

## 23 October 2022: Luke 18:9-14 (Proper 25)

Language is never static. Words and expressions change, fall into disuse; new words become everyday speech. Language *reflects* and *shapes* our perceptions and assumptions. Language has certainly changed with computers. There are new combinations of words: cell phone, screen saver, face time. Old words have new meanings: zoom, share, virus. Isn't language fun!?

As I read today's Gospel one new word kept bouncing in my head. Two men went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed his prayer, which both reflected and shaped his ideas of God, himself, others, and the way of salvation. The Tax Collector prayed too, and his words reflected and shaped his perceptions of God, himself, others, and the way of salvation. As I thought of this Gospel the word that kept drumming in my head is: download. This composite word would have been nonsense before computers.

Downloading is part of our social reality, shaping our social consciousness and expectations. Downloading is easy. We need not even look at the contents of the download. We may keep it unopened in cyber-limbo indefinitely. When we do open the file we can edit, manipulate, do whatever our computer has the capacity to do to it; the file is at our disposal. I wonder if some assume faith is "downloadable" in similar ways?

Notice the Tax Collector's actions and words. He stood *far off*, *would not even look up to heaven*, *but was beating his breast*... This is in obvious contrast to the Pharisee who stood *by himself*. At that time, the usual prayer posture was standing with extended arms, palms up, face heavenward. There is a difference between standing alone and standing far off. The Pharisee's prayer is self-centered, self-serving, and therefore only a delusional monologue: the Pharisee stands alone, even without the necessity of God except as context for his self-congratulation. The Pharisee is not just an example of how not to pray, but an example of tragically wrong-headed assumptions about God, humanity, and the way of salvation. The Tax Collector in his abject humility is our example of right prayer and the holy path of conversion. This Parable is not a simplistic melodrama, prompting us to boo the Pharisee and applaud the Tax Collector. If that is our response, we've only downloaded the story, manipulating it to our own ends.

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* In Greek the verbs for the actions of penance and cries for mercy denote repeated action. There is no boast of righteousness, no comparison with others, no self-congratulation. To stand before God admitting the separation one's sins have caused between oneself and others, to stand before God admitting we have transgressed God's desires for oneself and others and to keep on standing in penance does not come from 'downloadable' faith. It comes from a heart yearning for God's holiness; from a mind free from pride; from a life opened to the truth about oneself and the truth of God's mercy. Such humility and yearning cannot be one file among many we 'open' to manipulate as it suits us.

Jesus' Parable portrays a way of living foreign to a culture on easy terms with the downloadable. Jesus challenges us to stand before God as we are, continuously. Perhaps a first reaction is that this standing before God in penance is masochistic. It can become so if we keep the focus on ourselves. Jesus is saying that if someone as surely guilty of so many sins as a corrupt, greedy, exploitative bureaucrat can be restored through the offering of his true self to God in hope, then will not God have mercy on all sinners, if they will but give themselves to Him, just as they are? It is not our sins that keep us from God but our pride and shame in refusing to bring our faults to God, refusal to believe and act on the truth that God is loving and merciful. God can and will transform our worst into God's best, can and will transform human ugliness into divine beauty. Our merciful God uses our sins as raw material for our own conversion.

To stand before God in humility and truthfulness is not the work of a few minutes, it is not a downloaded file, it cannot be manipulated to please us. It is a way of standing, a way of life. I pray you and I will stand, not in deluded pride, not in pointless shame, not at anyone's expense. I pray we will stand gladly surrendering our faults and failures. This is just what God yearns for from us, so God's salvation, God's holiness may grow in us and transform us. May we so stand before God each day and keep on standing. May you and I continuously cry out—Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me! Amen.