

30th Sunday per Annum - C
Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18;
II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18;
Luke 18:9-14
Little Flower - 10/23/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

In one of the alternate opening prayers in the former Sacramentary, we prayed, “Lord our God, in you justice and mercy meet.” That meeting of justice and mercy can be seen both in today’s first reading and today’s Gospel.

In today’s reading from Sirach, we heard, “*The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites.*” At the same time, our God is a God of mercy: “*Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed.*” Sirach goes on to mention widows and orphans. In the Old Testament, widows and orphans along with foreigners were the marginalized in society.

When we say that God is a God of justice who knows no favorites, we are saying that God sees and treats all people as equals. This has been and continues to be a challenge for us. We constantly compare people. We often treat people, or at least see people, differently based on their skin color, nationality, ethnicity, religion, education, wealth, and/or lifestyle. We tend to look up or down at other people.

In his letter, St. James recognized this:

For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? [2:1-4].

On the other hand, children often do not make these distinctions. At one of my previous parishes, an African-American family enrolled two brothers in school. Another parish family had twins and another child who were in the same grades as the two new students. When the children came home after the first day of school, the mother asked them if they had any new students in their classes. They talked at length about the two brothers. However, never once they did mention they were African-American. And this was a school with very few African Americans.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus addresses another kind of comparison. This parable is very descriptive. Jesus addressed the parable to those “*who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.*” Jesus also tells us that the Pharisee spoke his prayer to himself. Although he was addressing God, he was actually praying to himself. The Pharisee was guilty of self-righteousness. On the other hand, the tax collector prayed to God in very simple language: “*“O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”*”

Ultimately, self-righteousness is the denial of our need to be saved by God. Deep down, a self-righteousness person believes that he saves himself. That is why Jesus said that the Pharisee prayed to himself. Are we more like the Pharisee or the tax collector? Do we recognize the need for God’s mercy and salvation, or do we believe that we can achieve salvation by doing all the right things? Do we believe that we are better than other people, or do we realize that all of us are united in needing God’s salvation? We may not all commit the same sins, but we all sin and need God’s mercy and forgiveness.

My brothers and sisters, the first part of today’s reading from Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy is often chosen for funerals. It is often chosen by families when their deceased family member had a particularly difficult life or suffered greatly at the end of life. When families choose this reading, they choose it because they believe that at the end of their loved one’s life, their loved one recognized that he or she had done his or her best in life and had not lost faith. They believe that their loved one understood that he or she would receive the reward promised to those who kept the faith and lived well. If we were to die today, would we be able to say that we have kept the faith and done our best to live good, holy lives?