

Sermon: Mary Magdalene

Happy Super Bowl Sunday – a uniquely American tradition that consumes the attention of millions of people and billions of dollars as we look to see who will be crowned the best team in football. In writing this sermon I wasn't sure how many people would attend the service - such is the power of this sport and this culminating event. I'm grateful for all here today (both in person and online) and those who will watch later because I know that a whole industry has risen up around this game. There are parties, and special food and gatherings and because our beloved Seahawks are once again playing, well, it's surprising that we didn't just shut the whole city down! The Super Bowl might not be an official American holiday, but it is, for better and for worse, the most American event the world has ever known.

I have a complicated relationship with football because I was raised with four brothers, two sisters and a lot of competition. Most of us love the rivalry and support our teams fiercely. At the same time, I agonize over the violence inherent and worry for any player that gets injured – which seems to happen a lot! I find this a little hard to talk about because football fans can be intense and take all critique and interference with their sport, personally. A story from my life helps to illustrate this. When I first started waiting tables in the late 70's I would introduce myself as Heidi and most people would smile and say, "oh I love that story, the little girl in the mountains with her grandfather and the goats." The exception were the football fans who remember a championship game (in 1968) between the

Oakland Raiders and New York Jets; a game where the Raiders scored two touchdowns in the final minute to win. Many people missed this dramatic finish because the broadcasters broke away from covering the game to play the movie Heidi (as it was scheduled). NBC executives decided to let the game play but were unable to communicate the change to the technicians because of all the viewers who phoned in to inquire about the schedule. The phone lines were jammed and the fans were outraged. The hoopla that followed caused NBC to install special “Heidi phones” that connected to a separate telephone exchange so this could never happen again. In 1997 the “Heidi” game was voted the most memorable in professional football history (although I’m sure we have had many more memorable games since then. I can think of several in this season alone!)

I have a reason that I wanted to talk about my struggle with football and with competition in general. I believe that competition is so embedded in how we view life that it’s hard to think of another way. We see evidence that the community that had risen up around the first disciples that was largely egalitarian because of how Jesus lived and walked with them came under pressure from the culture of the day and the age-old ego issue. This plays out especially as we look at the life of Mary Magdalene who has been called the apostle to the apostles and that is the best title to describe her. All four gospels identify her as being the first to get the message that Jesus has risen and all say that she was told to go tell the others.

In three of the gospels that talk about the burial, Mary Magdalene is named as having been there and even though she is not named in John, she had direct knowledge of the tomb because she is the first to go there. All four gospels talk of her being witness to the crucifixion and the faithful presence and witness to his death. In the Matthew passage that Bob read for us we hear that she was there at the tomb, observing his burial. While Peter denied knowing him and all the rest of the disciples fled in the garden, Mary Magdalene is the constant, the steady, the presence of love and the first witness to the resurrection. The apostle to the apostles – the faithful companion of Jesus. This is the true story of Mary Magdalene and the lens from which to view her. Listen to the text from John, and view her with these eyes:

John 20:1-18

20 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face

cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let's pray:

Holy, Triune God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, we thank you for your words of love to us. As Mary had her eyes and heart opened to you, so open ours to you as well. Let your Spirit speak to our hearts and may we be changed to go forth and spread your message of love, just as Mary did. As the first disciples were empowered by your Spirit, let us welcome your Holy Spirit to empower us today. For to you belongs the glory. Amen

Did it change you at all to view Mary with awareness of her faithful witness and abiding presence during the death and resurrection of Jesus? Let's take a moment to get into the story as it is given to us in the gospel of John. First of all, we see that Mary goes to the tomb early "while it was still dark" and I can almost feel her fear, her anticipation, her determination to be near to the tomb where Jesus' body lay. When she sees that the stone has been rolled away, she runs back to Peter and John to tell them. Then we have the somewhat humorous account of the two men running to the tomb and the underlying sense of competition between the two: The writer of John identifies him as "the one that Jesus loved" and the fastest runner of the two. Yet John looks in the tomb and sees the empty cloths but does not go in. Peter, gets there shortly and goes right into the tomb to see the cloths and John follows him in. The writer makes sure, two more times, that the reader understands John got there first by saying the words "following him" and then repeats "who had reached the tomb first." In the writer of the gospel, we see the jockeying for importance between these two leaders.

Wait, what? Competition in the story of the resurrection? Have you noticed this before? Well, we know that this sort of jockeying went on in the early church because Paul addresses it in his letters and here it's spelled out. The seeds of discord and division that always accompany the ego. I noticed it when I looked at it from the perspective of Mary - the true "first" apostle to receive the good news!

When they do not see Jesus, they head home.

The scene then focuses again on Mary, who also does not yet understand, but has remained by the tomb in her grief. Weeping. When she looks in the tomb, she sees the two angels sitting where the body had lain – at his head and his feet and they ask her why she is weeping. And she responds both to them and subsequently to Jesus that "they" have taken away the body of her lord and she does not know where they have laid him. Can you picture this? Can you place yourself there? The entrance to the tomb must have been low since both Peter and Mary need to "stoop" in order to look inside. It was big enough for both Peter and John to be inside at the same time and for two angels to sit where his body had lain. Was she frightened by the sight of the "angels dressed in white"? Why were they not present for Peter and John or were they and they simply couldn't see them? And why doesn't she recognize Jesus until he says her name? Why does he tell her not to cling to him? These are all questions that the text doesn't answer and ultimately, we can only wonder about. What we do know is that Mary is the first to see him and to get the message to "go and tell." Which she does.

I wonder how we got from this account of faithfulness and witness, steady presence and love to a portrayal of a woman of prostitution? That is the story of Mary Magdalene that come to us down through the writings of history. Could it be that the seeds of ego and competition in this very text combined with a culture that viewed women as second-class citizens been at work to downplay her vital role? After all, a good Jew of that time was known to thank God that he was not born a Gentile or a woman!

Over the years, we can see how Scripture was used to combine the stories of different women into one picture of Mary Magdalene the prostitute.

1) Luke, the physician is the one who tells us that Mary had seven demons cast out which implied that she was a sinner. In Luke's gospel, we also have the story of the woman who anointed Jesus used as an illustration of one who is forgiven much also loves much.

2) This woman is not identified as Mary Magdalene but she is called a sinner so the implication is that they are one and the same.

3) Given the effusiveness of her personality and the Pharisee's comment about "what kind of woman this is" her sin must be lust. This kind of reasoning can be seen in the writings of the early church fathers but it was explicitly spelled out by Pope Gregory in 594 in a sermon he preached. In it he says the following:

“She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe

to be Mary from whom seven demons were ejected according to Mark.

And what did these demons signify if not all the vices?...It is clear, brothers,

that this woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefor displayed more scandalously, she was

now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner.”

And so, we moved from Mary, apostle to the apostles, to Mary, the penitent whore. A transition that has more to say about the brokenness of man’s relationship to woman than it does to the message of good news that Jesus brought and delivered first to a woman. A faithful woman who followed and trusted him at great cost to her reputation.

The gospel of Mary Magdalene helps us to understand how she was sidelined. It was preserved and then discovered by a German collector in 1896. It’s translation to German and then finally to English was not complete until the mid-1970’s and came to light for English scholars about the same time as the Nag Hammadi. These translations of ancient material show a high degree of correlation and theology. That and the esteem these manuscripts held for the early community show us their importance

because only worthy manuscripts are copied. In the gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalene we hear the seeds of discord between Mary and the other disciples. In them we hear a clash of the male disciples' ego with the message of Mary Magdalene to embrace our need for transformation.

We see in the Scripture for today, the underlying temptation of our ego to compare and contrast with each other. The writer of John was making a case for this particular gospel to be put in the canon. This gospel is the writings that surrounded the community that particularly grew up around the leadership of John. This was true of all the gospels, they were the accounts that were told in their gatherings and were eventually written down. We have the four accounts that made it into the canon but there were many more. We know this because in the last 100 years many have come to light; including the gospel of Mary Magdalene. She was a leader in her own right and the stories her community told were also written down. In the gospel accounts of Mary and Thomas, there was a discord and disagreement between Mary and some of the disciples. From the beginning, Peter was outspoken about his doubt of her worthiness and says the following:

“Would the Savior speak these things to a woman in private without openly sharing them so that we too might hear? Should we listen to her at all, and did he choose her over us because she is more worthy than we are?”

The seeds of disagreement, discord and competition are, tragically, part of the human condition and we see them right here in a gospel that did make it into the canon. The writer of John was making his case for the worthiness of John, the beloved disciple, the faster runner and the first to believe.

This is the weakness and brokenness of our ego – to first of all compare, then contrast, compete, conflict, criticize and eventually to condemn.

(Repeat) And when this happens we lose out on the many gifts that we collectively have to offer. This ego driven, competitive nature of our culture is so deeply pervasive that we rarely question it.

I'm not saying that the gospel of Mary Magdalene should have made it into the canon but I am struck by how things may be different today if the early church had acknowledged the leadership of the women who followed Jesus as Jesus himself did. We do have accounts of women in Acts but the story of Mary Magdalene goes strangely silent. What happened to the apostle to the apostles? And a more pressing question is, what would have been the ongoing result of having Mary's message of community and collaboration allowed rather than silenced. What if they had been less quick to condemn and more willing to listen? What if a collaborative model of leadership rather than a hierarchical patriarchy had been passed down to us?

I believe we are in a time where the foundation of hierarchy and patriarchy are crumbling and a great deal of effort is being put forth to shore it up. I

know that this is a troubling time and many people are being hurt in the process. People that Jesus would ask us to protect and support and defend – the poor, the vulnerable, the foreigner, the “least of these.” I believe that we are seeing the foolishness of the ego and competition that says there is not enough for all and you get what you deserve. As if any of us deserve the good things that come to us or that others do not deserve basic rights such as food, housing and health care. Or due process. The answer to this individualistic and competitive view of life is instead one of community, collaboration and compassionate care. The view that sees us all as connected and in need of cooperation to thrive. When we hoard, when we look out for me and mine, when we see empathy as a failure...we have lost our way. We have lost the Jesus way.

The good news is that community is making a resurgence. So many amazing stories are coming out of Minneapolis of people coming together to look out for their neighbor, to share what they have, to be sacrificially self-giving. Stories of people bringing groceries to their neighbors who are afraid to leave their homes and restaurants opening up to feed anyone in need. The story I just read yesterday, reminds me that community can happen locally and globally. And both are needed. A local knitting shop in Minneapolis took inspiration from WWII and the Norwegians who knitted red caps as a sign of resistance. They began knitting together as a sign of solidarity with their neighbors who were being targeted by ICE. The owner of the knitting

shop is the daughter of an Egyptian refugee. Her father was forced to leave without being able to take anything, not even his papers, so what is happening to her neighbors felt personal. At first her regular knitters joined in without hesitation and soon they had 100 knitters. They decided to create a pattern that has the words “melt the ice” built into it and began to sell it online. While knitting patterns typically sell about 100, this pattern went viral and sold over 100,000 at \$5 and they’ve collected \$650,000 (and counting) which goes directly to benefit organizations supporting immigrants. Ravelry is the place you can buy it and I purchased a pattern (even though I don’t knit) and you can see it on a clipboard on your way out of the sanctuary. Over 43 countries have joined in buying these patterns and knitting the hats in solidarity with the struggles of the community in Minneapolis. This is community in a local and a global sense. As the reporter who told the story said “leave it to knitters to weave a people together.”

So how about us? How can we continue to deepen our sense of community, cooperation, collaboration and compassionate care? I’m so encouraged by our committee that is planning more ways to connect with our community and I hope that you will take advantage of any opportunity to join us as we plan our events in the days ahead. No act of kindness is too small and no connection is ever wasted. We need each other, now more than ever.

Let’s pray:

Holy Spirit, fall afresh upon all your people today. Where there is brokenness, let us bring healing. Where there is condemnation, let us bring acceptance and love. Where there is isolation and hatred and despair, let us bring connection and community. Where there are words of self-hate and doubt, let us look to you and hear your voice of delight. You see us as beloved, let us see ourselves and one another in that same light. For we are all your dear children and it is in the light of your love that we live and move and have our being. Amen.