

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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## The Woman Caught in Adultery

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

**O**ne of my favorite gospel stories concerns the woman caught in adultery who was dragged by a crowd of righteous people to Jesus for judgment. The story, which appears only in the Gospel of John (8:3–11), teaches a valuable lesson: Jesus identifies not with the action or the sin of the woman that brought her to this point of judgment, but with her pain, embarrassment, and suffering. He's concerned with how the woman feels; he seems completely unconcerned with anything else.

The woman accepts his compassion and acceptance, slowly coming to a deeper and more profound understanding that Jesus is associating himself with her in a way even more profound and intimate than that of the man (who, by the way, is nowhere around) with whom she committed the adultery.

She didn't find commitment and intimacy in her illicit action, but she does find it in her encounter with the Lord. He identifies with her, fills her, and gives her life without demanding anything of her but a free-will response to never allow herself to be used by another—and then he sets her free.

Jesus doesn't lecture her about the sixth commandment. He doesn't tell her how much she has hurt her family or how terrible sexual sin is. He doesn't even give her a penance. He simply tells her to avoid this sin, to avoid getting herself into a position where she settles for something that isn't truly intimate and that isn't a celebration of her goodness. She should seek moments and relationships that will lead her to life instead of to more shame and embarrassment.

**T**his story is a continuing source of reflection for me because Jesus acts in a totally unexpected manner. He doesn't act like a man in a patriarchal society would be expected to act. He doesn't act like a man who has total power over women. In this story, *Jesus abuses the power he traditionally has over the woman*. He chooses not to be powerful, but to be merciful. He chooses not to be righteous, but to be accepting. He chooses not to preach or teach or make a point, but to simply love.

And by abusing his power, by not seizing the mo-

ment to make a point about sexuality, sin, and people caught in their sin, he demonstrates the heart of God—the patience of the Father and the understanding and forgiveness offered to us by the Son through the power of the Spirit.

The early Christian community understood the power of this story—which is not simply about an adulterous woman. It’s also a powerful indictment of people prone to judge, of people caught up in the rush to exact justice for perceived faults and failings, and of people unwilling or unable to see themselves in another who has been exposed.

The early Christian community also understood this story to proclaim an intimate God, a God who puts people and their feelings above the law and the expectations of others, a God who ultimately loves, forgives, and consistently calls us not to death, but to life—life now and life to come. As such, it’s a story about a relationship so much bigger than that of one man and one woman.

**M**ost **people-centered** stories of Jesus in the gospel are about relationship, intimacy, forgiveness, and mercy. They’re about becoming whole, integrated, and filled with life. None of Jesus’ stories are about righteousness, judgment, sin, and punishment. We might hear the stories recast that way, but that isn’t how they were intended.

Jesus’ stories invite people to come into the light. His stories invite people to escape the darkness, to move from the part of themselves that is dead to the experience of risen life. When these stories are told

in a way that provokes a response other than life, it’s a disservice to the gospel and to the kingdom of God.

Do you really think the adulterous woman in this story left her encounter with Jesus thinking she had been forgiven of her sin? If you do, you don’t really know much about sin—and you know and understand even less about relationship and what gives life and celebrates grace.

Get out of your head and out of the rule books and all the dogma that fill life more and more each day. Let the story stir in your heart, not in your head, and you’ll know the intimacy of a loving God and Father. Even more, just like this woman, you will feel and know the truth of what it means to be truly loved. It’s the gift of Jesus for you today just as it was the gift of Jesus for that woman so many years ago.

**I**n **this Year** of Mercy we’re invited as God’s people to reflect on the core values proclaimed in the gospel. It’s much too easy to miss the spirit and the energy of God’s grace because we’re distracted by the rules and the regulations of our religious tradition. Rules and regulations have their place—I’d be the last person to counsel that they should be routinely ignored (especially not to the members of SA).

That being said, it’s helpful to try to understand the deeper meaning of the gospel stories our brothers and sisters preserved for us. Ask for the grace to believe what Jesus is trying to teach us—and then ask for the deeper grace to apply his teaching to your life and your struggles.

# Reflection

The following is adapted from *Spring Meditations* by Fr. John Bartunek (Liguori Publications, © 2016).

*Courage* has to do with how we behave in the face of obstacles and difficulties. The determined pursuit of a worthy goal even in the face of opposition and hardship, like the sprout that pops up in the first days of spring—that’s the essence of courage.

In English we have a revealing counterpart to courage: *discouragement*. People who give in to discouragement no longer have the energy to move forward. They give up. The worthy goal remains worthy, but out of reach. When we feel the weight of discouragement, we need something to boost our spirits to get us back on track. We need to be *encouraged*.

Discouragement never comes from God. If, in his providence, he has planted a desire in our hearts, he hasn’t done so to torture us. He will give us the strength, guidance, and assistance we need to overcome every obstacle and fulfill it. When he whispers something in our hearts, that whisper is enough. All we need to do is keep going, being brave in the face of difficulties.

These days, we need courage for everything. In some areas of the world, even going to Mass or praying to Jesus requires taking your life in your hands.

Most of us live in less dramatic situations, but we need courage nonetheless. Being faithful at home, being honest at work, being responsible to the duties of our state in life—these fundamental requirements of a truly human life face more and more opposition in our rapidly decaying culture.

The world around us is full of pressures and influences that constantly try to deceive and weaken us. In such an environment, to be true to the ever-ancient and ever-new wisdom of Christ and his Church requires courage, the courage only God can give.

The world will give us trouble, but we can take courage because the God who whispers in our hearts is the same God who made the soil and gave the seed its original spark of life.



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# MAILBOX

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***Q*** I followed your advice, and my priest refused to accept what I was doing. I even gave him a copy of the SA newsletter that explained my situation. He insists I do what he tells me and refuses to accept that scrupulosity is a serious impediment to fully accepting God's grace. Now I don't know what to do.

***A*** I'm very sorry this happened. My advice is to find a new confessor, a priest who is patient, kind, and willing to walk with you on your difficult spiritual journey. I don't know why your current priest refuses to do so, and I don't choose to make a judgment. However, the advice I provide is sound, orthodox pastoral practice and guidance, and you may in good conscience put it into practice every day.

***Q*** Is yoga a sin? My gym offers classes in yoga, and I find the stretching and breathing exercises to be very helpful. A friend says I should no longer attend the class because yoga is a spiritual practice that isn't accepted or endorsed by the Catholic Church.

***A*** To the best of my knowledge, no official Church office offers stamps of approval or disapproval on the many practices available to us. The Church relies on common sense and informed conscience. Your common sense informs you that yoga helps you maintain a healthy lifestyle and benefits you.

Although yoga does have roots in Hinduism, the yoga offered in a public gym isn't a threat to your Catholic life or spiritual practice.

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