

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 8: 1-3, 10:38-42

“Three Women”

Jesus’ public ministry was in some ways very typical of a 1st C. Jewish teacher – some argue that “prophet” is the right way to describe him – and that would include his miracles as well as his teaching; but in other ways he profoundly subverted the normal course of things. That is most obvious in the people he included as members of God’s kingdom, and how he began to demonstrate that in the makeup of the little community of disciples he drew around him – people he regarded as the “new and true Israel.” Within that new community were peasants from Galilee, tax-collectors and prostitutes, occasional people of money and influence, healed cripples and lepers and blind men, and those normally considered “unclean.”

And so we notice that Jesus gave respect, attention, approval, and welcome to two groups of people who were largely ignored in 1st century Judaism: children and women. Children were valued at about the same level as slaves – not doted on as we do – but Jesus used them as examples. Women were regarded as inferior, were rarely educated and largely illiterate, and expected on that account to be submissive to men. They were thought to be weak, morally as well as physically, and the source of most (if not all) sin – especially by exposing men to sexual temptation. The birth of a daughter was

reason to console the parents: perhaps they had not prayed enough for a son!

Daughters were a worry, and were betrothed right after puberty and married off as soon as possible – to any man who offered to take them. Wives stayed home, attended to domestic needs, raised children, did not go out alone, did not speak to men and were not much spoken to. When heads were counted in a town census, women and children were not included. Women’s words were unreliable, and they could not give evidence in court. By the end of the 1st C. if not sooner, men were known to give thanks daily to God that they were not made women.

In this culture, Jesus respects and includes women in his conversations, as his disciples, and as members of his new community. He initiates contact with them, he is known to touch them in healing, and be touched by them in sometimes scandalous ways. He speaks of protecting them from the culture of easy divorce for men; he forgives women involved in sexual sin. He gives them the chance to listen and learn from him on the same footing as men. Several women are named among his disciples – a rarity in ancient writings. We will look today at three of the women who met Jesus; women whose

names, whose characters and whose faith we know something of.

1) *Mary Magdalene*

Mary Magdalene – Mary from the town of Magdala, a small village on the Lake – first appears as one of the group of women from Galilee who follow Jesus and the Twelve on their itinerant ministry, and on the journey to Jerusalem. Among them are some with money, because this group is said to care for the needs of the men “out of their own means.” Although the traditions of hospitality meant that Jesus and the Twelve could often find lodging, you cannot imagine a group of perhaps 20 people traveling far without money and some means of support. Women like Mary, Joanna, and Salome provided it.

When women are listed by the Gospel writers, Mary Magdalene is always first on the list – for reasons we will soon see. But her name is often annotated as “the one from whom Jesus had driven out seven demons.” There is no question that this was a woman whom Jesus delivered from something terrible, even if we are not too sure what that was. It won’t do just to say it was some sort of mental illness; NT writers were generally quite clear about the difference between disease and possession, between healing and exorcism. But when we read in the Gospels of “evil spirits being cast out” from some people, at times we get a graphic and terrible picture of the suffering they endured. To say that Mary had “seven demons” is to say that she was as badly oppressed by evil as you could be. The old story that Mary was a prostitute we owe to confusion on the part of Pope Gregory I in 390AD, who mixed up three events and three people in the Gospels. Nobody today believes that about Mary, except of course film-makers like Mel Gibson, who love it.

God only knows what she must have suffered, but Jesus sets her free, and she becomes his devoted disciple, and leaves everything behind to follow him and learn from him – and she supports him in any way she can. We hear no more of Mary until Jesus reaches the cross. She is one of the named women there, together with Jesus’ mother Mary, her sister, Salome, and “many other women who had come with him to Jerusalem.” Only one of the men, John, was present, perhaps because he was known to the High Priest’s family and was therefore the only one of the Twelve unlikely to be arrested – as of course were the women: what did *they* matter, anyway?

So Mary Magdalene is present when Joseph and Nicodemus take Jesus’ body down from the cross and lay it in a tomb. Mary and the other Mary and Salome go out early when the Sabbath is over to buy spices, and are the first to arrive at Jesus’ tomb, only to find it empty. Mary is the one who stands there and weeps, and is told by angels that Jesus is risen. Mary is the one who cannot see through her tears until a figure before her in the garden speaks her name. Mary is the one who hugs and holds her dear Lord, until he tells her to let him go, and that she must go tell the men. Mary it is, the first witness to the resurrection, who brings the news to a skeptical world.

150 year later, a Roman critic of Christianity says it was founded on the words of a “hysterical woman.” That is priceless testimony from an opponent if you are trying to reconstruct the history of “the church of Jesus Christ” – the continuation of the community of disciples that Jesus had begun. A *demonic woman* becomes the first and most important witness to Jesus’ rising from the dead. No wonder they wrote “wonder stories” about her, made her a spokesman for 2nd C. Gnostic ideas, attributed 3rd C. “Gospels” to her, by the 6th C. venerated her

remains as far away as France, and - in the least orthodox and least historically supported view - made her into Jesus' wife.

2) *Martha, Martha*

But we turn now to a very different character: a figure of rectitude, and another close friend of Jesus. Her name is Martha, and she owned a home in Bethany (she may have been a widow) where Jesus stayed frequently. Her younger sister was named Mary, her brother, Lazarus. They were as close as Jesus came to having "family" after he left Nazareth.

When we first meet Martha, she is preparing food for Jesus and for the family. She is used to serving - that is what women do - and she is therefore scandalized that her sister has flouted all convention and propriety by leaving the "women's quarters" of the kitchen to go and sit at Jesus' feet so that she can learn from him, just as the men disciples do. Martha is so upset at this break with convention that she actually complains to Jesus - in itself an unusual thing to do, and perhaps reflecting how close they all were. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left all the work to me? Tell her to help me!"

In response, Martha gets one of those answers that you know before you hear it that you are not going to like! "Martha, Martha," says Jesus - hearing your name spoken twice is always a warning sign in Scripture! - "you are distracted and worried and upset about many things. Mary has chosen the one best thing, and I will not take it from her." Poor Martha! She is only doing what women have always done - serving the needs of others, and now her sister is deserting her to sit at Jesus' feet. "Well" - you can almost hear it - "La-di-da! Now my little sister is a 'disciple,' and I am left with the dirty dishes..!"

But maybe Martha was more forgiving than that. She was certainly not blind or stupid about faith, and faith in Jesus at that. When her brother Lazarus takes sick and dies, and Jesus does not arrive until it is too late, Martha greets him - in faith and not in criticism - with "Lord, if you had been here, he would not have died." But even then, she knows that God's power is at Jesus' disposal, and that anything is possible. But when Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb, the ever-practical Martha re-emerges, reminding Jesus that the body is decomposing badly, four days after the death. When Jesus says Lazarus will rise again, Martha affirms that she believes that will happen at the Resurrection - and draws from Jesus the great statement "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

We repeat Jesus' words to Martha to this day at every funeral. Martha calls Jesus "Messiah and Son of God," the same language that Peter used to confess Jesus - and on this confession, Jesus built a church of men and women with a surprising level of mutual equality and respect. It was not perfect - but just as master-slave relationships began to change in the early church but took generations to change fully, so (I would argue) the relationships between men and women that changed among 1st C. Christians are still changing - for the better - even today.

3) *Mary of Bethany*

Finally, Mary of Bethany, the younger sister of Martha. She so wanted to learn from Jesus that she flouted convention and risked her sister's anger by going and "sitting with the men" instead of staying in the kitchen (something that can still get you in trouble today!).

Like Martha, she confessed her faith and hope through her tears to Jesus when her brother died. But her memorial for the ages is not like her sister's – immortal words from Jesus – but something far stranger. Jesus indeed raised her brother from the grave, and some weeks or months later, a celebration dinner for Lazarus and Jesus is held at their house. The Twelve are there too. Martha, of course, does the cooking – though this time she apparently has no complaints, even though there are maybe 17 people to feed this time, and her sister does something even more outrageous than “sitting with the men.”

As they all recline around the table, Mary fetches a large jar of perfume, and rather than simply anointing Jesus on the head with a small amount of it, as might be customary for a guest, she empties it all on Jesus – and on his feet, of all places. If this is not extravagant and vulgar enough, Mary then does the unthinkable: she unwinds her hair, and uses it to dry Jesus' feet! Martha is silent; the only one who speaks is Judas, who complains about the waste of money. I imagine there was for the most part a long embarrassed silence. Mary has behaved worse than a wanton woman, like a prostitute or an accused adulteress, with her “hair down.” What in the world does she think she is doing?

Jesus alone understands her motive, and the depth of her devotion. She is, he says, anointing him for burial. It is a strange comment, in that anointing is usually about celebration. But Jesus is focused on his death, now only six days ahead, and Mary alone seems to grasp that. Her intuitions are rewarded by Jesus' gratitude.

Three women; all quite different. Magdalene: demonic but later *the* witness to the greatest event of Jesus' ministry. Martha: domestic, practical, easily distracted; but faithful,

loving, and loved by Jesus. Young Mary: eager to learn, extravagant, shocking, but affirmed and rewarded by the Lord she loved. Women all respected by Jesus, all included in his kingdom and among his disciples.

As is any woman, anywhere, who meets Jesus and loves him for loving her.

Let us pray...