

## “Mary Magdalene – A Place for the Ill”

March 29, 2020

*A Place at the Table* series – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – Livestream

There are so many Mary-s in holy Scripture – Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary of Mary and Martha fame who wanted to sit and learn at Jesus’ feet, and there’s Mary Magdalene. She’s Mary from Magdala, a fishing village around the Sea of Galilee. Hers is a story of healing – though different than what you might think. This is where a close reading of the Bible becomes so important.

Around the late 500s and in the early 600s, church tradition settled on the story that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. People made an assumption that she’s the woman Luke talks about right before these verses in chapter 8. If you look back in chapter 7, there’s a story of a “sinful woman” who anoints Jesus’ feet with her hair. But there’s nothing that makes the connection that this woman and Mary Magdalene are the same person. In fact, some scholars believe that the connection was made so that Mary Magdalene’s witness to the resurrection would be less reliable. Back to that later...

Sexism and misogyny aren’t new issues; they’ve been around since the beginning. And they’re far from absent today - in case you’re wondering or haven’t watched the news lately. They’re still with us in the church, too. And we must stand up against the vitriol we hear that demeans and degrades women. We must stand for equal and fair treatment of women right where we are and around the world.

I celebrate that our United Methodist Church first granted full clergy rights to women in 1956, though women were teaching and licensed to preach long before that. In fact, I’d contend that Mary Magdalene is the first person – not just the first woman – but *the first person* to witness to Jesus’ resurrection. More on that later...

So the first few verses in chapter 8 of Luke explain Jesus’ connection to Mary Magdalene. He had “released her from seven demons.” We’re not clear on exactly what that means, but many scholars believe that she suffered from a chronic condition – possible mental illness. Luke says she was ill and was healed.

To be clear, when it comes to our reading of Scripture, we’re in a different time and place with different ways of explaining why things are the way they are. In that time, both physical and mental health struggles pushed people to the margins. Mary Magdalene’s health struggle would’ve pushed her to the outside of the community.

Illness meant isolation – an interesting thing to consider in our present circumstance as we want to protect one another, but as we also feel the pain of separation - and as we hear stories of the isolation for those who are ill or who are caregivers and cannot be near their families.

When it comes to mental health concerns, isolation can be a reality for people who struggle whether it's depression, anxiety, dementia, or other conditions – and for their caregivers. It's difficult to ask for help. It's hard to trust others. It's hard to plan for the unknown.

Jesus released Mary Magdalene from what kept her outside of the community and brought her in. She and other women were vital to Jesus' ministry. They learned from Jesus, supported him and his disciples financially, and traveled with them. They offered practical help and did ministry with him.

In the same spirit that Jesus had as he went around healing and restoring people into community, we want those with mental health conditions to find healing and hope. We want to offer safe space, spiritual support, and caring community. Faith in Jesus Christ has a part to play, and so does quality healthcare. We need to be more open and honest about mental health and offer the tools and resources needed to make sure that people know that they have a place in the church – and a place at the table. You'll see a resource list this week.

Even with that hope, I'll confess that the church hasn't always done the work that's needed to reach out and to get rid of the stigma around mental health. Many of us and our families still deal with shame around seeking treatment for mental health. Some of us still live with the idea that it's something we need to just "get over" or "deal with."

This week, in the midst of the changes that came with a "shelter in place" order, I experienced something I hadn't ever experienced before. I felt a nagging heaviness in my chest. My breathing was fine. My blood pressure was fine. But I just didn't feel quite right.

After talking to trusted professionals, I determined that what I was feeling was a combination of anxiety and grief. That feeling has since subsided, but it was real – and not pleasant at all. I was grateful for people who would listen and be helpful.

I'm not making light of more serious mental health struggles. I simply want to say that mental health struggles are real, and all of us have our own experiences or have connections to family and friends who live with them every day. We may not fully understand what others deal with, but we want to offer

compassion and care in the name of Jesus who constantly reached out to bring healing and hope.

We want to be a community of care for those who struggle with mental health concerns. Just as we want to care for those who are battling physical health issues, we want to help bring healing for those who live every day with mental health struggles.

Our Social Principles, a great gift in our United Methodist Church, offer guidance as we engage many social issues. They say this: “Unfortunately, mental health eludes many in our world resulting in considerable distress, stigma, and isolation. Mental illness troubles our relationships because it can affect the way we process information, relate to others, and choose actions. Consequently, mental illnesses often are feared in ways that other illnesses are not. Nevertheless, we know that regardless of our illness we remain created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). No person deserves to be stigmatized because of mental illness.”

So our call is to break the stigma and offer care. I’d invite you to see this video produced in India called “Reach Out.” It will also be available on our website. **SHOW MEDIA**

The experience in the video offers a powerful word to us who struggle and to us as we offer care. Mary Magdalene makes it clear that Jesus’ inner circle is a place for those who are ill or who have struggled with illness. Jesus makes a place for her – a woman who had been healed and became important in his ministry.

She was an “early adopter” whose faith and trust in Jesus was clear. And if her support in his life and ministry wasn’t enough, she was one who remained close to him to the end as he died on the cross, and then went to the tomb to offer him a proper burial.

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene goes to the garden and discovers the greatest news that she has to share with the others – Good News of resurrection – that Jesus isn’t dead, but is alive again and offers even more hope and life that she could’ve imagined before.

It is Jesus who calls Mary’s name and tells her to go and tell others. Rachel Held Evans says, “that [Jesus] sent [women] out as the first witnesses of the complete gospel story is perhaps the boldest, most overt affirmation of their equality in his kingdom that Jesus ever delivered.”

So, Mary Magdalene is one more example of God’s inclusive love for the world. She reminds us that women have a place at the table sharing the Good

News of God's love. She reminds us that the assumptions that others make (even in church history) don't discount God's call on our lives.

And her story proclaims that there's a place at the table for the one who is ill – with physical or mental health struggles. There's a place for the person who has felt stigmatized or left alone because others don't know how to respond or help. There's a place for the person who feels shame when they hear others say that they should just "get over it."

God brings healing through the community of faith, the care we can offer, and the gifts that we can give and receive from each other. God cares deeply for all of us, and God uses all of us to bring good news of grace in the struggle and hope for a better day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**PRAYER SONG** – Heal Us, Emmanuel, Hear Our Prayer  
*Sing words to "Amazing Grace"*

**PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & THE LORD'S PRAYER**  
**Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer...**