

**Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – October 26, 2025**  
**Luke 18:9-14**  
**“There by the Grace of God Go I”**

In the spirit of the humble tax-collector, I have a confession to make: A few weeks ago, a fire alarm went off at the church. The alarm went off as I was walking to the liquor store to get sweet vermouth, which I needed to make a Manhattan – which I needed because a number of my in-laws had come to the house to meet the baby, and were staying for dinner. (I am giving you these details so that you can fully appreciate my state of mind.)

Two fire trucks pulled up. I walked the firefighters through the property, unlocked doors, checked rooms, and kept a watchful eye on the one holding the axe. We quickly discovered that there was no fire. It was a false alarm. I thought that would be that. But alas. None of the little control keypads were working, and so we couldn't turn the alarm off. The alarm kept sounding, and the lights kept flashing, and the firefighters couldn't or wouldn't leave until the system was disarmed.

I called the alarm company. I believe it was the number seven I needed to press to be connected to the operator, so there were a fair amount of menu options to wait through. I pressed seven and was put on hold. When the operator picked up, he told me that, while he could take the whole system offline so that it would not again trigger an emergency response from the fire department, he could not actually make the alarm stop sounding.

The firefighters were not satisfied. The operator suggested I hang up and call a second number to speak with a second operator, a tech support operator. When I did, there was no answer. So I called the main number again, pressed seven again, waited again, and then got a third number to try. Still no answer, but this time, at least, I could leave a voicemail. The firefighters and I waited for a call back; they were visibly annoyed. The guy who finally got back to me was not able to remotely deactivate the alarm, and his troubleshooting was no help.

He asked me – and I should say that, by this point, I was *very* annoyed myself, and *very* late for dinner (which I would now have to endure Manhattan-less) – he asked me if I was “handy.” I said, angrily, “I have hands.” He told me that I would need to find pliers and cut and cross wires to dismantle the alarm system manually. I asked: “Like a bomb?” “I guess,” he answered. For a split second, I was excited at the thought of this. But then I exploded: “Are you kidding me? I can't believe this! What if this were a real emergency?! It's already been an hour of calling and calling and talking to the wrong people and calling again and no one picking up and waiting and waiting and I'm missing dinner.” And then I swore at him: “Do you not see –” and I invoked a certain winged mammal which sleeps hanging upside down in caves, “do you not see how BEEP-BEEP BEEPING crazy this is?” And he said, “*Reverend*, I don't care to be spoken to like that.” And so it is that I brought shame upon our church.

So this parable might have been written yesterday. Two millennia have passed, and religious leaders haven't gotten any less hypocritical. Like the Pharisees of old, we still – present company very much included! – we still too often fail to practice what we preach. Now, clearly, I am not one to beat my chest and boast about my great piety. I don't look down on others for being

terrible sinners. And I'm a bleeding-heart, big-government liberal, so I do love me some tax collectors.

But there are all kinds of ways in which – to use the language of this morning's scripture reading – I “regard others with contempt.” The prayer “God, I thank you that I am not like other men,” is a prayer I am sure I have prayed some version of.

Whenever they ask me at CVS if I want to enter my ExtraCare card number, I say, “No.” One of the clerks, though, will not take no for an answer, and she asks me, “Don't you want the coupons?” And I say, “No. Thank you, though.” She seems truly mystified to be talking to someone who does not want the coupons, but she keeps at it: “Why don't you want the coupons?” And I say, “Because the ink rubs off on my fingers. And because the CVS receipts that the coupons come printed on are each long enough to mummify a small child with and we already have drawers full of them (of receipts, not mummified small children).

And she says, exasperated, “But don't you want to save money?” What I want to say is, “No, I hate money,” or to say, “Well, you know, actually, I won't be saving money; I'll be spending more than I intend to buying additional sticks of deodorant to meet the coupon's spend minimum. The house always wins.” But I simply say, “No,” and smile. And it's the smile of a real jerk. And she frowns and sighs audibly and wearily and shakes her head.

And this happens maybe once a month. And she is an older immigrant woman. And I am not. And even though I am always polite enough, clearly, at some level, I regard her simply as an annoyance, and regard her attempts at helpfulness as a cross to be borne. In my sarcasm, in my tone of voice, in my smile – which is offered as charity is offered, what I am communicating to this woman is: “You don't matter.” At some level, I really must believe that I am better than her, or that I am smarter than her, or that I have more important things to do with my time than to be there with her. I don't want to believe this. It is a despicable thing to believe this. If you were to ask me, I would tell you, “No, of course I don't believe this.” I never actually say, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men,” but I do say it, don't I?

The most insidious variation of “God, I thank you that I am not like other men” is “there but for the grace of God go I.” This is not something that I really say, but it is something that I think. Or rather, it's a thought that I've had. It's a thought that, all on its own, has risen in my mind, has risen from whatever part of me I wish weren't a part of me which it is that thoughts like these rise from. It is such a revealing expression. And what it reveals, I think, is the tangle of self-righteousness and hypocrisy which it's really, really hard not to get caught in – as a religious leader, and as a religious person, and as a person, *period*, as any person who tries to be good person. “There but for the grace of God go I.”

This is not an altogether unkind thing to say. It is a real recognition of someone else's misfortune. It is a true seeing of the need or the pain of another person. And it is a seeing of oneself in another person, is an acknowledgement of our shared humanity. It is an understanding that, in the end, not much separates us from others: just circumstances, circumstances which can and often do very quickly and very easily change. But, of course, that's not all “there but for the grace of God go I” is. It is an expression of something like backhanded sympathy. It takes as

much as it gives. Whatever similarity between us we let ourselves see is walled off within a far greater dissimilarity. We are like them, but, thank God, we are not like them.

The word compassion means, literally, from the Latin, “to suffer with.” We don’t quite “suffer with” those of whom we say, “there but for the grace of God go I.” This is a distancing sentiment. It allows us to draw near without drawing too near. It is how we say both, “come here,” and “go away” at once. Which is why, however sincerely our hearts do ache for them, what communicates itself loudest and clearest is almost always condescension and pity, and in that condescension and pity, a sense of our own superiority.

We want to do better than this. We want to do better *by them* than this. That’s partly *why* we say this or think this! The thing with self-righteousness and hypocrisy is: We’re so far off. But we really are also halfway there. One little change (which is actually the hugest, hardest change of all) will get us the rest of the way: Instead of “there but for the grace of God go I” – “*there by the grace of God go I,*” an embrace of full solidarity, an unequivocal identification with the one in need of prayer or care or kindness. We are them. They are us. All of us: human beings and children of God who are fighting hard battles, who are weak and fallible and fall short in so many ways, who need grace and mercy as we need daily bread, and who matter, who matter *absolutely*.

This is what it means to do as Christ calls and “love your neighbor as yourself.” To love them with a pure love, with a love that does not allow for any creeping, unwitting suggestions of “less than.” To love them with a love worthy of them – for they are someone’s son, or someone’s mother, and they have worries that keep them up nights, and they have dreams; they are a self in the same holy way that I am a self; they are a person and not a clerk at CVS or a voice on the phone; they are a person and should be seen and treated as such. This is the love with which God has first loved us: the self-righteous and the self-pitying, Pharisees and tax collectors alike, and all of us who are a little bit of both. This is the love we have received, and this is the love we can bless others by giving.