

I took my son to see the Harlem Globetrotters last Sunday at the JPJ. As I'm sure you know, the Globetrotter shows are a mix of dazzling athletic ability with outrageous slapstick humor. The Globetrotters always play the Washington Generals. But mostly they just play with each other and play with the referees and play with the kids in the crowd.

As they play the 4-quarter basketball game, with plenty of silly interruptions, there is scoreboard and an announcer who periodically announces the score. But no one really pays attention to the score. Of course, the Globetrotters almost always beat the Generals, but nobody really cares about the score, especially the Globetrotters. They are too busy having fun and making sure that the crowd is having fun too.

Can you imagine a life lived without the tyranny of a scoreboard? Most of us keep score all the time, in every imaginable arena. Marriages are so often reduced to scorekeeping: I did this for you, and you've done nothing for me. I changed the baby's last two diapers, while you slept a full 8 hours. Friendships are full of scorekeeping too. I've called you the last 5 times, you only call me when you when it fits into your agenda. Sibling relationships are chock full of scorekeeping. I've been the one to take care of Dad since he got sick, while you're living it up in California.

Scorekeeping at school – your grades or your titles, scorekeeping at work – your paycheck or your promotions, scorekeeping in your own body – the scales or the number of runs you've gotten in this week.

The gospel passage for this Ash Wednesday is about scorekeeping with God. Scorekeeping with God in such a way that God and everyone else will know that you are winning the game of religion. To this Jesus says, "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.*" Jesus says when you give money, or pray, or fast do so in such a way that nobody knows what you are doing. When he says nobody, he means nobody, including yourself! "*Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" Jesus says you can't even keep your own score.

The theological name for scorekeeping is "justification by works." It's a way of living life as if it were a contest to be won, a battle out of which one must emerge the victor, an accusation against which one must justify oneself. This is the way of the old Adam and the old Eve, and frankly put, it is the way of death. Justification by works is a closed circle. Because you can never justify yourself enough; you must always keep striving.

The Onion, with its usual piercing insight into the human condition, spoofed the idea behind scorekeeping through justification by works in a recent article about music star Kanye West. "*Following the widespread acclaim and media adulation over his latest album, multimillion-selling recording artist Kanye West announced Wednesday that he had finally received the exact amount of approval he needed to attain and had therefore retired from the entertainment industry to live on a small farm in Iowa.*"

*Though known for his outsized ego and grandstanding lyrics, West said "all of that is over now," telling reporters outside his remote two-bedroom farmhouse that after years of nonstop public attention, he was now completely secure in his sense of self and required no further affirmation. "My goal all along was to be praised and talked about until I reached a level of total contentment with who I am and where I belong in the world, and on Friday night of last week, I reached that level," said West, standing outside the screen door of his home in a pair of khaki slacks and a plain gray work shirt. "I finally feel satisfied and whole as a human being, which means I can stop being a famous pop star now."*

Like the Onion, Ash Wednesday strips the emperor of self-justifying scorekeeping of all of its ridiculous and petty clothes. In the words of a brilliant essay by one of our parishioners, *"Ash Wednesday reminds us of the core truth of Christianity: we must give up. We must give up not this or that habit or food or particular sin, but the entire project of self-justification, of making God's love contingent on our own achievements."*

The message of Ash Wednesday is the message of the Gospel: give up. Give up the whole fruitless enterprise of self-justifying scorekeeping. In a visceral way, Ash Wednesday reminds us that death awaits us all – that death makes a mockery of our attempts to win on the scoreboard of life. *"We are reminded, both by the words we say and the burned palms imposed on our foreheads, that we will die. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Give up! Give up, for you will not escape death. The entire logic of the theology of glory, of all our Pelagian impulses, of all human attempts at mastery and control, are searched out and stripped away on Ash Wednesday. We are seen for what we are – frail mortals. All power, all money, all self-control, all striving, all efforts at reform cannot permanently forestall our death. Our return to dust is the looming fact of our existence that, in our resistance to it, provides a template of sorts for all the more petty efforts we make to gain control of our lives."*

The message of Ash Wednesday is that though your death and my death make a mockery of the scoreboard, there was and is another's death that renders all scorekeeping in life utterly absurd. For Jesus' death on the cross has once and for all justified you.

There is no more to be done. There is just life to be lived. There are referees to be teased, children to be played with, men and women to be loved. Though we may wish to continue to let our left hand and everyone else know what our right hand is doing, the truth of the matter is that God is not keeping score. Amen.