

32nd Sun. Ord. Time (B)
St. Cecilia Parish, Ames
November 10, 11, 2018

During most of the last few days prior to the recent mid-term elections, I heard a lot about 'suburban women'. Personally, I think I myself know only a couple such people. As you know that phrase usually referred to white, and college educated women, with at least middle class incomes or higher. However, when I went to today's Scriptures in preparation for this weekend, I found the opposite of 'suburban women' people. Both today's First Scripture and today's Gospel text feature widows. (Maybe today, we might also think of women who are single parents.)

Widows held a special place in the mind and heart of Jesus. To Jesus they were clear and special symbols of the Kingdom of God. We notice first that both of today's widows are unnamed. In the culture then, and even in the minds of most of the people then, widows were not significant enough to warrant a name. In Jesus' day, widows were marginal people, (as are single mothers today), frequently poor, and even desperately poor. In the time of Jesus, officials and people in general thought they were being helpful to such women when they allowed them to be 'gleaners': they allowed these women to go out into the fields to pick up what little grain they could find after the fields had been threshed by the farmers. (Another example of 'crumbs from under the table'). In Bolivia, even in recent times, the Bolivian government (which owned the country's tin mines) permitted the widows of miners to pan for the droppings of tin ore at the processing sites. Often these women were young, as their husbands and fathers died at an average age of 37, due to the hazardous conditions of working the mines. You would see them waiting at the mine openings to begin to do this at the end of each day. There are many other examples of the subjection of women that could be cited. Rarely do we hear about 'glass ceilings' for men within the corporate world. So when the Old Testament and Jesus feature widows, we really need to listen up. An important lesson is about to be taught.

Both of today's widows are cited for their generosity. Each situation shows us a widow who shares with others what could actually be their last food or coin, both of which they no doubt needed for themselves. And in each case it was a man of God or the priests of the Temple who sought the food and the coin. In the gospel Jesus is really harsh on the Priests and the Scribes for imposing rules and demands on these widows, rules and demands that Jesus says the Priests and the Scribes are not willing to endure themselves. *“Beware of the Scribes They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.”*

The lesson for us might be to think seriously about the difference between HYPOCRISY and what John Shea calls VALUE DISCREPANCY. Certainly I, and probably most of us, are more familiar with the former, with Hypocrisy. It is a conscious deception for the

purposes of promoting and protecting yourself. Examples would be the Scribes in Jesus' day who laid heavy rules and Temple taxes on the people, and from which they no doubt profited, while yet failing to live by the same rules and taxes. Or, husbands and wives who tell their spouse that they love them, but then talk only about themselves and don't inquire about their spouse's feelings and needs.

The signs of Value Discrepancy are much less clear. They are easy to miss. This is because these are often embedded in organizations and systems of operation. For example, the mission statements of hospitals and of school systems, even the mission statements of parishes. These often carry words like 'compassion', 'respect', 'stewardship' and 'collaborative'. These values are supposed to permeate the organization: how the organization operates. But then look at their policies ... look at the decisions of their Councils, Boards, etc. When you do this, you will probably find discrepancies between the stated values and how the organization actually operates day to day. This can happen for a variety of reasons: the organization grew too fast, and the policies were created out of expediency. Sometimes cultural values work their way into policy development of these organizations, and no one looks back to the actual mission statements on a regular basis. And value discrepancies often are not blatant, obvious; they are difficult to spot. Sometimes they happen because leaders rely on the much disliked phrase "this is how we have always done it" or even "this is how we do it here".

Looking at today's widows, the kinder assessment would be that they have become victims of such value discrepancies. The harsher judgment would be that they are the victims of leadership hypocrisy. (It seems that leadership hypocrisy is at the root of today's new sex abuse scandal in our Church. This week the US bishops are meeting in Baltimore; please pray for them). For example, in today's gospel the Laws obliging Jews to support the Temple really exploits the widow. Of course we have no trouble saying that donating to the Temple is a good thing, even when the Scribes and priests are supported by it; and our religious piety finds no trouble with saying that our donations to such is even a sign of our sincerity and commitment to God. What you give to the Temple you give to God. But such Laws and customs should never oppress and certainly never exploit anyone, especially a widow. The widow, and those we may think of as such in our society, are already marginalized by life's situation. No widow should ever be allowed to impoverish herself by fulfilling the Laws of a church, or government, etc.

All this Fall Season we have heard Scriptures that teach us about discipleship. It is the calling of a true disciple to call out hypocrisy as soon as it is detected. It is also the calling of a genuine disciple to grow and develop in awareness about value discrepancy. Calling out hypocrisy and value discrepancies is a real and important application of how sincere we are in our discipleship. Going to Mass is important. Saying our prayers is also good. But to ignore hypocrisy and relying only on the phrase "this is how we do it