

In our scripture readings today, we see symbols of pride, arrogance, and *power over* others – particularly over the oppressed and hungry. We also see signs of humility and service – particularly from the widows in 1 Kings and the gospel reading. These attributes of human nature seem to be on polar opposite ends of the scale – one end based in hubris and the other based in compassionate authenticity. This juxtaposition of arrogance and humility reminds me of the scribes and the widow – and brings to mind something Pope Francis once said, *“Our world tells us to seek power, money, and success. God tells us to seek humility, service, and love”*. I see those dynamics clearly exposed in our readings. The widow, existing by humble and meager means, gives all that she has to God. And Jesus recognizes her sacrifice in her selfless act of vulnerability.

On the other hand, we also see the symbols of power and pride in the scribes – those seeking respect, honor, and power – a pride and arrogance which may mask a deeper insecurity – an insecurity that led them to test Jesus. We see this in the earlier parts of Mark chapter 12. Jesus and his disciples were in the Temple in Jerusalem. Time and again the religious authorities tried to trap him with trick questions about his ministry. First the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and questioned his authority. Then some Pharisees and Herodians were sent to ask him a question about paying taxes to Rome. Then some Sadducees asked him a question about marriage after the resurrection. But Jesus bested them at every turn.

Jesus also discredited the spirituality of the religious authorities – essentially calling them hypocrites and pious pretenders. They were vain, pompous, and arrogant. Doing the proper thing just to demonstrate their power led Jesus to warn, *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect...and be seated at places of honor at banquets.”*

In the next sentence, it’s not clear what Jesus might mean when he said, that the scribes *“devour widow’s houses.”* It may have referred to the possibility that the religious leadership was doing something to exploit those who were already vulnerable. Were they using their authority to manipulate? Did the widow feel obligated to give everything she had? Had greed gotten in the way compassion? Had her sincerity been *used* instead of affirmed? No one was questioning her humility and trust. But even Jesus doesn’t lift her up for giving her last two coins nor tell the disciples, *“You should do also”*. He seems more intent on pointing to the disparity between the widow’s giving and the contributions of the wealthy in the crowd. So, when Jesus says, *“That’s all she had to live on”*, you can almost sense his hurt and anger. Jesus’ sadness and anger are even expressed in the two verses that follow today’s Gospel. The disciples are admiring the large stones and architecture of the Temple, but Jesus replies, *“Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down”*. Jesus is angry and seems to condemn the value

system that motivates the widow's action. Others were donating out of their abundance. She was donating out of her poverty. Jesus is lamenting the unjust difference.

Nonetheless, Jesus' anger does not nullify the humility and vulnerability of the widow and those who trust in God's guidance and provision. As in the Psalm, "*Put not your trust in rulers, or in any child of earth, for there is no help in them. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down and gives justice to those who are oppressed.*" What a tension that lies between these two extremes of arrogance and humility. What a tension that also lies between these two extremes of the human and divine nature. The paradox of this dissonance is that it can, at times, highlight the tension, the push and pull, as we balance our own lives between our ego's desires and our humility to serve. As Thomas Merton aptly states, "*Pride makes us artificial, humility makes us real*".

As with the widow, when we give from a place of humility and sacrifice, it demonstrates our trust and desire to be in relationship with God. In my own experience, when I attempt to center myself in God's will for my life, I most often find that I need to summon my humility and curb my pride. Unfortunately, I often find this sweet spot only when I am at my own wits end.

In the hospital setting in which I work, we encounter people who are humbled by their failing bodies, minds, and spirits and it is our privilege and honor to hear their stories and be with them in their times of struggle. It is through our caring connection that we both can be touched by the presence of a compassionate and providing God. The connection can be, in fact, a sacrament of grace for both the servant and the suffering other – both of us discovering some level of healing through relationship and the sharing of our human and sacred stories.

None of us welcome the things that we need to grapple with – particularly if it is imposed upon us. Sometimes we want to rescue ourselves with distraction, denial, and other things. But suffering is always humbling, and humility sooner or later brings us back to ourselves – to the centeredness of our deeper values and our relationships with God. Standing humbly and responsibly before our true potential of living life to its loving fullness requires *courage*, a word which has its root in the word *Coeur*, or *heart*. Risking to lean into our authenticity and health requires our humble hearts.

Trust in God is what saves us in the midst of the mysteries and fates of life. And, through our humility, which is built through our experiences of grappling with the ambiguity and mysteries of life, we are able to give back in gratitude and service to others. Pride is concerned with *who* is right. Humility is concerned with *what* is right.