

September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

“Don’t Chicken Out”

Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear can lead us to make decisions we would never otherwise consider. Fear strikes at the heart of our sense of wellbeing. To be fair, there are times fear is the better part of thoughtfulness. Choosing not to touch something hot because we are afraid it will burn us can be an expression of good common sense. When I was growing up, especially boys called those they wanted to shame into some sort of action, “Chicken.” “What’s the matter, chicken?” The weight of the sheer folly in the world done because of that question is enormous.

But there is another way to think about emulating Chickens or not. And that is through the phrase created from observation of the life of chickens together – “*Pecking order.*” The clear delineation of who is in charge – who is not – and everyone in-between.

Jesus asks his disciples - *what were you talking about on the road?* The sun must have been really hot that day for them to be arguing about who was the greatest while following Jesus. **Then as now, these two really don’t go together.** Except, and this is important, *the ancient world was all about hierarchy.* Everyone in the culture knew where they stood in the “pecking order.” Every business deal, every construction project, every ship that was built...all happened with the framework of who owed who a favor and who was farther up or lower down on the chain. We know what this looks like. We say, “It’s not what you know its... (Who you know) But it was much more ingrained in everyday life then.

This points to one of the crucial questions we have to ask as we live a life of faith. Some aspects of the culture we grow up in reflect the life God calls us to – and other aspects of the culture get in the way of relating one to another in ways that please God. It is hard to sort out whether something is helpful or harmful when it is what we are used to. In many cases, it is only God working in us that can help us to see beyond what we are sure we already know.

The disciples were no more products of their culture than we are of ours...and in today's text it got them in trouble. It is easy to miss the point of this text once Jesus begins talking about welcoming children as a sign of being his people. We are all on board with that. We love children. We want the best for children. They make us happy just by being there. And while I am completely in the boat as far as our attitude to children goes – *that's not how children were thought about at the time Jesus cited welcoming them as a virtue.*

In ancient Israel if your kids were rebellious, you could take them to the city gate – explain why they are being disobedient, and everyone could stone them to death.

In ancient Rome, Children weren't named for 8 or 9 days after they were born because infant mortality was so high. In Ancient Greece they weren't considered a person until five days old. We argue in our technological society about whether life begins at conception. The ancient Greeks said, "That's not a hard question...day six!" Mothers died bearing children and children had a hard time growing up. Because death was such a common part of the landscape, there was pressure *not to become attached.*

When Jesus tells his followers to welcome children, he isn't being sweet or sentimental. He is telling us to love **when there is risk**. To welcome those who have no standing and no power. To make a place for "*the least of these.*" We think differently about children than when Jesus said this, and I think Jesus is one of the main reasons we do. But it is easy, thinking as we do, to miss what Jesus is saying.

We are in trouble, not when we "chicken out" because there is danger. We are in trouble when we "chicken out" in our relationships with one another and *imagine life is all about status*, wielding of authority and how we compare one to another. That is the ultimate experience of acting like a chicken – and it means walking away from the way God would have us live.

I think this is the source of a lot of our division these days. We don't believe being loved by God is enough – so we want to make sure someone is lower than we are on the ladder. So we decide we are superior to people based on race or sexual orientation or where they are from...or....or....fill in the blank. All because we are afraid we are not enough because someone is ahead of us on the social scale. We can get past this if we will make God's valuing of us count more than comparison with others.

The disciples today didn't want to hear that suffering is a part of how God manages life. But they were willing to fall back on the habit of establishing a pecking order – a double whammy of “Chickening out.”

God bless us as we do our best to find the life God has for us...and avoid chickening out. God help us to give up imagining we can trade the path of grace for the reinforcing of an arbitrary pecking order. May we, as God's children, never “Chicken out.”