

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In baseball when a fielder commits an error, the offense gets a so-called fourth out. A runner has reached base only because a defensive player made a mistake. Fans of the offense expect their team to capitalize on this mistake by scoring a run, punishing the defense for its error. It's frustrating for the fielder because he has given the offense more power, and the offense intends to use this power to its own advantage. I'm going to the ballgame tonight, and I confess to you that that is how I will feel if the White Sox commit an error. I expect the Royals to seize the advantage, flex their power, and show no mercy against their opponent. But I'm very glad that in my life, when I commit an error, God does not treat me the same way.

Today's first reading is an obscure passage from the Old Testament Book of Wisdom. This prayer describes God's absolute power. When God condemns someone, God does not have to prove the justice of the decision. There is no other god before whom God is accountable. God possesses all might and all mastery, but God uses these properties to be just and merciful. The Book of Wisdom says this to God: "though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us." The prayer goes on, "And you gave your children good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins." When we commit an error, God does not will to punish us absolutely, but permits repentance. This would never work on the baseball field. If the second baseman commits an error, he doesn't shout to the next batter, "I'm stupid. It was a mistake. Please have mercy on me, and don't drive that run home." But that is what we say to God whenever we sin and repent.

The lectionary gives us this reading today perhaps as a buffer to the parable in the gospel. There, Jesus has promised that "Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." Not much mercy there. Even though people create a caricature of an angry God in the Old Testament and a merciful God in the New Testament, today's readings switch them around. Jesus' parable treats evildoers as though they were infielders committing an error. Show no mercy; punish them for their sins. But the Book of Wisdom presents a God who is lenient.

Two conclusions. First, we should take advantage of this. We should be grateful that God, who has all power and doesn't need to defend his judgments, still chooses to forgive us. We may confidently own up to our errors. Second, we should pay attention to one more line from the prayer in today's first reading: "you taught your people, by these deeds, that those who are just must be kind." Each of us holds some power to judge other people. When someone at work makes a mistake, or your brother or sister does something stupid, or a stranger commits a crime against you, you hold power. You may be merciless or merciful. You can take your next at-bat trying to make that fielder pay for his error, or you can be kind. Outside the baseball field, it's easy to obtain mercy; it's not always easy to show it.

Sunday, July 23, 2017