

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 24, 2010 (Proper 25, Year C)

My new favorite TV show is called Bait Car. The premise is this: police officers place a fancy car – usually a Cadillac Escalade – in an area recently plagued by auto thefts. But it's not just any car – it's been equipped with a hidden video camera, an ignition kill switch, and a remotely-operated door lock. Undercover officers stage a scene and the "bait car" is then parked and left running. It always proves too great a temptation and inevitably someone gets in and drives off. That's when the police move in to shut down the car and arrest the thief.

It's incredibly voyeuristic, of course, and that's a large part of the allure of shows like Bait Car and Cops. It's easy to sit in your family room and watch other people get in trouble and make ridiculous excuses for things you've just watched them do. And it can't help but justify your own existence. "Well, I may not be perfect but at least I'm not dumb enough to get caught stealing a car on TV."

I have a feeling the Pharisee in this morning's gospel passage would love Bait Car. And if it aired while he was out saying his prayers in the Temple he'd surely Tivo it. Because self-righteousness and self-justification seem to play big roles in his self-identity. Just listen to the beginning of his prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

I love this passage because of its absurdity. But it also resonates because of its reality. I don't think anyone actually prays like this – thanking God for being "better" than others. But we all certainly *act* like this. We are all vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness. It makes us feel good; it lifts us up; it sets us up as better than others. Which in itself is absurd but is also deeply embedded in the insecurity of the human condition.

Sometimes it comes so naturally and subtly that we don't even realize we're doing it. So it's not really a matter of *whether* we adopt the attitude of the Pharisee in this story but of *how* we do so. Do you thank God that you're not like those other people in that *lower* tax bracket? Do you thank God that you're not like those other people who live in trailer parks? Or like those other people who haven't attained your level of education? Or don't have a job? Or don't have legal immigration status? The list goes on and on. And so when you thank God for the blessings of this life are you really thanking God that you aren't like those other people who are not similarly blessed?

These are hard questions especially in light of the example Jesus holds up as the one who is more righteous. This tax collector, this outsider, this sinner is precisely the type of person we're likely to be thankful that we're not. He is the epitome of those "other people." And so highlighting his virtue is shocking. But his approach to God – his abject humility – is precisely how we need to enter into relationship with God. He places all of his trust in God's merciful hands rather than his own; he places his entire being at the mercy of God rather than seeking to justify himself at the expense of others.

What the Pharisee failed to grasp, and what we sometimes forget, is that we are already justified by God by virtue of our faith. There's nothing else we need or can do; there is no need for self-justification. It is, of course, wonderful to give thanks, but thankfulness is not about self-justification. It's not about placing ourselves on a pedestal at the expense of others – which is precisely what happens when we watch shows like *Bait Car*. We subtly and even subconsciously give thanks for being better than somebody else. But we're not. God loves us for who we are, period. There's no class rank or pecking order. And it's certainly not something we have any knowledge of or control over. Ranking ourselves is not part of the human job description, as tempting as it might be.

And justification is an interesting thing. I may not always pay attention to my child, but at least I don't beat her. I may not pledge prayerfully and intentionally, but at least I put something in the collection plate when I show up on Sunday. I may not be literally feeding the hungry, but at least I brought in a bag of food for the Hingham Food Pantry. I may not be Mother Theresa, but at least I send a check to Episcopal Relief and Development every year.

We all do a lot of good things. Bringing in clothes for the needy, sending money to charity, pledging to the church. These are all good things, just as it's good that the Pharisee fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of his income to the temple. (And during this season of stewardship, I won't discourage that). But we could all do more. Jesus doesn't condemn us for not going further but he extends to us the invitation. The well of good works that flows from faith is deep. God loves us and rejoices in who we are. But we are also continually challenged to go deeper.

In this parable, self-justification draws the Pharisee towards self-righteousness. And that leads to spiritual arrogance. Which is something the tax collector in this story surely can't be accused of. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" he prays again and again. And it's this spiritual humility, Jesus tells us, that will ultimately be exalted. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." The tax collector knows he is a sinner. Not just because he's a tax collector, but because he is a human being. Made in the image of God and yet *not* God. Just like you and me.

The Pharisee in this parable isn't evil. As we've seen, he follows the law, he fasts twice a week, and he tithes his income. In other words he is following the very letter of the law and would have been commended and held up as a shining example of faith by the religious establishment. I don't doubt the Pharisee's good works but I do question his inner conviction. Because while he's giving thanks, he's basically giving thanks to himself, rather than to God. He's using thanks to justify himself and gratify his own insecurities rather than giving thanks to the God who loves us despite our imperfections.

To some degree we will always be like the Pharisee who thanks God for not being like other people. Humans tend toward spiritual insecurity. We fear the invitation to give more and more of ourselves. But God loves us anyway. God never forsakes what we've already given, but God is always seeking more and more of us. Not because God is unreasonable or demands perfection but because God wants all of us. God loves us, not partially, but in totality. And rather than fear this reality we should always strive to embrace the fullness of God's love.