

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene
July 2016 (Year A)

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Reflections on
Lk 2:36-38; Jn 20: 11-18

Even before the events described in today's gospel reading, Mary's life had been transformed. It began when she first met Jesus and he healed her. We don't know what Luke meant by the "seven demons" Jesus expelled; "demons" and "unclean spirits" were blamed for all manner of ills, from deafness and spinal deformities (think of the bent-over woman) to seizures and mental illness. Whatever her ailments, they were evidently severe and overlapping, and Jesus made her whole again.

She in turn became a most dedicated and resourceful disciple, supporting his ministry throughout Galilee and beyond. She was from Magdala, a fishing village on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, and she must have been an independent woman, since she is distinguished from the other Marys by her home town, not by her family relationships. She is not Mary, the wife of Cleophas, nor Mary, mother of James and Joses, nor even Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. And she must have been a woman of some means, since she provided for Jesus and his band of followers, as Luke says, along with some other Galilean women: Joanna, the wife of the steward of King Herod of Galilee (those connections may have proved useful at times); Susannah; and others. These women would have been a mainstay of Jesus's ministry, working behind the scenes, doing whatever needed to be done: seeing that everyone had food and lodging; providing water and bandages for sore feet; and keeping a supply of oil, of course, because it was useful in so many ways, for cooking, as a fuel for lamps, and as a soothing lotion.

When Jesus decided to leave Galilee and head south into Pilate's territory of Judea, Mary and a number of other women went along, con-

tinuing their ministry. Mary remained with Jesus to the bitter end. She kept vigil while he was dying. She followed the men (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were not from Jesus's core group of disciples) who took his body down from the cross so that she could see where they buried him. Only when they had rolled the stone to seal the tomb did she leave, to prepare the perfumed oils for a more dignified burial as soon as the Sabbath was over.

And then came a second transformation of Mary's life, as told so movingly in today's gospel reading. It was a transformation of understanding, a turning upside down of expectations. No wonder it took a period of transition, a moment of non-recognition, before the scales fell from her eyes and she truly saw him, face to face. There was no more appropriate recipient of this astonishing revelation than she, the disciple who had been with Jesus through everything, the one who had dedicated herself so thoroughly to his mission, and the only one who could give personal witness to his life and his death. No wonder she was the one chosen to announce to all the others that Jesus had passed through death and was alive again. Her account of seeing Jesus again in the flesh was foundational; she would have been asked again and again to retell the story, to "preach the good news."

How did we lose her voice for so many centuries? What clouded our eyes, obscuring and distorting her image? How did we get the idea that she was a reformed prostitute? And how can we reclaim her and her message, not only for ourselves, but for the church and the world?

Doubtless there were lots of cultural factors to explain this loss. Deep-rooted patriarchal traditions discounted the witness of women. In

time there was an increasing interest in monasticism, with its reverence for celibacy and its tendency to separate women and men from each other. But one person in particular was responsible for the charge that Mary of Magdala was a reformed prostitute: no one other than the Bishop of Rome, Gregory I.

Gregory's reign (590-604) marks the end of ancient Christianity and the start of the Middle Ages, and it was one of his sermons that bequeathed to the Western church the distorted lens through which we came to view Mary Magdalene. He left us, as a church, with the need to re-educate ourselves, to open our ears to the true stories of the female disciples, and to clean the lenses through which we view women in general.

I take a guilty pleasure in imagining Gregory's re-education in the hereafter. Gregory himself taught that Christians would face a purgation after death to deal with whatever residue of sin remained, and he told stories about souls going through the process. (We know how the medieval imagination would fly with this idea!)

So, in the spirit of "turn about fair play," here is my capsule version, from the year 604 AD, when Gregory died. Gregory appears at the pearly gates, and the angel on duty ushers him into a waiting room, telling him to expect a visit from a very important disciple of Jesus. Gregory thinks that he is about to meet Peter, his predecessor as pope, and he prepares to give an account of his stewardship of the church of Rome. But in walks a woman!

"Hello, Gregory," she begins. "My name is Mary."

"The Mother of our Lord?" he asks dubiously . . . "or the repentant sinner?"

"Oh, Gregory," Mary explains, "That label you put on me is totally unfair, libelous in fact . . . And that's the problem. There is no way you can enter the communion of saints until you have acknowledged the errors you perpetrated. You need to hear the true stories of our lives so that can see who we truly are. Until now you have been seeing through a glass, darkly, distortedly, but now you need to see us face-to-face, eye-to-eye."

So Mary of Magdala tells the story of her life, somewhat as I just summed it up, but much more fully, of course, with a lot more detail that never made it in to the Christian scriptures. As she seems to be nearing the end of her account, Gregory asks whether there weren't some other men in her life before she met Jesus. "Gregory," she answers, "I know what you're thinking. What on earth gave you the idea that I was selling my body for money?" At this point Gregory realizes that he had better just shut up and listen.

When Mary of Magdala is finished with the story of her life, she tells Gregory that he needs to meet some other women. The first will be another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who lived in Bethany. "This Mary is quite a separate person, Gregory, and she has her own story."

So Gregory meets a second Mary and hears from her and her sister about the hospitality they offered Jesus—each sister in her own way—on the road south from Galilee to Jerusalem. They talked about the strong friendship they developed with Jesus, and the crisis they faced when their brother Lazarus fell seriously ill. They sent word to Jesus, hoping he would come in time to help, but he didn't make it until after Lazarus died; he even missed the funeral. But then Lazarus was miraculously restored to them, and the sisters prepared a celebration dinner. Mary wanted to show special honor to their guest, so she brought out perfumed oil and anointed Jesus' feet. As Gregory listens, he notices, again, that there is no mention of extraneous men hanging around Mary, but this time he knows enough to stay silent.

Mary of Magdala looks at him and asks, "Was it the fact that we both used oil for anointing that confused you, Gregory?" Mary Magdalene asks. "Do we women all look alike to you, especially with oil jars in our hands?"

"But speaking of anointing, there is another woman you need to meet," Mary of Magdala goes on. "In the Scripture she has no name, and no voice of her own, though Jesus speaks up on her behalf. She met Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee, where she, too, anointed Jesus's feet, after washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair. She has her voice back now, and she will tell you about what happens to

poor women with no family support and no resources to fall back on, women who are forced into degrading situations to stay alive.”

So Gregory gets an earful about life on the streets and the traffic in female flesh. He also hears how this woman recognized in Jesus a kind of love that was so generous, so true, so unlike the false perversions of love in the sex trade. And he hears how Jesus’s love awakened her own capacity for love and helped her begin her journey of healing.

When the woman has finished her story, Mary of Magdala commented, “This woman was more sinned against than a sinner herself; does she really deserve to have her whole life summed up as a ‘repentant sinner,’ as if that is all she is? You don’t characterize men that way: Wasn’t Peter a repentant sinner? And Paul?”

This must have been a lot for Gregory to absorb. Like many church leaders, then and now, he wasn’t in the habit of listening to women. He had divided his time between the geo-politics of Rome and the Benedictine monastery he had founded on one of his family’s estates. Neither had much space for women. This made it all too easy for him to mash women’s stories together, to slot women into categories, such as virgins, mothers, and whores, and to follow the deeply rutted patriarchal path of using the image of a woman to personify sin.

I leave it to you to imagine what other of the saints he may have had to encounter, and what he could have said or done to be reconciled with them.

It can be discouraging to contemplate how long this problem has been going on. At the same time, we sense that the Spirit is moving in a new way in our day. We can take encouragement from Anna, Phanael’s daughter, in our first reading. She was heir to a long family tradition going back to Jacob’s son Asher, but in the child Jesus she saw the first glimpses of a new beginning, and she proclaimed it to those around her.

We can take comfort from the brave women in the litany we used this afternoon. These women, down the ages and up to the present, spoke out with their words and with their lives. In their vastly different stories and in many different ways they proclaimed, and still proclaim, the transformation God works in human history, calling out always for mercy and justice. They organize and support ministries of all kinds. They offer hospitality to gatherings of believers, and feed and house those in need. They tend to sick and exhausted bodies and spirits. They bear witness to injustice and demand that all people, without exception, be treated with dignity. They support the bereaved, always holding in reverence the memory of those who have passed on. We have a rich heritage to back us up. They persisted. And so shall we!