

Feast of Mary Magdalene
Sunday Masses at St Mary Magdalen Parish, Berkeley
July 21-22, 2018

Song of Songs 3:1-4b
Psalm 63:2-6, 9
2 Corinthians 5:14-17
John 20:1-2, 11-18

Today's readings on this celebration of Mary Magdalene are about loving, searching, and finding.

Who are you looking for?

Mary Magdalene searches for Jesus in the gospel reading. However, before we go on our own search for Jesus, we first have to search for Mary Magdalene. Between the bible, a pope, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *The DaVinci Code* there are lots of mixed signals and mis-characterizations when it comes to Mary Magdalene.

Apostle. Prostitute. Lover of Jesus. Leader. Faithful friend. Repentant sinner.
Benefactor

According to the Gospels Mary Magdalene is:

- Present at the crucifixion of Jesus, an observer of the burial of Jesus, and the first witness to the resurrection. She is strong, faithful, and persistently present in Jesus' hour of need, which notably contrasts with Peter who denies knowing Jesus and the other male disciples who run off into the night.
- Listed as a leader among the women – when there's a list of women, her name appears first, just as Peter's name appears first in lists of male disciples. It indicates her significance in the resurrection tradition.
- Someone who was healed by Jesus. Luke says seven demons were cast out of her. The number seven suggests a totality of healing – and the demons likely indicate she was healed from some type of mental or physical illness. She then becomes a benefactor, traveling with Jesus and financially supporting the disciples as they moved from place to place.
- She's the first to encounter and recognize Jesus after the resurrection. She is commissioned to share the news with the other disciples.

- She is an apostle, or one who is sent. She's frequently called the "apostle to the apostles." Apostles were ones who were witnesses to the resurrection and called to preach Christ. She clearly does both.

In the 6th century, Gregory of Antioch imagines Jesus addressing Mary Magdalene saying: "Be the first teacher to the teachers. So that Peter who denied me learns that I can also choose women as apostles." (Ann Graham Brock 15)

Non-canonical gospels, such as *The Gospel of Phillip* or *The Gospel of Mary* depict tension between Mary Magdalene and Peter. The non-canonical gospels typically portray her in a stronger leadership role than we see in our Gospels and demonstrate there were questions about the role of women in the early church.

As parishioners of Mary Magdalen Parish, you are certainly already aware that depictions of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute are not accurate. This mis-characterization of Mary Magdalene can be traced back to a homily given by Pope Gregory the Great on the gospel of Luke, where he conflates a couple of female characters in the Gospels. He assumes that the sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet and whose sins are forgiven in Luke 7 is also Mary Magdalene who is said to have had seven demons cast out of her in Luke 8. However, there is a clear literary break between these passages (which means they're two different stories). Furthermore, Pope Gregory concludes that she was a great sinner because there were seven demons cast out of her. Yet, an exorcism of demons in a story indicates illness, rather than sinfulness. Then somehow, according to Pope Gregory, since Mary Magdalene is a woman and a sinner, she must be a prostitute.

Those are some pretty large leaps in reasoning, and seem to be the source of the idea of Mary Magdalene as sinner and prostitute. Prior to Pope Gregory's unfortunate homily she is not portrayed as such. Later artwork picks up on this imagery.

Throughout history strong women are minimized, and too frequently discredited by means of their sexuality. Perhaps that is what is happening here. Jezebel is another such biblical woman. Like Mary Magdalene, there is nothing in Jezebel's story that would justify labeling her a prostitute, yet both women's names today are synonymous with promiscuity. There's a lesson here in the damage a leader can inflict when irresponsibly resorting to name-calling...but that's another reflection.

Let us turn back to who Mary Magdalene is rather than who she is not. Today's readings highlight the themes of searching and love.

The first reading was from Song of Songs, which celebrates two lovers. Most of Song of Songs is written from the woman's point of view. Today's passage describes a woman searching for the one who is dear to her heart. When she finds him, she clings to him and does not let go. The bible affirms this intense loving between two people and readers of this sacred text have through the centuries turned it into a metaphor to describe humanity's relationship with God.

Today's psalm echoes this imagery in describing our longing for God:

It is you I seek...for you my soul thirsts...my soul clings fast to you. This language demonstrates a desire to know God intimately.

We heard of the loving passion that pulls two people together, that leads one to search for the other when they are apart. Then we heard about the search for God and the human longing for God. Now the 2nd Letter to the Corinthians speaks of love again. The love of Christ impels us, reminding us of sacrifice and the new creation that now exists because of Jesus' resurrection.

There's a movement here from a particular love that is focused on an individual, to a love that is focused on God. Now love impels us. Christ impels us outward.

And we turn to the John's gospel, where Mary Magdalene is desperately searching for the one she loves – Jesus. We have the poignant scene of grief and desperation blinding her until she recognizes Jesus' voice calling her name. Mary. Mary Magdalene is one of Jesus' sheep who recognizes and responds to his voice. She is portrayed as an ideal disciple in John's gospel. She is overjoyed at finding the one she seeks alive. She wants to hold tight to this moment...not unlike the lover in Song of Songs or the psalmist longing for and clinging to God.

Jesus' loosening her hold on him is not a rejection of Mary, but an affirmation. She is entrusted with a message. She is now tasked to share her close relationship with Jesus with others. She goes forth proclaiming.

Love compels us. Christ compels us. Mary Magdalene compels us to go and do likewise.

Who are we looking for? What are we searching for? What is our call – over a lifetime and in this moment?

Willingness to be in the in between, unresolved space of searching is a spiritual practice. Faithfully searching can be a holy thing even though not knowing or not finding can cause anxiety. It is in our searching that we find each other and God. We let go. We go forth for the sake of others...and begin the search anew.

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