

Endless Love

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: Matthew 27:55-56; Matthew 27:61

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The year was 1970, and the song by Tim Rice, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, was recorded. In 1971, Broadway was rocking with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the rock opera whose centerpiece was perhaps that marvelous solo just sung so sensitively, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," ... "I want him so, I love him so, he scares me so." It was the year that I returned from Europe.

In the year 1960, in this congregation, I was ordained. You remember the 60s? I don't remember the 60s because I was immune to them. I was inoculated against all that was happening in the social upheaval of the 60s, a period of time in which there were tremendous insights gained and great progress made in human transformation and the transformation of society, an era from which we have also reaped some bitter fruit.

The 60s - that revolutionary time whose real impact will have to be sifted and sorted out for decades to come. But, I didn't live through the 60s; probably I was too old to be a flower child. But, had I even been the right age, I wouldn't have lived through it with any kind of depth or experience because I had been so traditioned in the piety of a Jesus who was a heavenly being and, at best, a divine intruder into this historical human scene. My Jesus, the Jesus of my nurture for which I will be eternally grateful, was, nonetheless, not a Jesus that I would have been able to recognize at all in the song of Mary Magdalene, for he was this heavenly being who dipped down into history, coming in order to die to bear the sin of the world, providing salvation only to return to the glory that was his with the Father before all time. That was my Jesus. And so, I would have been well insulated against the upheavals of the 60s and, as I returned here in 1971 and Broadway was rocking with "Jesus Christ Superstar," I was conscious of the criticism that was being fired at that rock opera, and yet in my own existential journey, having come from Europe where I was beginning to learn a Christology from below, I have to tell you, the words of that song got to me and I do believe that song was the catalyst for a long trek from that heavenly being who was a divine intruder to the flesh and blood Jesus who is my brother, one that I need

not so much revere as one I could begin to love and honor, one before whom I could stand in awe.

"I don't know how to love him," because, you see, there was that ethereal, eternal dimension, that transcendent reality, that presence of God that was in him so obviously, but he was my flesh and blood brother and I began to experience Lent and Holy Week and Good Friday as never before, as though I had never understood in the slightest what it was all about.

Mary Magdalene knew. She is the face upon which we focus this morning, our final Face Around the Cross in this Lenten journey. Mary Magdalene, who really didn't know how to love him, who loved him so, wanted him so, and was so frightened at that which she was experiencing over against this one who was every bit human in her presence and yet, something more that she couldn't quite put together. Mary Magdalene is the most prominent woman in the New Testament. She is the most prominent person in the Gospel story of the life of Jesus. We read various references to her in the four Gospels. Luke tells us, in the eighth chapter, that she was a part of those women who joined the disciple band and was supportive of the disciples. Luke tells us that Jesus healed her, casting out seven demons, in the terminology of that day. We read that she was with the mother of Jesus at the cross. She was at a distance witnessing the burial, and she was the first one to the tomb on Easter Sunday. There was something about Mary Magdalene - the love and the devotion that comes to expression in the Gospel that causes me to think that she understood the reality of endless love, a deep, human, intimate love. It scared her so. She didn't know how to love him, but she loved him so.

The story that we read in John's Gospel is the story of the anointing that happened in Bethany outside of Jerusalem in preparation, as it were, for Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week that John would record in subsequent chapters. In the Gospels, if you read all four of them, there are basically two anointing stories. They may be reflections of one event, or there may be two events. The details of both events are mixed up in the four stories. That isn't important. We read in Luke 7 of another interesting anointing - a woman off the street, a prostitute who barges into the Pharisee's home during a dinner party, weeping over Jesus, her tears falling at his feet. She lets down the tresses of her hair and wipes his feet, drying her tears. Jesus speaks to her a word of forgiveness with those immortal words, "She has loved much, and the one who loves much is forgiven much." Luke doesn't say that was Mary Magdalene. In John's Gospel, the anointing before Holy Week, it's Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home, but it doesn't say Mary Magdalene. That Mary may be Mary Magdalene, she may not be - it doesn't really matter. This morning, I'm going to use Mary Magdalene because she was the preeminent feminine presence in the Gospel story, and in that act of anointing, she gave expression to the very central core of discipleship, according to the Gospel of John. That kind of loving devotion, that kind of action, that kind of extravagant expression of love gets the affirmation of John. He

doesn't use the words that Mark uses, talking about the same incident, when Mark says that Jesus said to the critics of Mary for this extravagance, "Leave her alone. And I tell you wherever this Gospel is preached, this story will be told in remembrance, in memorial of her." A strong affirmation of prodigal love, of an extravagant expression of love, of tangible, concrete love, of the love of one human being for another. Mary Magdalene - the most powerful feminine presence in the Gospels, gives us the supreme expression of discipleship in this act of extravagant love.

As we reflect on it this morning, I want to suggest a couple of thoughts that come to me as I think about that scene, the anointing, that loving expression of Mary of Magdala. In the first place, I want to have us recognize how uneasy we are with that kind of wholesome expression of love. In the Church we do not handle well that deep and intimate expression of love, one human being for another, and when we find it even in the Gospel story, we hedge it in with all kinds of safeguards.

The Church has done a great disservice to the world in our understanding of human love in its full expression. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was protested by the Church because, traditionally, we in the Church have been very, very tense about the possibility of bringing him down, making him flesh and blood like the rest of us. Even more recently, at the showing of the film based on the novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, by a Greek author, people picketed outside the theaters, saying it was blasphemous. In that scene in which the novelist, as an artist, tries to get into the head and the mind and the being of Jesus - Jesus who, if he was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, must have struggled with his vocation - Jesus who, if he was really one of us, must have found his obedience only in the wrestling with his true humanity. In that film, Mary Magdalene again plays that role of a potential lover, maybe even wife or partner for life. In the Church we have not wanted to deal with Jesus, a real human being, and all of the implications of that human reality.

The big word for love in the New Testament is *agape*. When I learned about *agape* in the seminary, it was a love that stems from the lover and flows out to the one loved, but the one loved has no loveliness at all. There is no reason in the one who is loved that he or she should be loved; it is simply the love that bubbles up within the lover. This is the love of God. This is the word used in the New Testament over and over again. I was so thankful this fall when Krister Stendahl was here, who is no mean New Testament scholar himself, who said we have misused and misunderstood *agape*. *Agape* love is love that esteems the other, that finds that which is valuable in the other and, therefore, it is not simply the outpouring of love from the lover falling upon one who has no reason at all to be loved, but it is the esteeming of the other. But, nonetheless, that is only one word in the Greek language for love.

Another word is the word *Eros*, and you won't find *Eros* dealt with in the Church. It is the Greek word from which we get the word erotic, and so you will understand that we can't talk about that in the pulpit. But, actually, the meaning of *Eros* is that yearning for the human person, it is that drive for union and that drive for union within the human heart and soul is no different in its longing after God than in its longing after the other. And there is no longing after God that does not find expression and concrete experience apart from the loving of the other.

Ah, there are a few special souls down through the centuries, mystics, we call them, who got lost in some kind of ecstasy in contemplation of the divine in splendid isolation. But, it doesn't work for most of us. Most of us need another, another for whom the soul longs, whom the arms would embrace, the other body that is the embodiment of the other which, in the experience thereof, brings with it that dimension of the holy, the transcendent, so that in the horizontal realization of union there is the experience of that vertical dimension of the one who is in us and beyond us. We haven't done very well with that in the Church, even though the Gospel story makes Mary Magdalene the most flesh and blood woman in the Gospels, the preeminent feminine figure in the life of Jesus.

If you read the writings that come from the early Church fathers (and they were fathers), you will be aghast, honestly. You will be aghast at the distortion of human sexuality. Marriage is a compromise to the weakness and the lust of the flesh. The brilliant Church Father, St. Augustine, even suggests that marriage is for procreation without passion. Incredible! But that strain of asceticism, that rejection of the body, that distortion of human sexuality has so permeated the life of the Church that, in all honesty, there is probably no group of human beings anywhere, in any other organization or society or institution who are more fouled up in the handling of human sexuality than the Christian Church. We are scared to death of it, and not without reason. It is so powerful. And in the 60s, when the flower children threw off the oppression and brought about the revolution, they also reaped the whirlwind and the tragedy that follows in the steps of the abuse of that marvelous gift. But we have to be honest. Mary Magdalene said, "I don't know how to love him. I want him so. I love him so. He scares me so." That is more honest than anything you will read in any Church Father for 2000 years, and probably more helpful in gaining an insight into Jesus Christ.

That brings me to my second comment, and that is that, if Mary Magdalene in that intimate relationship, was moved off into the wings immediately in the Early Church we can understand why. Isn't it remarkable that the preeminent feminine presence is not heard of again? Instead, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is exalted to the place of preeminence. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is mentioned at the gathering on Pentecost. Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes the feminine symbol for the Church, and, for those of you who have some feeling for the Virgin Mary, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but in all honesty, if it is a male-dominated clergy that is setting up the ideal of the feminine, is it at all surprising that Mary

Magdalene is removed out of the place she has in the Gospel and replaced by the Virgin Mary who is marked by submission, passivity and obedience? And in the Church still today the feminine is put down and there is injustice to a Mary Magdalene and there is the exultation of the Virgin Mary who, in the Gospels, gets an ambiguous press, who didn't really get it, who had to be distanced by her own son. The Virgin Mary, for all of the femininity she brings into the divine and into the godhead and all of that, all of the beauty of her intercession, her openness to sinners - all of that which has been used positively and is understandable - nonetheless, it is not the Mary of the Gospel. The Mary of the Gospel is Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is the model of discipleship. She was the last at the cross; she was at the burial; she was there on Easter morning. It was Mary Magdalene who in her expression knew the secret of endless love, and it was because her life had been transformed and she loved him so, and she wanted him so, and he scared her so. And it was that love, that endless love, that has the affirmation of Jesus Christ.

Maybe we are about to turn a corner where we'll see not the domination of the feminine, but the reciprocity and the mutuality of the masculine and the feminine and the honoring of both and the honoring of the Eros that is the yearning within us for union, in which union we experience something more - something more, indeed - the presence of the Endless Lover.