

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999
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Context and Expectation

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Often the context of an experience informs our future reactions in the same scenario. For example, if my boss asks me to come into his office and close the door, I'll assume it's important. If my previous experiences in this scenario were negative, I may also assume that this meeting will be negative: I didn't do something correctly, or I need to focus differently on a task. In that case, I'm surprised if something different happens—like if the manager praises me.

As it is in life, so it is in the gospels. Jesus speaks to his followers in a way they're quite familiar with, so they have expectations of how things might work out.

But imagine—as is often the case with Jesus' parables—that their expectations aren't confirmed and Jesus proposes something completely different. In these instances, Jesus intends to teach a profound and essential lesson. Scripture scholars attuned to this dynamic in the Jesus' parables call this the "principle of reversal." The teaching moment occurs when the expected result is turned upside down.

For example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we expect his father to chastise him, punish him

for his unacceptable behavior, and refuse to accept him. But that's not what happens. When the man who owes a huge sum of money is dragged in chains to the king, we expect the king to punish him. But that's not what happens. And when the apostles inform Jesus that all they have for the large crowd is a few loaves of bread and a couple of pieces of fish, we expect Jesus to send everyone home. But, again, that's not what happens.

When our expectations are turned upside down, we experience the profound, sudden, and extravagant manifestation of God's grace. Nothing in our experience can prepare us for the awesome power of grace. It's pure gift—unexpected, unwarranted, and nonetheless showered upon us, changing our perceptions and inviting us to imagine a context for living that is beyond our experience.

Extravagant manifestations of God's grace aren't limited to the parables. God's grace is active and alive in our world and in who we are as the people of God. God's grace *intends* to break in and disrupt the expected.

There is, however, a catch: *If we don't cooperate with God's grace, it remains only invitation and never becomes reality.*

What blocks God's life-giving grace? Sin comes first to mind for people with scrupulosity, but the more dangerous obstacle is the fear and anxiety that make us unwilling to risk everything to be lifted up and made whole—or, as Scripture teaches, to experience the saving power of God.

Fear blocks the fullness of the extravagant manifestation of God's grace because fear mistrusts, misinterprets, and never freely engages extravagance. We can't control and discipline our thoughts and feelings, but the *imagined* ability to do so routinely causes havoc and mutes the manifestation of grace.

Imagine how different the story would be if fear had caused the Prodigal Son to stay with the swine and never take the journey home to his father. Imagine being in the crowd that followed Jesus. Now imagine that fear causes you to leave the event and go home alone instead of accepting the invitation to sit down and take your place before him.

In each example, the extravagant manifestation of God's grace occurs but is missed. Fear becomes the agent of control and discipline as it eliminates creativity, imagination, and the powerful manifestation of the unexpected.

When we talk about fear and anxiety, we are *not* talking about sin. Fear and anxiety are manifestations of a disorder that prevents us from fully engaging and living the way God wants us to. Nor are we talking about punishment. God does not single people out to deny them the fullness of life.

We *are* talking about a terrible scourge that makes certain responses to life difficult but not impossible. All that's required is the focused effort to *at least try*. Even if we don't succeed, *in our effort* we might experience the extravagant manifestation of God's grace.

If we make this effort, slowly but surely grace will heal what right now seems as though it will be with us forever—and it all begins with imagining an outcome completely different than the one we expect.

Be sure to listen to Fr. Santa's live call-in show, "Understanding Scrupulosity," on Radio Maria USA. The show airs Wednesdays at 2 pm Eastern Time.

To listen: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity to access podcasts or listen live

To call in: 866-333-MARY (6279)

To e-mail a question to Fr. Santa: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity and complete the form.

Reflection

Adapted from *Hopeful Meditations for Every Day of Easter Through Pentecost* by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

Again and again in sacred Scripture we hear, “Do not be afraid.” Again and again we are reminded that God is with us. Our faith tells us that with God by our side, nothing can harm us. Yet we continue to feel afraid and often let that fear control our thoughts, actions, and words.

Being afraid can become a habit. Sometimes we are afraid of making others angry by saying what is in our hearts. Sometimes we are afraid of being hurt if we love someone or let someone love us. Sometimes we are afraid of losing our job if we take a stand against something we feel is wrong or unjust. Sometimes we are afraid of getting old, getting sick,

being dependent on others, or being alone.

Overcoming fear takes a commitment on our part, but it can be done. We are greater than fear.

Awareness is our greatest ally in overcoming fear. When we are aware of the fear, we can name it, describe it, and look at the reasons for our fear. We ask God to be right by our side to show us how to address and banish the fear.

Letting go of fear is a skill we learn with practice. Each day we can ask God to show us our fears and help us overcome them. Each day we can trust that God is by our side, leading us gently on the path of love, helping us to leave all fear behind.

Ponder: What do I fear?

Prayer: Risen Lord, you are always with me. Help me love more and fear less.

Practice: Today I will refuse to be controlled by fear.

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MAILBOX

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE • LIGUORI, MO 63057-9999
NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q *I strongly disagree with the advice you gave the man who wants to go to the swimming pool even though he is tempted by immodesty. Jesus said we should avoid all "near occasions of sin."*

A I respectfully disagree. The man isn't trying to avoid immodesty. He's trying to avoid the *anxiety* he experiences in the natural activity of swimming in a pool. No sin is connected with anxiety or with inaccurate judgments associated with anxiety, and I won't confirm your perception that there is. To do so would only encourage even more anxiety.

Q *I do yoga because it is helpful exercise. Is it a sin? I've received conflicting advice and don't know what to do.*

A It is by no stretch of the imagination a sin. Yes, yoga is an essential spiritual practice in some traditions, but it is also, as you rightly observed, a form of exercise. There is no conflict between yoga and your faith. Engage in your yoga practice with a clear conscience. Be at peace.

Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats

Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Friday, Sept. 25 – Sunday, Sept. 27, 2015

Cedarbrake Catholic Retreat Center
5602 Highway 317
Belton, TX 76513
254-780-2436

Friday, Jan. 15 – Sunday, Jan. 17, 2016

Spiritual Life Center (Wichita, KS)
7100 East 45th Street North
Bel Aire, KS 67226
316-744-0167

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