

January 23rd, 2011

What About Zebedee?

In many ways, the call story we read today is like every other call story. It begins with an unexpected invitation, and ends with a risky decision - a leap of faith - and some baggage left behind. Every call story begins with God's initiative - and ends with men and women who are willing to take a chance.

It's tempting focus our attention solely on James and John — after all, they dropped everything – their fishing nets, their income, their family, even their father - and simply walked out of the water and into the mission field. If we think of Zebedee, the father of James and John - at all, it's with pity, or sympathy — or even a tiny bit of amusement. *“Poor Zebedee — left behind while his sons were called on the adventure of a lifetime. Poor Zebedee, the odd guy out after choosing up teams; the broken cookie at the bottom of the box; the last bit of batter scraped from the bowl.”*

If we ever “see” Zebedee at all - it's as an old man sitting alone in a boat holding on to an empty net and clutching some shattered dreams. It's almost as if Zebedee has become a cautionary tale — a watery lesson - on the true cost of discipleship and the importance of traveling light.

But maybe there's more to Zebedee than meets the eye. Maybe his life has something important to teach us. Maybe his legacy to us is a little more enduring than a backward glance and a quick farewell. But we have to look closely. Zebedee's lesson is the kind we stumble over on our way to someplace else. Zebedee reminds us that for every disciple called into action, there might be others who must stay behind, supporting the cause, repairing the nets, processing the catch, paying the bills. For each disciple who drops everything to answer a call, there might be someone standing below, catching the pieces, juggling the plates, clearing up the mess. The image of Zebedee, left behind in his boat, invites us to reflect upon the life of someone who may have quietly answered a call no less compelling and no less complete than the one that inspired his sons.

Maybe Zebedee remained in his boat so that his grandchildren would have food on the table and clothes on their backs. Maybe he stayed put so he could support Jesus with fervent prayers, fresh fish and ready cash. Maybe when James and John were called to drop their nets, Zebedee's call was simply to pick them up.

Sometimes staying where we are and serving where we're needed can be the biggest challenge of all. It's neither romantic nor daring. It can be thankless, exhausting – and most of the time – renders us almost completely invisible. It's like taking a “staycation”. It might be prudent and good — even sacrificial— but no one really wants to hear about it. In fact, if you are called to stay put, most of the time, no one even knows your name. But as G.K. Chesterton noted,

“An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us. It is thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose.”

It is significant that in a Bible full of stories filled with unidentified mothers, and nameless fathers; legions of unknown soldiers and throngs of anonymous villagers - Pharisees, beggars, prostitutes and thieves... Matthew calls Zebedee by name. By noting his name, Matthew also notes his importance.

Maybe that's because he is the father of James and John. Maybe it's because he was a friend. But

maybe - just maybe - it's because Matthew thinks his story is important for us to hear. Maybe Matthew is reminding us that call stories come in all shapes and sizes. Some are dramatic drop-your-fish-and-go stories, while others are more like songs in ordinary time. Some calls hurl us out into the wilderness, or invite us to jump without a net. But some, at least on the outside, look remarkably like standing still.

However we interpret this story, the call of James and John and the image of Zebedee, left alone in the boat, reminds us that there's always a price attached to a call from God. There will almost always be someone left behind, something left undone, someplace else to go. There will almost always be dropped nets and juggled plates and pieces for someone else to sweep up. And there will always be risk — a risk of failure - a fear of the unknown - a loss of other dreams. But to paraphrase Chesterton, calls - like adventures, are not of our own choosing. Rather, like the call of James and John, and perhaps even like Zebedee, they may arrive at the most unexpected times in the most unexpected places - from a God who never grows tired of taking a chance on us.