

When I first became a priest people told me I didn't look like one. The reason was that at age twenty-six I looked fifteen. When I attended Msgr. Nichol's funeral that summer, dressed in my long white alb, I overheard Msgr. Froeschl asking Msgr. Harper who I was. Hearing the response he said, "A priest? He looks like Jesus at the age of twelve." And this went on for years. At twenty-nine a rather large man stopped me on church property and asked if I knew where a priest was because the volleyball team needed a net. He saw the smirk on my face and asked, "Are you a priest?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You don't look like a priest." I bit my lip, but I wanted to say, "You don't look like a volleyball player."

Now the Pharisee in today's Gospel looks like a Pharisee. He marches into the temple, stands up, and prays a most glorious prayer. Pharisees are not all bad guys. A pious sect, they devoted themselves to the law of God. With the Sadducees they made up the Sanhedrin. One big difference was that Pharisees believed in resurrection and Sadducees did not. They weren't all bad; St. Paul called himself a Pharisee. What was bad was a hypocritical Pharisee, one who claimed to be pious, but really was not. Those are the ones Jesus rags on. Even this fellow today may not be all bad. After all, he lists impressive credentials in his prayer: He's honest, he fasts, and he tithes. He's an Eagle Scout among Pharisees, as trustworthy as a pharmacist, as heroic as a firefighter. He's a Pharisee that looks like a Pharisee.

Tax collectors, on the other hand--people despised them. They were not just collecting taxes, they collected tolls on the road and fees for state services. You knew that somehow they would cheat you out of more money, but you were consoled that they would cheat the state out of its money too. ~~Society accepted the distrust of tax collectors, just as people today cheat the IRS.~~ Society was prejudiced against tax collectors in the same way that we are prejudiced against used car sales people, garage mechanics, incumbent members of congress, and those real scumbags--people who root for the national league during the world series. Truth is they're probably not all that bad, but it's acceptable to hate them anyway.

This tax collector looks like a tax collector. He crawls into the back of church and bows his head. Well he should. But Jesus says the self-righteousness that fills our hearts creates a home for prejudice and blinds us to the goodness of others. We judge people by their dress, their skin, their occupation, their school, their car. We judge them by their body odor, the cleanliness of their hands and the tops of their desks. We judge people all the time because we can't read their hearts and we need to assure ourselves that we are righteous. The Pharisee's big mistake was not in his religious practices, but in his prejudice that he was better than the tax collector. He's not. And we're not if in our own self-righteousness--as individuals or as a parish--we hold others in contempt.

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