30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2016
Fr. Peter Mottola

In the first words of today’s reading from Sirach we hear, “The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites.” Throughout the Old Testament, God is praised not only for his mercy, but also for his justice. In the New Testament, too, as St. Paul looks back on the whole of his ministry, from his conversion on the road to Damascus to his impending martyrdom, he says with confidence “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith” and speaks of “the crown of righteousness [that] awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me.”

God is a God of justice who will judge us for our actions. The Pharisee in today’s Gospel knew that, and so he went to the Temple to make his case before God. He actually sounds like a pretty good guy: he’s neither greedy, nor dishonest, nor adulterous. He fasts, practicing self-denial, and he pays tithes—he cuts a check to the Temple for ten percent of everything he earns.

So he sounds like an upright and decent man; but he takes a wrong turn. He knows that God is a God of justice who will judge us for our actions, but rather than ask for God’s mercy to make up for his shortcomings, he compares himself to someone else. Knowing that in addition to all his good qualities he has many sins and failings, he quickly hedges his bets by saying ‘but at least I’m not like this tax collector! At least I’m better than that guy over there!’

By condemning the Pharisee for doing this, Jesus teaches us that God will judge us for our own decisions and actions, not in relation to how good we are relative to other people.

That makes some people uncomfortable. Sometimes, it makes me uncomfortable! But: my experience has always been that I push myself to do better when I know that I will be held to a high standard.

In my junior year of high school I had a wonderful math teacher, Dr. Eng. He was a genius—he was literally a rocket scientist, who after retiring decided to teach high school math. And if there was ever a ‘just judge, who knew no favorites and showed no partiality,’ it was Dr. Eng. His tests proved definitively whether you
knew the material or not, and if everyone did poorly on a quiz, everyone got a bad grade. No grading on a curve!

Because Dr. Eng was so unrelenting, I always studied for his exams. After a few months of slow improvement I finally felt confident about my performance on one of his tests. As he handed back the graded exams, I saw from the faces of my classmates that they had once again failed to meet his exacting standards, so you can imagine what I felt when he handed my test and I saw, circled in the upper-right hand corner, the number 99. Dr. Eng said to me:

“You could have done better.”

Aaaaah, c’mon!!! “You could have done better,” that’s it? Not, “Good job,” not, “Way to improve,” just, “You could have done better”?

But you know, the fact that he pushed me meant that I became better, because I acquired the study-habits necessary not just for his class but for all my classes, and for my years in college and graduate studies that were to follow.

In the end, Dr. Eng’s harsh judgments on my work were the best thing for me.

And I experience Jesus’ words in the same way.

This week’s Gospel picks up right where last week’s left off. Last week, “Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary.” My self-assessment was that I have pretty decent prayer life. But this week, I hear Jesus saying to me: “You could have done better.”

And I want to say to Him, ‘Aaaaah, c’mon, Lord! I pray every day, and some people don’t pray at all! I not only recite the Psalms every day, as the Church requires of all priests, but I also say the Rosary!’ And Jesus says to me in today’s Gospel, “You’re acting like the Pharisee, comparing yourself to other people.”

When I face the high standard of God’s judgment, I want Him to grade on a curve. But I know that what I need to do is ask God in prayer for the grace to live a better life, since when I die I know that I will be rewarded, or punished, based on what I have done.
Last Tuesday, after the celebration of Fr. Ray’s funeral Mass, a great many people gathered together at a reception in the school gym, talking about how much he meant and how his priesthood had impacted our lives. In that context, I was struck by a sign that hangs in the gym. It’s an 8.5”x11” sheet of paper taped up next to the exit of the gym that says, “How did I do today?”

“How did I do today?” Those five words … that’s a question we can ask ourselves every night as we say our prayers before going to bed. “How did I do today?” And whether we can say with St. Paul, “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith,” or whether we need to say with the tax collector, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner,” this question keeps us from saying with the Pharisee, “At least I’m better than other people!” Because in that moment, in prayer, where it’s just God and me, what anyone else has done doesn’t matter. “How did I do today?”

May our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall come to judge the living and the dead, give us always the grace to do well.