

There's Nothing About Mary *June 16, 2013*

Scripture: Luke 7:36-8:3

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Sermon: There's Nothing About Mary

This morning I am approaching my sermon backward. I want to begin my reflection by completing this morning's scripture reading and then discussing it from the end to the beginning.

Ever since I learned of the grave injustice perpetrated against Mary the Magdalene over the centuries, I have felt called to rehabilitate her reputation. See, Mary is not the woman you think she was... She is not the woman she is remembered to be. So, Let's learn what she is, not what she is not.

Mary Magdalene is, it can be argued, the second-most important woman in the New Testament. Within the four Gospels, hints of Mary Magdalene's importance in the early Church can be found. She is named 14 times, more than most of the apostles.

The assembled Gospel references describe Mary Magdalene as a courageous servant leader, brave enough to stand by Jesus in his hours of suffering, death and beyond. Scholar Mary Thompson points

out that she is the only person to be listed in all four Gospels as first to realize that Jesus had risen and to testify to that central teaching of faith. This is a spectacular first indeed!

Other Gospel passages can confuse us, because other women also named Mary and some anonymous women, to boot, can seem to merge several women into one. This phenomenon—fusing several stories into one composite—is called conflation.

This conflation of Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of this morning's story has occurred all throughout our modern cultural references. From Jesus Christ Superstar to Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, poor Mary has been depicted as a woman of ill repute. And we've seen it over the centuries from Ephraim the Syrian in the fourth century, Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth, and many artists, writers and Scripture commentators who followed their lead.

One Mary, the Mother of Jesus, retains her unique status and reputation as the number-one woman in the Gospels. But other women—Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, a woman who anoints and one identified as an adulterer—are mistakenly fused into one sensual young sinner.

Pope Gregory, who became pope in 590 A.D., clinched Mary's mistaken reputation as sinner when he delivered a powerful homily in which he combined Luke's anonymous sinful woman (Lk 7:36-50) with Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene. He said, "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?"

Gregory, like the much later Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) and many other famous preachers, loved to give a moral "spin" or interpretation to Scripture. How could the pope as pastor use the story of the Magdalene to encourage repentance during a time of famine and war in Rome? The seven devils morphed into the seven capital sins, and Mary Magdalene began to be condemned not only for lust but for pride and covetousness as well, just to add insult to injury.

One thing on which we all might agree: The Church has not valued women enough, especially a woman whose greatest assignment was to tell the apostles the pivotal news that Jesus was alive. Her words, "I have seen the Lord," are the first act of faith in the Resurrection.

Does it really matter all that much which biographical details we attach to a long-ago woman? In a word, yes. In the 21st century, as in centuries before, the Church is full of sinners. We all are sinners. It's good and instructive to be convinced that Jesus loved sinners, because that's our human history and weakness.

But we also need the example of sanctity. Women especially need the encouragement of a Gospel role model who exercised bravery and leadership in challenging circumstances.

Which brings me back to the woman who is at the center of our scripture lesson this morning. She is a courageous person who demonstrated her faith and devotion without restraint. She prostrates herself before Jesus; she rubs his feet with oil, rinses them with her tears, and then dries them with her hair. Jesus lets her do this, because he understands her life, he knows about her reputation, her past, her sin... her need to be forgiven. But what Jesus sees in this woman, what she shows him, is love. How much love? All of it. Love without restraint. Love expressed in equal measure to her sin. Sin, like a dark

place in our lives, like a hole in our souls... a hole that can only be filled in by love, because what is forgiveness if not love?

Love and forgiveness are offered to us through Jesus Christ, but only we ask for it. And before we can ask for it, we have to recognize that we need it. We have to admit that we are broken, just like the sinful woman. Bit too often, we behave like Simon the Pharisee, judging others before considering our own indiscretion, our own sinfulness, our own need to be forgiven.

Jesus uses the example of a creditor who forgives the debts of two people. One person is forgiven little, one person if forgiven much. After he hears this example, Simon concludes the person who is forgiven much will be the most grateful... This makes sense, but only if the debtor admits his debt. So often we minimize our debt, so often we rationalize our need, too often we excuse our own sin. But you and I, we shouldn't do that, if fact we can't do that. No one can forgive our sins beside God.

Which is another reason our scripture lesson this morning is so important! Jesus shows he is indeed a prophet, capable of recognizing what resides in a person's heart without having met him or her, but he also demonstrates he is more than a prophet by offering forgiveness in God's name. No ordinary priest, prophet, or rabbi would dare to claim God's prerogative, yet it is here, perhaps even more than in the mighty acts and miracles, here in the love and forgiveness, that we find Jesus shares the heart and character of God.

The promise of the Gospel is a promise made for you. God already knows who you are and where you come from. He knows your heart. Do you know your heart? Because if you do, if you really do, you should know God can fix your broken places, but only if you acknowledge the need to be fixed, and you ask God for forgiveness. This is the Gospel. This is the good news. Selah.