting until one day in September, in her words. "The apartment where I lived overlooked the World Trade Center. I actually saw the first plane go in. I thought it was a terrible tragedy, and then I saw the second one. I watched the buildings collapse. I couldn't

believe what I was seeing. And everything was quiet. And people began to help each other. All at once the city of anonymous people became a community. There was no panic, just quiet. It transformed my life. It was the worst day in history, but there was hope, because we knew we were part of something bigger than ourselves. I'm a supervisor now. There are thirty people who work for me, but I am not their boss. My job is to help them do their jobs, so that we can all do our jobs." Sventlana, like John, John who heard someone say "Follow me, and I'll make you fishers of men and women." John who learned the difference between being a slave to people and being a servant to something greater. You sell out your soul, you become a slave. But you give your heart in service to something greater than yourself, and your life has purpose and hope. John was one who helped prepare the meal for the last supper in the upper room. He was one who was asked to take care of Mary, mother of Jesus, as Jesus was dying on the cross. He was not a slave to anyone, but was a servant of hope, who found himself by giving himself.

It was Barbara Brown Taylor who wrote in her book, *Home by Another Way*, "Once you are baptized, you belong to God, and all that remains to be seen is what you will do about it. Just remember," she said, "you don't have to be famous or perfect. You just have to be you, the one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-repeated human being, whom God created, that you should be, to love as you're loved, to throw your arms around the world, and to shine with the sun." Perhaps it was toward the end of his life that Zebedee understood the influence he had. He was so proud of John, so proud of his son, who was transformed by hope.

How is it for a father? How is it for a child? For a father I'm reminded of the story that is told by a basketball referee, Al Covino. A high school game that he would never forget, it was a championship game. The gym was packed, the game was well played. New Rochelle and Yonkers. Yonkers was ahead by a point. Thirty seconds to go, New Rochelle pushed the ball up the court. A shot was taken. A hand reached up and tipped the ball. The basketball went back into the basket. The victory. The championship to New Rochelle. Al the referee looked at the clock. The time had expired, but he hadn't heard the buzzer. The noise was deafening. He checked with the other official, he didn't see it. He went to the timekeeper, a student, a seventeen-year-old. The student said, "Mr. Covino, the buzzer went off before the final basket. New Rochelle has lost the game." Al walked over to coach Dan O'Brien, and he said to the coach, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but time had run out. Your team lost. That last basket, it didn't count. The timekeeper told me." The timekeeper, the seventeen-year-old, walked over to the coach and said, "I'm sorry, but I saw it clearly. Time ran out." Coach O'Brien smiled. He said to the student, "That's okay, Joe. You did what you had to do. I'm proud of you." And then he turned to the referee. "Al, I want you to meet my son Joe." And the two of them, they walked off the court together. The son looked up to his father, and the father looked up to his son. That's the best it can be for a dad, to teach his daughter or son what it means to be honest and truthful, and then watch them live that out.

How can it be for a child, how can it be for a child? The Baseball Hall of Fame, on the second floor, they were renovating the room and moving a display case, and that's where they found it. The Baseball Hall of Fame, there was a picture of a man in a baseball

uniform. Now, you'd expect that in the Hall of Fame, of course. But the picture of the man was not anybody anybody knew. The uniform was strange. There was an emblem on the sleeve, it was a dinosaur. What baseball team has a dinosaur for a mascot? Maybe the Rockies, I don't know. On the back of that picture there was a note. The picture had been put there underneath that cabinet. It was there in Cooperstown, in the Hall of Fame, put there by somebody who had gone on the tour through the building. The man pictured in a baseball uniform with a bat on his shoulder was the father of the one who put it there, and the note said simply, "You were never too tired to play catch with me, Dad. On your day off, you were with me. You always came to watch me play. You're a Hall of Fame dad, and now you're actually in the Hall of Fame. This is where the best of the best go, and you were one of the best." That's how it is for a child who had a father she or he could believe in. To find a way to say it, and let him know. "You were the best of the best, and I am what I am because you were what you were."

Richard Speight said it: For a father, just a vicarious thrill here and there, a little triumph to remember from time to time, and to be able to repeat it to annoy them, and for a child a dad whose love and support is there for the taking in equal measure whether you win or whether you lose. When the old fisherman thought about his life and realized he was known for the way he raised his children, not by the fish he caught, he'd probably think about James the fighter who became a lover, who defined himself by what he followed, not by what he opposed, driven by the power of love, and he'd think about John the coward who learned the difference between being a slave who needed to be liked, and being a servant who was driven by the promise of hope. The old man Zebedee on Fathers' Day, a glad dad, not a sad dad. On this Fathers' Day may it be for all of you, for all of you dads, to be able to see those you care about being transformed by love and hope, and for you, for all of you, like Zebedee, take some time today to think about the fact, you know, you had a small part in that.