

Kenotic Love and the Pericope Adulterae in a Power-Crazed World

(John 8:1–11, John 7:37–39, and John 8:12)

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Abstract

In our power-crazed world dominated by anger and fear, what can the ‘meekness’ of Jesus teach us about kenarchy — the practical outworking of kenotic love in the face of opposition and oppression?

What can we learn about a love that subversively calls for both oppressed and oppressor to pause in the midst of turmoil — to consider, to consent, to cooperate — as they come face to face with a Messiah they did not expect? The Feast of Tabernacles historically celebrated God’s abundant provision for his people in the desert. At the time of our story however, the city was embroiled in an atmosphere of rising anger and danger, exacerbated by Jesus’ claims to be the fulfillment of the Feast’s ceremonies. Right in the middle of the drama is the controverted Pericope Adulterae (PA), (the story of the woman caught in adultery), which I see as a powerful portrayal of Jesus’ kenotic love. At considerable risk, Jesus humbles himself before a woman caught in adultery (the Adulterae) and the worldly power of the religious leaders; choosing the way of protector, revealer of hearts, wisdom and love over retaliation, self-preservation, or the exploitation of his own power. He respects the woman’s God-given dignity in her need for de-escalation and reflection, providing the opportunity for thoughtful metanoia, as she faces her decision to consent and wholly participate in union with God in his kingdom. At the same time he demonstrates the counter intuitive power of the shock of meekness in social action: Stooping in the dust before them, he provides quiet space in the centre of turmoil, “forcing” the religious leaders to confront their own sin and the harm they are perpetrating, clearing the way for their own conversations with God, that might perhaps lead to soul transformation and social change.¹

By reading the story as history and metaphor, considering the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles, I will explore how Jesus demonstrates unpanicked kenotic love, and invites us too, to consent to and participate in that love, for ourselves, for the oppressed around us, and shockingly, even

¹ “He held ‘before the offender a mirror that registers an image of himself that reflects the image of those who suffer at his hand.’” Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change” (Lawrence Lecture, October 13, 1978), The Howard Thurman Digital Archive, accessed April 3, 2026.

for the oppressors. Howard Thurman is a sure guide in this story, as he gently models the beauty of “kenarchy” for us.

Question

In our power-crazed world of anger and fear, what can the ‘meekness’ of Jesus teach us, about kenarchy — the practical outworking of kenotic love, in the face of opposition and oppression? What can we learn about a love that subversively calls for both oppressed and oppressor to pause in the midst of turmoil — to consider, to consent, to cooperate — as they come face to face with Jesus? The story of the woman caught in adultery, the “Pericope Adulterae” (PA) is as controversial as it is potent and will provide the historical foundation for our search.

Thesis

The Feast of Tabernacles historically celebrated God’s abundant provision in the desert. At the time of our story however, the city was embroiled in an atmosphere of rising anger and danger, exacerbated by Jesus’ claims to be the fulfillment of the Feast’s ceremonies. Right in the middle of the drama is the controverted Pericope Adulterae, (PA) (the story of the woman caught in adultery) which I see as a portrayal of Jesus’ kenotic love. At considerable risk, Jesus humbles himself before a lowly woman caught in adultery (the Adulterae) and the worldly power of the religious leaders; choosing the way of protector, revealer of hearts, wisdom and love, over retaliation, self-preservation, or the exploitation of his own power he respects the woman’s God-given dignity in her need for de-escalation and reflection, for thoughtful metanoia, as she faces her decision to consent and wholly participate in union with God in his kingdom. At the same time, he demonstrates the counter intuitive power and efficacy of meekness in a situation of spiritual abuse and social injustice, extending the offer of kenotic love to the oppressors as well as the oppressed.

Method

By reading the story as history and metaphor, considering the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles, I will explore how Jesus does not strive to answer power with worldly power, but demonstrates unpanicked kenotic love, and invites us to consent to and participate in that love, for ourselves, for the oppressed around us, and even for the oppressors.

Background

The Pericope Adulterae is set in John's Gospel, the day after the week of joyful celebration known as the Feast of Tabernacles, Festival of Booths, or Sukkoth.² After the last harvest, the people were commanded to live in booths for a week, making daily offerings "to the Lord by fire."³ They remembered God's presence, provision, protection and guidance; specifically in manna, water from the rock, and guidance by fire and cloud, during their escape from Egypt and subsequent desert wanderings. Despite God's faithfulness, the desert was a place of murmuring and grumbling against God, climaxing in Moses' fateful striking of the Rock to bring forth water at Meribah.

During the post-exilic period, "the festival assumed an eschatological orientation."⁴ The feast's ceremonies were shaped by prophecies of redemption (of living water from the altar, to be provided by the returning King);⁵ the slaking of spiritual thirst;⁶ and a great and guiding Light⁷ for all peoples, as prophesied by Isaiah.⁸

By Jesus' time, the Feast of Tabernacles was a popular call to the nation to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest, anticipate and pray for rain⁹ and renewal of sunlight after the winter,¹⁰ but especially to await in hope the coming of Messiah.¹¹ The week's rituals and sacrifices included a morning "Water Libation ceremony," in which water from the Pool of Siloam was poured over the altar in the temple, and a "Willow ceremony," when willow branches were brought to the temple. "They beat them against the sides of the altar, chanting, "We beseech thee, O Lord, save us we pray..."¹² In the evening

² First mentioned in Exodus 23:16, as the "Feast of Ingathering," it is described in increasing detail in Leviticus 23, Numbers 29, and Deuteronomy 16, as the "Feast of Tabernacles."

³ Leviticus 23:36.

⁴ Gerry Wheaton, *The Role of Jewish Feasts in John's Gospel*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 162 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 127–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139942034>.

⁵ Ezekiel 43–47, specifically 47:1; Zechariah 14:8.

⁶ Isaiah 55:1, 10–11.

⁷ "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." Isaiah 9:1.

⁸ "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:6.

⁹ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), accessed November 15, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰ Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

¹¹ "[Worshippers] looked expectantly to a future time when life-giving waters will flow from the temple and invigorate the land, just like water flowed for the ancestors from the rock in the wilderness." Gale A. Yee, "Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John" (1988), 77, quoted in Frederick D. Bruner, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 487.

¹² Wheaton, *The Role of Jewish Feasts*, 127–58 (specifically referencing "Analysis of m. Sukk. 4 and t. Sukk. 3: The altar ceremonies and the Meribah tradition").

there was a “Light ceremony,” in which a “huge golden candelabrum”¹³ was lit, the lamps so bright that they illuminated the whole courtyard and could be seen outside the city on a hill.¹⁴ Usually, this Feast was joyful, but this year, there was an air of murmuring, confusion, and rising fear and anger (reminiscent of desert days) from Jesus’ brothers (John 7:3–5), some of the disciples (John 6:60, 66), the crowd (John 7:12–13, 20, 30) and, most dangerously, the religious leaders; Jesus the seeker, offering life, was becoming Jesus the sought, hunted for death.

On the last day of the Feast, Jesus came to the temple, stood and cried, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this, he meant the Spirit...¹⁵ He proclaimed himself the fulfillment of the Water ceremony prophecies, manifested himself as the Messiah, and offered living water to the thirsty (as Calvin states,¹⁶ and Augustine hints, by loving first, he promotes thirst, so to fill it)¹⁷ enabling them in turn to refresh others from the fount within them.¹⁸ Ominously, the “Willow ceremony” still hung over him, hinting that he will be struck, as the living altar, to allow the water to come forth.

After his meeting with the “Adulterae,” Jesus declared, “Ego eimi, I am the Light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life... ”¹⁹ He thus claimed to be the embodiment of the Light ceremony as well, the Light of Life illuminating the whole world,²⁰ Light to reveal the Truth — about our hearts, for the sake of justice, and about himself: “The brightness of souls,

¹³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 140–41.

¹⁴ Karen Engle, “Feast of Tabernacles: The Most Joyful Feast on God’s Calendar,” ICEJ Reports, <https://icejusa.org/2023/10/12/feast-of-tabernacles-the-most-joyful-feast-on-gods-calendar/>, 6.

¹⁵ John 7:38–39.

¹⁶ “It is the office of the Spirit, therefore, to give us an appetite for His grace.” Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 492.

¹⁷ “I mean, if you had not been dry, you would not have been thirsty. If you had not been thirsty, you would not have drunk. What do I mean when I say: if you had not been thirsty, you would not have believed in Christ? Unless you had discovered how empty you were, you would not have believed in Christ. Before saying, ‘rivers of living water will flow from his belly,’ he first said, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come and drink.’ The reason you will have a river of living water is that you drink. You do not drink if you are not thirsty.” Augustine, *Sermons 160.2*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IVa*, John 1–10, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 264.

¹⁸ “[The person] who comes to Me I shall equip, not only to be refreshed and satisfied and to quench his own thirst but also to become a sturdy, earthen vessel, endowed with the Holy Spirit and with gifts that enable him to give consolation and strength to many other people and to serve them, as he was served by me.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works 23:273*, quoted in Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 489.

¹⁹ John 8:12

²⁰ “He wanted to show that he was not one of the prophets, but the Master of the world. ‘I am the light of the world,’ not only of Galilee, or of Palestine, or of Judea.” John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 279.

the one who drives away the darkness of ignorance, and the one who reveals mysteries that can be perceived only by the pure.”²¹

In between these two momentous “I Am” claims lies the Pericope Adulterae. There has been great debate about whether this story should be included in John’s Gospel: in many translations, it is not. It seems to break up the drama of chapters seven and eight; some of the text and vocabulary does not bear the hallmark of John, and some early manuscripts put it in Luke or did not include it at all.²² Many scholars consider it “unquestionably an interpolation”²³ and therefore question whether it is canonical. The arguments for and against the PA are many, and beyond the scope of this paper. I was most interested in Augustine’s opinion, especially given his famously complex view of women²⁴ that including this story might encourage women to promiscuity or make adultery a minor infraction,²⁵ which is why it was so often left out. Keener, among others, discounts this theory on the basis that other passages about promiscuous women “were not similarly excised.”²⁶ However, as I see it, all the other stories about such women have clear outcomes of faith and repentance, justifying their inclusion: this one, as with the elder brother in the prodigal son story, leaves us hanging, which makes it less palatable...

However, as Grabiner concludes, the PA is widely considered to be historical, it is referenced positively in the “Protoevangelium Iacobi”²⁷ (the most influential gospel outside the canon) and most ancient Christians (from Augustine, through Calvin²⁸ to FF Bruce²⁹ for example) accepted it as gospel and appreciated its spiritual lessons. Thus, despite the controversy, pastorally the PA should not be ignored,

²¹ Maximus the Confessor, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 280.

²² Every commentary I read held an opinion on this story; “The Pericope Adulterae: a most perplexing passage,” by Steven Grabiner, is a thorough example.

²³ Steven Grabiner, “The Pericope Adulterae: A Most Perplexing Passage,” accessed November 27, 2024, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3292&context=auss>, 111.

²⁴ “Some men of slight faith, or, rather, some hostile to true faith, fearing, as I believe, that liberty to sin with impunity is granted their wives, remove from their scriptural texts the account of our Lord’s pardon of the adulteress, as though he who said, ‘Go and sin no more,’ granted permission to sin, or as though the woman should not have been cured by the divine physician by the remission of that sin in order not to offend others who are equally unclean.” Augustine, *On Adulterous Marriages* 2.7.6, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 272.

²⁵ Augustine’s theory has held; cf. Frederick D. Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 508; and Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 230.

²⁶ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 787.

²⁷ Grabiner, “The Pericope Adulterae,” 112.

²⁸ Grabiner, “The Pericope Adulterae,” 113 (quoting John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*: “But as it has always been received by the Latin Churches, and is found in many old Greek manuscripts, and contains nothing unworthy of an Apostolic Spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our advantage”).

²⁹ Grabiner, “The Pericope Adulterae,” 109 (quoting F. F. Bruce, who argues that the PA is “eminently worthy of being treated as canonical” due to its historical nature and the truth of the gospel contained in the account).

as it is a valid account of a moment in Jesus' life, through which the Spirit has and continues to testify. Grabiner states: "Since the PA is widely considered to be historical, the passage can also be preached in reference to other texts. For example, it can be used as an illustration of freedom from condemnation, as other true stories are used to illustrate Bible principles."³⁰ That is, it is a story that is consistent with the Spirit of God throughout the rest of the Canon, and its lessons can confirm and be confirmed by other texts.

Regarding the PA itself; a few small points of background: Bailey states that the day after the Feast was treated as a Sabbath — work was prohibited. Writing was considered work. But writing in the dust with one's finger was allowed because it "leaves no lasting mark,"³¹ it will be blown away in the wind. There are only a few other instances of the penmanship of God — in Exodus and Jeremiah:³² The Ten Commandments 2.0 were written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. Later, God spoke through Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow..." requiring more writing, as described in Jeremiah, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

The Jewish law regarding adultery is clear: "If a man is caught in adultery with the wife of another man, both of them shall die."³³ "Stoning was a traditional penalty, seldom if ever enforced upon adulterers, though often threatened."³⁴ In fact, Roman law did not permit the Jews to put anyone to death³⁵ (the ultimate human power of any government over its citizens being control of the sentence of death) and Roman law did not authorise execution for adultery.³⁶ Last, but not least, I am reminded of the hierarchy of power in Israel at this time. Israel was brutally governed by all powerful Rome, an overarching threat to their physical survival, and to the survival of their culture and faith.³⁷ Roman presence was ubiquitous; in the setting of our story, there was a large military fort on the north end of the temple area, accessing the temple via a walkway that was patrolled vigilantly, especially during feast

³⁰ Grabiner, "The Pericope Adulterae," 112.

³¹ Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 234.

³² Exodus 32:15–16; Ezekiel 36:26–27; Jeremiah 31:33.

³³ Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22–24.

³⁴ Mark Edwards, *John Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 89.

³⁵ John 18:31; Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 233.

³⁶ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 738.

³⁷ "The crucial problem of Judaism was to exist as an isolated, autonomous, cultural, religious, and political unit in the midst of the hostile Hellenic world." Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 10.

days. Everyone was conscious of the power of Rome watching for any unrest.³⁸ Within the Jewish community the Pharisees and Sadducees held the power. Under them, power rested with the Rabbis; then the ordinary men; followed by their upstanding wives; leaving widows, children and lastly, at the bottom of the power chain, the “sinners,” lepers, prostitutes, women of ill repute. Jesus, by contrast, having left the power filled glory of heaven, described himself as “meek (*praus*-gentle, possessing power under control)³⁹ and humble (*tapeinos*)⁴⁰ of heart” offering rest to any burdened and toiling soul who came and learned from him.⁴¹ The religious leaders confront Jesus, sure that the balance of power and the Law is in their favour. However, as I understand “kenarchy” to be the outworking of the kenotic, self-sacrificing, self-emptying agape love of the “upside down” kingdom of God — love that reorders worldly power structures in favour of the oppressed — we glimpse in this story the Messiah shifting the balance of power as he cares for the shalom, surprisingly, not only of the oppressed, but also of the oppressors.

Exegesis

The Pericope Adulterae occurs on the day after the Feast, which had ended with Jesus’ stunning announcement that he is the Living Water. Tensions rose, and everyone retreated to their own homes. Jesus, however, having given up his heavenly home, went to the Mount of Olives, his earthly place of refuge, for the night. Bede reminds us that “*eleos*” means mercy, the same root as “*elaion*” an “olive plantation;” as olive oil is used for anointing, so the Anointed One goes for anointing from his Father once again,⁴² receiving “the tender mercy⁴³ of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 233.

³⁹ “This difficult to translate root (*pra*) means more than ‘meek.’ Biblical meekness is not weakness but rather refers to exercising God’s strength under His control—i.e., demonstrating power without undue harshness.” *Helps Word-studies*, Cognate 4239, Bible Hub.

⁴⁰ “5011 *Tapeinos*: Inner lowliness describing the person who depends on the Lord rather than self. Being God-reliant rather than self-reliant—which ironically always exalts a person—brings them true worth.” *Helps Word-studies*, Bible Hub.

⁴¹ Matthew 11:28–29.

⁴² “God, his God, has anointed him with the oil of gladness above his companions in order that he may deign to make us also companions of that anointing of his, that is, sharers of spiritual grace.” Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, quoted in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 273.

⁴³ *Eleos*: mercy, compassion, corresponding in the LXX to the Hebrew “chesed.” Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. Thus, mercy is deeply rooted in the covenantal loving kindness between God and His people.

⁴⁴ Luke 1:78–79.

With the rising sun, Jesus returns to the temple, sitting down as rabbis do, to teach the people, living in darkness, who are gathered. Suddenly interrupting, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees drag in a nameless woman. The unfolding story is relatively straight forward, and there is not much controversy in its interpretation. The text clearly points out that the religious leaders, exploiting the power of their position, are simply using this woman as a pawn to trap Jesus. With utter disdain, they force her to stand before the whole group; she is merely another man's chattel, and they care nothing for the impact of this public shaming upon her. They claim that she was "caught in the act of adultery," although how these religious leaders caught her when they should have been observing the Sabbath is not clear. They remind the giver of the Law himself that the law commands stoning "such women," omitting the fact that the law commands stoning both the man — whom they have not brought — and the woman. Thinking that they have now caught Jesus too, they ask, "Now what do you say?" They know that if Jesus promotes stoning, he will likely be arrested, for the Roman guards on patrol would be alerted to the ensuing chaos and he would be blamed for breaking their law. Pronouncing the sentence of stoning would negate Jesus' teaching on forgiveness,^{45 46} and "the mercy that he was always teaching,"⁴⁷ and discredit him as the "Messiah" who "should be meek."⁴⁸ On the other hand, if he forgave her, he would be accused of contravening the Jewish Law and would be found guilty, along with her, as an accomplice,⁴⁹ a "friend of sinners."⁵⁰

Jesus does not fall into their trap. Exhibiting Messianic meekness of power under control, he bends down and starts writing on the ground. Why did he write? To buy time? Add drama? Act as if he did not hear them?⁵¹ Draw the crowd's attention off the woman and onto himself,⁵² protecting her, an act of power in the face of her weakness? Malachi describes Messiah as the "sun of righteousness or justice."⁵³ By writing on the ground, he reminds the leaders that he knows the Law, including their

⁴⁵ Mark Edwards, *John Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 89.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Sermon 16A.4*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 273.

⁴⁷ Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 273.

⁴⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 1549.

⁴⁹ "Thou art an enemy of the law, thou judgest contrary to Moses, or rather against Him who gave the law. Thou art guilty of death, and must be stoned together with her." Augustine, quoted in Cornelius a Lapide, *Catena on John 8*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 273.

⁵⁰ Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1549.

⁵¹ Edwards, *John Through the Centuries*, 89.

⁵² Bruner gives the reasons that most other commentators cite too. Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 505.

⁵³ Malachi 4:2: "For you who fear my name, the sun of Righteousness/justice will rise with healing in its wings."

additional Sabbath rules.⁵⁴ But he does it with mercy,⁵⁵ not with vindictiveness. Maybe he is giving them time, in the light of his proclamation the night before, to remember Jeremiah's warning: those who "forsake the LORD, the spring of living water,"⁵⁶ "will be written in the dust." But they continue to press him, and he straightens up. Augustine asks, "How did that Righteousness answer? ... see how full of righteousness, how full of meekness and truth his answer is! This is the voice of justice."⁵⁷ Jesus says, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And bends down to write again. It is suggested that he writes the words of the Law, or "Guilty as charged" or "Stone her," Jerome and Augustine propose that he writes the names and sins of all those accusing her.⁵⁸

However, as he writes, in this genius, gentle, shocking moment of pause, of de-escalation, all her accusers slowly walk away, eldest to youngest, convicted, or embarrassed, or afraid, their public humiliation likely fueling the danger Jesus is in. As Jesus straightens up again, only the woman is left there, "Woman," he asks, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She is not defiant, does not protest her innocence, beg for mercy, explain herself, in her weakness she simply allows him to deal with her enemies, merely saying, "No one, Lord." Augustine, followed by others, interprets these words as confession and acknowledgement of sin.⁵⁹ And Jesus, the only one who could have thrown the first stone, but who had not come to condemn the world, rather to save it, said, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." Implicitly, he agrees that she has sinned, does not condone it, but forgives her, charging her to radical change. Bruner summarises the consensus of other commentators: "We have splendid doctrines of both justification and of sanctification, and of their sources and motives, in our short story."⁶⁰ On her way out, we do not know if she heard the 'Sun of

⁵⁴ Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 234.

⁵⁵ Beautifully, "tsedaqah:" righteousness or justice is "often linked with 'cheched' Cheched: loving kindness, steadfast love, loyalty, faithfulness, goodness, mercy, (the very definition of God) The corresponding Greek word also being 'eleos.'" Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

⁵⁶ "O LORD the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water." Jeremiah 17:13.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 275.

⁵⁸ Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 274.

⁵⁹ "No-one is confession of her sins. 'Lord,' that is pardon of what she deserved. 'I acknowledge both things, I know who you are; I know who I am. It is to you I am confessing... I know my confession, I know your mercy.'" Augustine, *Sermon 16A.5*, in Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 277.

⁶⁰ Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 507.

mercy and righteousness' proclaim, "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the Light of Life:" Messiah, God himself.⁶¹

This briefly summarizes the commentaries of this story as history. However, I do not think the story actually wraps up that neatly. I would like to review it differently, as metaphor that reveals the cruciform and kenotic love of Jesus, specifically in his desire for consent and participation in our lives, and in those of oppressed and oppressor.

My first glimpse of this was in a review of the words "he straightened up." In the Greek, "anakupto" from "ana," a "sense of reversal, up, upward," and "kupto: I bend, stoop, bow the head." Anakupto is also translated, "he lifted himself up," which brought to mind, "if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all peoples to myself" (John 10:18) and, "no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord... and take it up again."⁶² Though the Greek words are not the same, the message is. Bradley Jersak sees John 10:18 as Jesus' active and self-initiating consent to his Father.⁶³ I see Jesus emptying himself, coming to earth, humbly bending down from heaven to bow in the dust with us (kupto) (Jn 8:6), writing our sins, the contravention of commandments that God himself had written in stone,⁶⁴ and their penalties in that dust; I see him, lifted up (anakupto) onto the cross identifying with everyone's sin and shame (Jn 8:7) then bending in death to the grave, (kupto Jn 8:8) but this time, having conquered sin, the previous words of the law blown away, writing a new commandment now on hearts of flesh: "Love one another... as I have loved you!"⁶⁵ I see him rising from the grave (anakupto, Jn 8:10) face to face with the woman (each of us). She seeing "only Jesus" (like the disciples after the glory of the transfiguration! Or Mary Magdalene, that other former prostitute, in the garden on Easter Sunday morning) and hearing his words of forgiveness, the offer to her Spirit of Living Water and Light for her life. Cruciform love, a "Love Supreme."⁶⁶

⁶¹ "This threefold manifestation [of water, 7:37–39], of light,, and I Am, [8:21–38], corresponds with the affirmations of the Prologue, which present the Logos as the bearer of life and light, and as being both theos, [God, 1:1c] and pros ton theon, [with God, 1:1b] or eis ton kolpon tou patros, [in the bosom of the Father, 1:18]." C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 351, quoted in Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 492.

⁶² John 10:18.

⁶³ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God* (Winnipeg: CWR Press, 2015), 124.

⁶⁴ Exodus 34:1.

⁶⁵ John 13:34.

⁶⁶ "And for Christians, a love supreme is intuitively connected to the cross as the supreme act of divine love." Brian Zahnd, *The Wood Between the Worlds* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2024), 55.

And then I begin to see kenosis in the working out of consent and participation: The religious leaders dragged in a nameless woman, whose sin was without question, but who was still being treated abominably by all the men complicit in using and abusing her, placing her literally in the shadow of death. They brought her to try and trap Messiah himself.⁶⁷ But he, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God⁶⁸ humbled himself and knelt in the dust before the feet of this despised woman! I think of Job's fearful words, "Remember that you moulded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?"⁶⁹ and wonder, was she too thinking, "But this is what you concealed in your heart, and I know this was in your mind: If I sinned, you would be watching me and would not let my offence go unpunished."⁷⁰ And then, the fateful words that could have meant her death — "Let him who is without sin..." except Jesus knew the hearts of all men and so could walk the knife edge that led to light being shed, the truth in men's hearts being revealed, the opportunity given for metanoia not only to her but to her accusers as well. Howard Thurman beautifully explains:

The mystic's concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society...not merely to relieve human suffering and human misery... The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this calls for action...The assumption here is that both parties, the sufferer and the offender, are both cut off from their own altars... I must not forget that the ill that a man does to others stands between that man and that man's own altar."⁷¹

Kenotic Love, instead of raining down condemnation and punishment on either side, restrains the power of Jesus, so that everyone involved is given pause to consider the altars in their hearts and what might be there blocking fellowship with God.⁷² As Jesus again bent low before them all, providing

⁶⁷ "He is wisdom-in-himself, Word-in-himself, himself the father's own Power, Light-in-himself, Truth-in-himself, Righteousness-in-himself, Virtue-in-himself, yes, and the Stamp and the Effulgence and Image. In short, he is the supremely perfect fruit of the Father and is alone Son, the exact image of the Father." *Against the Gentiles*, 46, quoted by John Behr in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 33.

⁶⁸ Nicene Creed

⁶⁹ Job 10:9.

⁷⁰ Job 10:13–14.

⁷¹ Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change" (Lawrence Lecture, October 13, 1978), The Howard Thurman Digital Archive.

⁷² In his discussion of Philippians 2, Hak Joon Lee writes, "Although Paul's message on kenosis was addressed to all Philippian Christians, it targeted particularly those with power and status within the community. Paul is directly telling them to exemplify servanthood by 'giving space' to others as Jesus did rather than holding on to power and

space for examen, the men left, perhaps to drink Living Water, exposed to the Light of life and love as they were; or perhaps still “incurvatus in se,” bent in their pride, more determined than ever for vengeance. Jesus did not force the issue. As Volf puts it, “The decision to come to Jesus as the Light of Life is possible and free, but humans are heavily pressured [by a complex field of forces] as they exercise that freedom,” and, “He is the judge who doesn’t judge.”⁷³

And so, the woman has Jesus’ undivided attention. Had she seen the radiance of his glory? We do not know. The beauty of this story is that, unlike the story of Mary Magdalene, we are not assured of her repentance and redemption. Instead, Jesus understands that this woman was still reeling from her near-death experience, her adrenaline still pumping, her worldview of men who use, abuse, dominate and demand their way, still too ingrained. Jesus knew that “passions [as the ancient monastics used the word] blind us so that we cannot love... .”⁷⁴ Jesus’ way with this woman was not as other men; it was the way of meek kenotic love: granting respect, dignity, mercy, compassion and righteousness. His unpanicked love was prepared to wait until the woman was ready to receive, consent and participate.⁷⁵ “Go and sin no more” is the epitome of grace and wisdom, displaying the riches of kindness, tolerance and patience, allowing her space to go away and process, to be able to come to the point of wholehearted, rational, appropriate healing and metanoia in her own time.⁷⁶ For all the controversy over the Pericope Adulterae, I see its position at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, between the invitations to come to Jesus as living water for our thirst and light for our darkness, as a historical story illustrating the mercy and righteousness of God towards even this poor desperate woman; the co-suffering love of Jesus

privilege.” Hak Joon Lee, “Kingdom and Kenosis: The Mind of Christ in Paul’s Ethics,” Fuller Studio, 2025, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/kingdom-and-kenosis-the-mind-of-christ-in-pauls-ethics/>.

⁷³ “Each person is caught in a complex field of forces—individuals’ wills and proclivities, God’s light shining on them and God’s lure pulling them, social attractions and pressure, and finally the agency of the mysterious ruler of this world. This complex field goes a long way toward explaining the great diversity of stances to Jesus we find in the Gospel. On the one hand, the decision between light and darkness is between two stark opposites. On the other hand, given the complex ways that both light and darkness bear on individual lives, one can understand peoples’ many ambivalent responses to Jesus in the Gospel of John. The decision to come to Jesus as the Light of Life is possible and free, but humans are heavily pressured as they exercise that freedom.” Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 186–87.

⁷⁴ “They create for us interior lenses through which we see the world, lenses which we often do not even know are there. When we are under the control of our passions, even when we think we are most objective, we cannot be—we are in the grip of emotions, states of mind, habits that distort everything we see. What we think of as love while we are in the grip of the passions may very well have little to do with the person we supposedly love.” Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 65.

⁷⁵ “The Son does not force himself into our lives or make us receive his love...He initiates and we respond...always by consent.” Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, 125.

⁷⁶ “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance?” Romans 2:4.

paying full selfless attention to her even while in mortal danger himself. His nonviolent response to the not-so-subtle threat of the leaders, forcing that moment of silent reflection on them all, broke the tension, and provided an opportunity for light to be shed in the hearts of all involved. I see it also as a metaphor demonstrating the cruciform love of Jesus, offering to quench the woman's thirst and redeem her life from the pit so that she could walk in the light of life. However, "the cruciform God will not and cannot, by love's nature, coerce us to obey. God grants us the dignity (and discomfort) of 'finding our own bottom' ...the end of which is willing surrender to the arms of grace."⁷⁷ He allowed her to walk away, even as he had encouraged her oppressors to walk away, giving time to all to reflect, repent, consent and participate. We do not know if he is still waiting, but we do know that he remembers that we are dust, his mercy is never-ending,⁷⁸ and his kenotic love unfailing.

Relevance

When I was fourteen, feeling abandoned after eight years of boarding school, I became anorexic. I told God, "You can have control of every part of me except my body." My image of God as a boarding school principal, whose love was conditional on my obedience, meant I could not trust him not to test my faith by "forcing me" to become obese! For 35 years, God patiently, mercifully waited. I had a relationship with him but could not freely, fully participate in the kingdom of God: that only comes with full, willing consent of heart, soul, mind and strength [body]. My life was revolutionised when my image of God was corrected, just as the Adultrae's was when she saw the most high God making himself small and humble enough to kneel in the dust before her. As I experienced the perichoresis of the Trinity inviting me into their inner circle of love, smiling,⁷⁹ I finally consented to participate in their dance with all of my being, my soul delivered from death, my feet [body] from stumbling, so I could gratefully walk before God in the light of life.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, 185.

⁷⁸ Psalm 103.

⁷⁹ "After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child.... God interprets himself to man as love in the same way: he radiates love, which kindles the light of love in the heart of man, and it is precisely this light that allows man to perceive this, the absolute Love: 'For it is God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). In this face, the primal foundation of being smiles at us as a mother and as a father. Insofar as we are his creatures, the seed of love lies dormant within us as the image of God (imago). But just as no child can be awakened to love without being loved, so too no human heart can come to an understanding of God without the free gift of his grace in the image of his Son." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 75–76.

⁸⁰ Psalm 56:13.

This story shed light on my deep fear about my loved ones' loss of faith, as well as the faith I long to see in the vulnerable, disinherited women I minister to. I thought about Jesus' humble, unpanicked Spirit as he allowed the Adulterae to walk away without a word of gratitude or acknowledgement, not knowing if he would physically meet her again. Then I recognised the power of participation among the Trinity in the wooing of souls. Of course, as the Wisdom of Solomon reminds me,⁸¹ Jesus could leave the follow up seeking to the Spirit, as living water to quench her thirst, and as light to shine in her heart, giving her the "knowledge"⁸² of God, the light of life! Jesus is not panicked about waiting for consent, and the Spirit is perfectly able to lead the oppressed, including those I love, out of darkness. I can trust them to him; my role is not anxious striving and pressure to "convert," it is to consent and participate with the Spirit: kneel in the dust with them, serve them with mercy and righteousness, allow the Spirit to stream out of me, become what I have been called, "the light of the world,"⁸³ love them well, with heart, soul, mind and strength. As Lee affirms, this is my practice of kenosis.⁸⁴

Howard Thurman defines "consent" as treating others with "reverence for personality."⁸⁵ In his analysis of the PA, he concludes: "He met the woman where she was, and treated her as if she were already where she now willed to be... He placed a crown over her head, which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear,"⁸⁶ but he did not coerce. Instead, he waited for her consent and participation. In my context, I am called to reverence the personalities of the disinherited women my church ministers to, by treating them with respect as beloved Image bearers, as we seek to holistically meet their needs, preserve their dignity, love them on level ground, without pressuring them with "religion" that has been co-opted by the powerful or dominant.

⁸¹ "She goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought." Wisdom of Solomon 6:16.

⁸² In the sense of interactive living relationship.

⁸³ Matthew 5:14.

⁸⁴ "Our kenosis is possible when God's reign takes deep root in our own lives through the Spirit, and when our hearts are filled with thankfulness to God's love and conviction in the final victory of God. Kenosis is not duty. It cannot be coerced, and it should be voluntary as in the case of Jesus. Ironically, kenosis or self-emptying is the fruit of exocentric, overflowing love made possible through Christ. If kenosis is possible, then it should ultimately be a natural overflow of our lives in response to God's love." Lee, "Kingdom and Kenosis."

⁸⁵ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 94–95.

⁸⁶ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 96 (quoting the full text: "He met the woman where she was, and treated her as if she were already where she now willed to be. In dealing with her he 'believed' her into the fulfillment of her possibilities. He stirred her confidence into activity. He placed a crown over her head which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear").

Thurman also helped me to see how Jesus demonstrated the efficacy of nonviolent, self-controlled (meek) social action in the face of violent injustice. Thurman explains that “one of the radical functions of social action is to make the offender aware”⁸⁷ of how his hegemonic actions harm the security and well-being of the other, and also how his actions damage “the altar” of his own soul. This is radical kenotic love! Love that includes my enemy as well as my neighbour. Thurman suggests that sometimes “shock” is needed to bring this clarity to the oppressor, to force them to pause in the midst of the turmoil and consider... This is how actions like boycott, protest, or peaceful resistance, such as that of the RedletterChristians led by Shane Claiborne outside Lockheed Martin this past Good Friday, work. When we peacefully, yet determinedly, “stand with those suffering under systems of violence together” (as Claiborne describes it) the kenotic love of the Spirit can be given free reign in the quieted pause, as Jesus writes in the dust.

The witness of Howard Thurman, a modern-day Mystic:

Thurman modelled this “Jesus Way:” Born in 1900 in segregated Florida, raised by his grandmother, who had been enslaved,⁸⁸ he knew firsthand what it was to live standing with his “back constantly against the wall.”⁸⁹ He thought deeply about the religion of the white Pharisees of our age, who treated their black neighbours as “adulterae.”⁹⁰ In Jesus, he saw one of his own: disinherited, poor, back against the cross, and this was enough for him “to preserve at all costs, the inspirations and strengths of the religion of Jesus”⁹¹ despite the devastating witness of white Christianity. Drinking deeply of living water and exposing himself to the light of life, Thurman became quietly, but powerfully, influential in academia, politics and the church, founding the first intentionally integrated church in America.⁹² The hallmark of his life remained a staunch, humble commitment to resist hate, actively fight

⁸⁷ Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change.”

⁸⁸ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, ix (“come through the fierce crucible of slavery”).

⁸⁹ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 3.

⁹⁰ “Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 3 (referencing people “as objects of missionary endeavour and enterprise without being at all willing to treat them either as brothers or as human beings”).

⁹¹ M. E. Brogdon, “Reflections on the Life and Thought of Howard Thurman,” *Christian Ethics Today*, 2024.

⁹² “Howard Washington Thurman (1899–1981) was an influential African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. He played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century and was one of the leading religious figures of twentieth-century America. Thurman’s theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists and he was a key mentor to leaders within the movement such as Martin Luther King, Jr.” Renovaré USA, accessed June 8, 2026.

power-mongering with pacifism, embrace reconciliation — to love “friend and foe alike.”⁹³ Let his be the last word:

“The Word was Love, Hate is the last great fortress of the weak...All this Jesus knew, the Word was Love. The meaning of life, what is it? Down through the ages the deathless words ring out...” Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength. And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” And thy neighbour? Any man whose need of thee lays claim: Friend and foe alike. Thou must not make division. Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search to find the way by which the road to all men’s need of thee must go. This is the highway of the Lord.”

Conclusion:

The Pericope Adulterae is a controversial story that many have discounted to their loss. Taken as history, we see Jesus putting himself at risk to protect a despised, vulnerable woman whose life is worthless to the men who callously use her to trap him. In love, he displays ultimate power under control: mercy, righteousness, wisdom and humility, creating space for all concerned to consider his supreme offer of living water and the light of life. He gives each (oppressed and oppressor) the opportunity to do what it takes to remove whatever blocks union with himself. Taken as metaphor, it reveals his cruciform kenotic love, humbling himself in the dust, rewriting the Law on the cross, our mandate and telos now being only his love, of friend and foe alike. But he does not coerce anyone. Instead, his unpanicked love is demonstrated by his self-controlled willingness to wait for our consent and participation, trusting the consent and participation of the Trinity to continue to woo for as long as it takes.

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⁹³ Howard Thurman, “The Great Incarnate Words” (Howard Thurman Educational Trust, 1972).

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