

September 26, 2021 - Pentecost 18

In the summer of 1966, Dion and the Wanderers released a single on Columbia Records.

The band's front man, Dion DiMucci, didn't capture a hit with it like he did with a cover of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" earlier in the decade.

That's show biz, I suppose.

But what the song "Two Ton Feather" did do, arguably, is set up a cultural phenomenon with the line: "Check yourself, don't you wreck yourself."

Now with some light re-working, that song lyric gained a lot more traction, prominence and familiarity in the rapper Ice Cube's 1993 hit, "Check Yo Self."

The former song was largely ignored by its generation but the latter wasn't. Most people my age can recall the chorus if not the whole track.

It's a catchy hook. But I know the whole song is pretty explicit. It made its mark on the music industry but it's not gonna resonate with everybody.

That famous line though -- "Check yo self before you wreck yo self" -- is a lot more succinct than the message Jesus is trying to get across to his audience in Mark's Gospel. Then again, Jesus wasn't out there trying to make a platinum record. His concerns were, and are, a little bit different.

But I think it's a similar message when boiled down to its core. Worry about your own "stuff" before you get all wrapped up in anybody else's. To do otherwise isn't going to end well.

It's kind of crucial here not to lose sight of this being a continuation of the scene in the gospel Betty read for us last week. I didn't preach on that reading – that's why I asked her to read from Mark and I read from the James' text the Spirit guided me to focus on – but if you'll recall, Jesus surprisingly pulls this child from the household in which he and his disciples are staying and puts his arms around them as he teaches.

In contrast to his followers' concern for themselves, their argument over who's the greatest, he calls their attention to the one among them under this roof who is most likely to be overlooked and ignored. In their time, children were meant not to be seen, nor heard. They held very low social significance until they were believed old enough to contribute. Children weren't really taken seriously and that's why I say it would have been surprising for Jesus to just

reach out and bring a kid to be at the center focal point, right there with him.

It isn't natural in this setting, like it might seem it would be to us, for a loving and wise teacher and leader, to be mindful of children and their welfare. And Jesus' odd concern doesn't sink in right away for his friends. John hears his rabbi say "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" and he certainly appears to be listening. Cuz he picks up something there but it's not the main point.

Never mind this silly little kid business, he apparently reasons. The important thing is Jesus' good name and, I think trying to be a good student, trying to be the top of his class still, the greatest, so to speak, he wants to point out that he gets it. He sees what the lesson was and that he could recognize the whole gang putting it into practice.

I think he's in for another surprise when he hears Jesus' response.

Because it's clear to Jesus, they really aren't getting it.

Those who seem to be "doing it wrong" aren't your problem.

Now maybe that's a word we can all hear. And it's a frustrating one. Because I'm willing to bet that there are indeed others whose sins are causing greater harm than mine right now. I don't mean to sound like I'm trying to boast, but don't we all think that's the case, if not all the time, at least much of the time?

And if so, we *could* even be right about that.

But ... so what?

We can change our minds. Our hearts. Our attitudes. Our actions. We can let Jesus' words, his teachings, be our guide in those changes. But we cannot will or force that to be the case for anyone else. Sometimes, a lot of the times, it seems like it would be awfully nice if we could. But we can't.

And I'm not saying we don't have some ability to persuade and to influence others. It can be good to do these things. But we can only do so much. We cannot control others. For better and for worse. Our faith must include the faith in Holy Spirit to do best what we cannot.

So don't worry, in particular in this case, about those who are doing the right thing in what you or I might perceive as the wrong way. Nobody's really got time for that. And God might know a little something that we don't.

And dealing with that diversion, trying to correct that misperception, Jesus brings the focus back where he wants it to be. That child from before, presumably remains held in Jesus' arms. And the teacher launches into this illustration that's really rather over the top. I don't think anyone in their right mind takes this rather extreme, pretty bloody and graphic depiction literally.

So what to make of it?

It often makes us uncomfortable to revisit it. Especially if we consider this child upon whose ears Jesus' teaching falls. It feels like it deserves a PG-13 rating and this kid wouldn't be that old.

I can't offer an ironclad explanation for this. What I can do is tell you what I suspect from the perspective of a parent who just vetoed a family viewing of a PG-13 flick as recently as last night.

In part because of the aforementioned place in society that children held and also given to the overall hardscrabble kind of existence people lived in during the first century, this child would not have lived as sheltered a life as my own kids, for sure. They'd have seen some things. And then as now, there is only so much one can protect their child from, even when determined to do so. Only so much we can whisper and think we are going over their heads.

And at the same time, Jesus is so ahead of his time. Concern for children's welfare was pretty lousy through the Victorian era. And that adage that children should be seen and not heard surely survived into my upbringing and came to the forefront of my mind at times. It's only been in recent years that I've heard and recognized the wisdom in seeing children not just as the leaders of the future in the church but potential leaders with a valuable voice right now, as they are.

Jesus' harsh words recognize a harsh reality and also the very real possibility that it can and should be better. And it starts with each one of us as his followers. We can be more mindful of what we permit to get in the way of the path Jesus lays out for us.

And we can hear the invitation to be more expansive and imaginative in the depth and seriousness of Jesus' words and concerns, as over the top as they may be in this instance.

Concern for the rights of children have made a lot of headway in relatively short time in much of the world. Laws offer them greater protection. Human rights campaigns put their need at the forefront of their efforts. We're not all the way there but there's also little controversy in saying and living out: "we must seek better lives for the children of the world."

But there are other segments of the population who do not benefit from near-universal goodwill. And I assure you that Jesus wraps his arms around them, too. People who are refugees and asylum seekers who cross borders. People who live without a roof over their heads and warmth for the winters. People who are too easily diminished as "only looking for a handout."

They are easier to overlook and to miss their humanity. But Jesus does not. And Jesus will not stop drawing the people who society pushes to its edges into his embrace.

**And he will not stop bringing them right beside him,
inseparable, when he is at the center of our attention.**

Jesus' final metaphor here is mysterious. A practice of "salting with fire" isn't really documented and maybe it's lost to time what that references. It may be akin to the purification of a refiner's fire but we aren't sure. It's also strange to speak of salt losing its saltiness. That doesn't happen. Salt can sit on the shelf and never expire. Salt simply doesn't stop being salt.

But if as followers of Jesus, we are being invited thrice over to see ourselves as salt, what does that say about us? If salt can't stop being salt, as followers and doers of the word, we can't stop following God's Word and doing what it says. We can't stop being concerned for the very same neighbors, siblings ... children of God for whom Christ has concern.

But we can be concerned with making peace among ourselves and demonstrating that ability to live in peace. To

let go of concerns for being the greatest, for getting the credit and being in competition with one another for the affection and attention of others and of God.

That kind of check on ourselves can serve us very well.

And I have no significant credentials as a critic but I think in fall of 2021, it could really be a hit.

Amen.