

Nevertheless She Persisted: Listening to Women of the Bible

Part 6: Mary Magdalene

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Scripture: Luke 7:37-39, 8:1-3; John 3:16-17

I. Myth Buster #1: Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute?

Last Thursday evening Melanie and I were laying in bed talking about an upcoming trip to Cancun this October to attend Countryside member Tim Kerrigan's wedding (which I'm helping to officiate). In the course of our conversation she asked if our passports were up-to-date. "Yes, they are," I confidently answered. But then I asked myself, "How do I *know* that they haven't expired?" I reconsidered my response. Walking downstairs, I opened our travel file and readily found the passports. Melanie's doesn't expire until 2023. But mine expires on July 29, 2017!

Had my only trip out of the country been to Cancun in October, I could have simply renewed my passport for \$60 and had it back within six weeks or so. But given that I am co-leading a retreat in Northern Ireland just three weeks from now, I was horrified.

Happily, agencies exist for the sole purpose of helping people like me – for a price. In the end, the \$60 renewal cost me \$370 – and I was grateful. A couple weeks from now it would have costed \$700! Unexamined assumptions can be costly. They can cost us dearly, and they can cost others as well. Can you imagine what would have happened if I had showed up at the airport the day of the Ireland trip only then to learn of my expired passport? I doubt this would have happened, but I shudder to think of the consequences for me and 23 others!

Unexamined assumptions we make about others can be costly, too – for both them and us. Take, for instance, the assumption many make about Mary Magdalene's profession before she became one of Jesus's closest allies and disciples. What was her profession? If your answer is "a prostitute", you may want to ask yourself where this assumption came from. Did you read it in the Bible? Actually, there is no reference in the Bible whatsoever to Mary Magdalene's profession! In fact, if you scour the whole canon of early Christian literature you will find that it wasn't until the 6th Century – a full five centuries after Mary's time – that Christians in the West began to think of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. And the Eastern Orthodox Church has never believed this was Mary's former profession. (By the way, her official "feast day" was yesterday, July 22nd.)

Indeed, in the first several centuries of Christian tradition, you'll find lots of admiration – and even adoration – of Mary Magdalene. She is depicted as pious, loyal, and a particularly close friend of Jesus. Some even believed that Mary was the author of the Gospel of John, since the author is identified not by name but only as "the disciple

whom Jesus loved” and certain non-biblical texts written in the 2-3rd Centuries claim that Jesus loved Mary more than the rest of the disciples. This note has also led to theories that Jesus was married to Mary. More on this later!

What caused the tide of public opinion about Mary’s background to change was a sermon delivered by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th Century in which he claimed that Mary was a prostitute. Gregory’s evidence? He pointed to a story in Luke 7 where an *unnamed* woman tearfully bathes Jesus’s feet in her tears, wiping them away with her hair. This *unnamed* woman is referred to as “a sinner”, which many assume to mean “prostitute”.

So, in essence, Pope Gregory made an assumption based on the weakest, most circumstantial evidence. He assumed the woman in Luke 7 was a prostitute, and further assumed she was Mary Magdalene even though she was *unnamed*. What seems to have happened with respect to her name is that the pope conflated the story in Luke 7 with a similar story in another gospel in which a woman named Mary cleanses Jesus’s feet, only with perfume, not tears. The only problem with this conflation is that the Mary in this story is Mary of Bethany, not Mary of Magdala – where Mary Magdalene gets her name.

While labelling Mary Magdalene as a prostitute may have suited the pope’s agenda for that particular sermon, the trouble is that a sermon published by a pope – even a 6th Century pope – has a tendency to remain in the public eye for all time – kind of like any of our posts on the internet. Once they’re out there, they tend to remain there forever.

Yes, unexamined assumptions we make about others can be costly! They can tarnish a person’s name for a very long time. And perhaps even more sadly, they keep us from appreciating the gifts that a person’s unique character, personality, and life story could offer us.

What unexamined assumptions do you make about others? At what cost?

II. Myth Buster #2: Was Mary Married to Jesus?

Another myth we find about Mary, especially in recent years thanks to Dan Brown’s wildly popular book, *The Davinci Code*, is that Mary was married to Jesus and that this fact was deliberately hidden by patriarchs of the early church. Being married to Jesus may be a more positive belief than that she was a prostitute, but it does create a largely unexamined bias against the early church – or even the modern church. In fact, when people these days tend to talk about Jesus and Mary secretly being betrothed, it is often with a bit of conspiratorial glee in their voice, as if the sins of 2,000 years of Christendom have finally been revealed.

If you happen to be one of those gleeful souls, I hate to burst your bubble. While the Bible offers a lot of evidence to suggest that Jesus and Mary were quite close, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest they were married. Nearly all such theories,

therefore, must rely on texts that were written a full 100-200 years after Jesus's death, none of which actually claim they were married. Instead, these scant writings refer to Mary as a "companion" of Jesus, or assert that Jesus loved Mary more than the rest. But they never state outright that they were married.

Now, the Gospel of Phillip, written in the 2nd or 3rd Centuries, does claim that Jesus kissed Mary. Dan Brown alleges that the Gospel of Phillip states that he kissed Mary "on the mouth". But unfortunately for Dan Brown, the word "mouth" is not in the text. The text we have is badly damaged right where it mentions that Jesus kissed Mary. It is broken right where we read that Jesus would "kiss her on her [...]!" While Brown imagines "her mouth", most scholars believe the missing word is "hand" or "cheek" or even "foot" as a show of respect.

So if Mary Magdalene wasn't a prostitute, and wasn't married to Jesus, who was she anyway?

Mary's name indicates she was from the town of Magdala on the shore of the sea of Galilee between Capernaum in the north and Tiberius in the south. She is specifically mentioned twelve times in the gospels – more than most of the apostles. We know that Mary was among a handful of women who witnessed Jesus's crucifixion, and a handful of women who were the first to witness Christ's resurrection. The gospels of Mark and John even assert that the risen Christ was revealed to Mary alone, at first. So we may surmise that they were quite close.

Based on Luke's gospel, we may further surmise that Mary was a woman of wealth, as she is listed among a group of women in Luke 8 who travel with Jesus and financially support his ministry. In this list, Mary is also identified as a woman "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). Thus, while she may not have been a prostitute, she evidently had been a deeply troubled woman before meeting Jesus.

Having been a minister now for over twenty years, I have observed a great number of people who have had the modern-day equivalent of "demons" exorcized from their system. These modern "demons" – which I suspect are quite similar to the ancient variety – include various forms of addiction, such as to intoxicating substances, or to food or sex, or more sophisticated addictions like materialism, narcissism, greed, envy, anger, or despair. What I have noticed is that when a person makes a break from any of these addictions, the "demons" may leave, but they like to stick around and poke at a person. And they like to wait for moments of weakness when one's resolve weakens long enough for them to slip back inside more powerfully than before.

Therefore, just because Luke says that Mary had been cured of seven different demons, I would suspect that as happy, compassionate and generous-spirited as Mary must have been as a result, she was probably a deeply troubled person at times. Whether or not Mary ever succumbed to her inner demons, I suspect that Mary was plagued now and then by regrets and shame; that she lacked self-confidence at times when she expected to be bold; that she spiraled now and again into fits of despair,

believing herself to be unlovable – unlovable to her peers, to Jesus, and most of all to God. If you were following Jesus around the country as closely as Mary was, wouldn't your motivation have been, at least partly, to be constantly reminded of the fact that you are loved – and worthy of love? Good thing all our issues with unlovability have been worked out of our system ... Or have they?

Perhaps we should be paying attention to Mary's story more closely than we thought.

III. Busting Out

I think the reason why so many people these days are captivated by the idea of Jesus and Mary Magdalene being lovers has less to do with the interest in Jesus's sexuality – which seems entirely missing in the gospels – but with his *humanity* – which seems almost entirely missing in modern imagination.

The earliest Christians had no trouble conceiving of Jesus as a full-blooded human being. But once Jesus was proclaimed to be “fully God, fully human” at the Council of Chalcedon in the 5th Century, the “God” part of the equation swiftly took over. Today, it seems almost blasphemous to suggest that Jesus was anything but all-knowing and all-powerful, or that he would experience any of the aspects that we associate most closely with our humanity – characteristics like vulnerability, insecurity ... or desire. But if Jesus was truly human, he experienced all these things and more.

While it is highly improbable that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, I think that all the speculation over their relationship arises from wanting to fill a void that has been missing in much of the Christian tradition for centuries. Namely, Jesus's humanity has gone missing.

To wrap things up this morning, therefore, I'd like to offer a couple of ideas about Jesus that are admittedly speculative, but are far from “unexamined assumptions”.

First off, as a human being subject to similar limitations that you and I have, Jesus could not have been absolutely certain that anything he either did or proclaimed was in accordance with God's will, or of the effect he would have on human civilization. He probably had quite strong intuitions, for instance, that God desires for us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us, even though these intuitions run strongly counter to most of what human beings have believed throughout our history. Likely, Jesus tested and retested these intuitions many times before proclaiming them. But he could not have been absolutely certain that he was not crazy or at least misguided in his thinking.

The same goes for what Jesus thought he was accomplishing on the Cross. As Jesus envisioned what would happen in the wake of his dying, he absolutely could not have been certain that his sacrifice would change the course of human civilization. In fact, I believe he had to seriously grapple with the idea that the significance of his death would not be noticed or understood by most of the world – or even his own people. It was far

more likely that most people would shrug off his grand statement about God's love and grace all together. After all, the idea behind it, that God loves *all* sinners – even those who would slay God's Messiah – and seeks to be in loving relationship with them seems more like the crazy fantasy of a lunatic than of the Messiah long-expected by the Jews.

So when Jesus was faced with the prospect of his own death, he would have been asking two simple questions that you or I would have asked. First, how sure am I that my assumptions about God's compassion, love, and desire to be in relationship with us reflect Reality? And second, he would have asked how many lives would have to change in order for his sacrifice to be "worth it"?

Would losing his life be "worth it" if it didn't change the hearts of the entire world, but of the Jewish people alone? I think it's pretty certain that Jesus would have thought the sacrifice would be "worth it" if only this happened. But what if it didn't? Likely, it wouldn't. So what if his sacrifice only changed the hearts of the thousands who followed him and considered him the Messiah? Again, I assume he would have chosen the path he was on. But what if the message of God's love and forgiveness was only embraced by his disciples – the twelve and perhaps the seventy or so that the Gospels identify as the closest followers of Jesus? In reality, he could not count even on their "getting it." After all, one of his twelve closest disciples had betrayed him after spending the better part of three years absorbing Jesus's message.

No, I think that as Jesus made his own, internal calculations about what degree of effectiveness would make sacrificing his life worth it, he may very well have hoped that it would change the world, but he would have gone through with it if he expected it to change just one person.

That one person would quite possibly have been Mary Magdalene. For Mary is the one from whom seven terrible, life-destroying "demons" had been cast out, and likely those "demons" still afflicted her powerfully at times with thoughts of unworthiness, unlovability, shame, regret, and feelings that she wasn't really lovable, especially in God's eyes. Such feelings are incredibly hard to shake once they've been with you for some years, even if the root of the problem has been eliminated. And Jesus loved Mary more than life itself.

The idea that Jesus would have given his life if it changed the life of just one person, and that this person could have been Mary Magdalene, is pure speculation, of course. But consider the implications if this assumption rings true to Reality. For, if Jesus would have considered his sacrifice worth it if it only changed the life of one person, who is to say that he wouldn't consider his sacrifice worth it if it only changed you?