

Mary Magdalene: Bedeviled

From the sermon series: No Stained Glass Saints

Text: Luke 8: 2; John 20: 16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The lilting melody and the words of the song of Mary Magdalene in the rock opera, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, are, for me, one of the most moving songs that have come along in a long time.

*I don't know how to love him,
What to do, how to move him.
I've, been changed, yes, really changed.
In these past few days when I've seen myself
I seem like someone else.*

(Mary Magdalene, in *Jesus Christ Superstar, A Rock Opera*)

The song expresses the struggle within the heart of Mary Magdalene, whose life had been transformed by Jesus Christ, trying to come to terms with that experience and with the One Who was the catalyst for that human transformation.

*Don't you think it's rather funny
I should be in this position?*

She is *no lover's fool*, the one who has always *been so cool*, ... *running every show*.

And yet, in the presence of Jesus, Mary is a woman transformed, transfixed, really not knowing how to love him.

He scares me so... I want him so...I love him so.

I find that Mary Magdalene has been the subject of a great deal of the great art of the world – painting, literature, drama. She has played an important role in the tradition of the Church. She is the example of a person whose life was changed by Jesus Christ. I know that she has been sculpted in statuary, she has been painted

on canvas, and I can't help but believe she has been placed in stained glass, as well. Mary Magdalene is a woman about whom we know very little prior to her encounter with Jesus Christ. Luke's brief statement tells us that Mary was one of a company of women who accompanied the band of disciples and Jesus, who ministered to them out of their resources. He identifies Mary as one from whom seven demons had gone out. I don't know if he meant seven, or if he meant simply seven as that number of completion, but that isn't really important. The important thing is that he points to a woman who ministered to Jesus Christ during the days of his ministry. If we had read the complete Gospel record, we would find her to have been with Mary, his mother, lingering at the Cross when the disciples had forsaken him. We would find her in the company of other women early in the morning, coming to the tomb on the day of Resurrection. We find her, as we read a moment ago, as that one to whom Jesus gave that special and personal revelation of himself. It would seem, perhaps, that Mary Magdalene represented that human person in Jesus' life with whom he must have had the deepest, most intimate relationship. Her life had been changed and with total devotion she followed him, she worshiped him. He was the source of her continuing new existence. And it's a remarkable story full of good hope for all of us, because I don't imagine there is anyone here this morning that could qualify as a better cripple than Mary Magdalene. There is no one who has entered this sanctuary this morning who would have to take a back seat in the presence of Mary Magdalene before she met Jesus.

We don't know much about her, but the imagination of the Church has been full and rich. Throughout the Church tradition she has often been lumped with the other Marys. There are, indeed, seven Marys mentioned in the New Testament. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, for one. And then, just prior to this account in Luke 8 mentioning Mary Magdalene, there is the story of a woman of the street, the streetwalker, the harlot, who comes into the Pharisees' party where Jesus is, breaks down, weeps over his feet, wipes them with the hairs of her head. In the tradition of the Church, Mary Magdalene has often been identified with this woman, although without any real biblical warrant. She has been identified, also, both in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and another, earlier 20th century drama, *Mary Magdalene*, by a man named Maeterlinck, as the woman in John 8, the woman taken in the act of adultery who was dragged before Jesus with the question, "What shall we do with her? What does the Law require?" Jesus said, as he stooped and wrote in the sand, "Those of you who are without sin, cast the first stone, fulfilling the Law," and with all of them slinking away, he finally confronted the woman, saying to her, "Does no man accuse you?" She said, "No man, Lord." He said, "Neither do I. Go your way and sin no more."

There is no biblical basis for identifying Mary Magdalene with the woman in Luke 7 who burst into the dinner party, nor is there any basis for identifying Mary Magdalene with the woman in John 8 taken in adultery. However, it is a possibility. We don't know. Whatever was the trouble with Mary Magdalene, as a matter of fact, she was a wounded, crippled human being. She was a person that

was in bondage. She was a person who was not free, not healthy, not whole. She was a person who lacked a sense of identity and self-esteem and spiritual health and wholeness. She was a person who was crippled, injured, wounded. She was a person who was dominated by some power outside of herself, which was not the Power of God, but the Power of Darkness. This one, who has been a great, magnificent woman in the mind of the Church down through the centuries, was, indeed, a broken, crippled human being. Then she met Jesus. And that's the hopeful message this morning – that there is no human condition that cannot be transformed by Jesus Christ. The simple message this morning is that there is no wounding of the human spirit, no crippling of the human person that cannot be reversed by the mighty power of God that appeared in Jesus Christ.

I have read books this week because I knew I would be facing Mary this morning, as I faced you, and I knew the Bible says that out of her had gone seven demons, and I'm not one who easily believes in demons. I'm not one who easily believes in angels. I'm not one that easily believes in anything I can't get my hands around. And it's tough to be a preacher of the Gospel when you are also a person who is generally on a head-trip, intellectually oriented, and totally conditioned by the modern scientific method. I say, it's tough to be a preacher of the Gospel when your head keeps getting in the way. And so, I knew I had to start early, but I didn't start early, I simply went late. Reading, reading, reading. Hoping that now, finally, after all of these years of ministry, all these years of preaching the Gospel, all of these years of dealing with Gospels that have the Son of God and human cripples and the demonic and evil in them – that I might get some insight as to how darkness can come to indwell the human spirit and wound and cripple the human person, and how Jesus Christ can transform, setting the person free.

Well, I could have just concentrated on the magnificence of the Magdalene in her devotion to Jesus, once she had been healed, and let it go at that. But I couldn't really do that, either, and so I have struggled and I have wrestled and, believe it or not, even prayed. Here is a story of a human being, a human being crippled. I know human beings crippled. I know human beings in this congregation this morning who are crippled, who are wounded, who are scarred, who are in the power of something from which they cannot break free.

We come to church - what for? Religious obligation? That doesn't work here for very many anymore. We come here - for what? To hear some interesting word, some scintillating lecture, some good music? Not all bad. But, is that all? Who are you this morning who has entered the sanctuary and come into the presence of God and presented yourself? Is there not one here this morning who is wounded and crippled and broken, struggling with darkness, knowing the anguish of the desperation within for which there seems to be no liberating word? Let me tell you that Mary Magdalene must have been that kind of a person. She is portrayed movingly in some of the drama written about her. She has sparked the imagination of playwrights; she has caused the creativity of artists to flow.

Because there she is, bound with seven demons, in the grip of darkness, meeting Jesus, life turned upside down! Changed.

*I've been changed. Yes, really changed.
I don't know how to love him.
He scares me so. I want him so. I love, him so.*

I've been changed. Yes, really changed.

Have you come to church this morning to be changed? Have you come to church this morning conscious of bindings, bondage, unfreedom, darkness and desperation? I announce to you the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which says that he has the power to deliver you from whatever shackle binds your spirit. And he can transform you, wherever you are and whatever your condition, into a person that is whole and healthy, full of worship and praise, love and devotion. Jesus can make you new. I believe that.

I don't understand it. I often wrestle with it. Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "... deliver us from the Evil One." I don't know anything about the Devil, Satan. I even get queasy when people talk about the Devil. Most of the time, when people say the Devil did this or that, I get to thinking, "Ah, don't blame it on the Devil. We are responsible and we are to be mature and we have a certain freedom to make our own decisions. Don't blame it on the snake." It's not easy for me to picture a universe in which there are, in reality, spiritual powers that impact our lives. But I believe it. In spite of myself, I believe it. And I believe the story of Mary Magdalene is in scripture as a sign of hope for every human being that would be set free.

I read a document to which I referred some months ago, *Healing The Family Tree*, in dazed amazement as it tells about the reversing of incurable, irreversible human situations simply by believing prayer in Jesus' name for deliverance and for healing.

Mary Magdalene marches before us this morning as a sign of hope. I confess before you that too many of you have come to me and I, with you, have too readily, too easily acquiesced to the givenness of the human situation. I have not had faith. I confess to you - I do it not as a rhetorical ploy. I confess to you that it is hard for me to believe! Do you hear me? So, I am preaching beyond my experience and I am preaching beyond my faith. I am preaching what the Bible says this morning, calling you to the possibility that your life could be set free if you believe in Jesus and asked him to set you free from whatever shackle or chain is weighing down the human spirit.

Don't believe as I believe. Trust the word of God, and Jesus can heal you and change your life, whatever your human situation.

And so, this morning, as we close, I'll pray simply. To the extent that it is your prayer, you pray it after me. To the extent that you are serious and it reflects where you are, trust Jesus to do what you need him to do for you. He could change your life here and now.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, Living Christ,
present here, present now, powerful here and powerful now,
as on the occasion when you met Mary Magdalene.

We, too, have demons aplenty
raging within our hearts and minds.

Assured of your love,
assured of the sacrifice you offered once for all,
assured that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ,
assured that the decree against us has been nailed to the Cross,
assured that the guilt has been removed as far as the East is from the West,
assured that every power of darkness has been conquered
once for all on Easter morning,
assured that you want for us life and wholeness,
Lord Jesus, set us free.

Set us free from whatever is binding us.
Set us free from whatever has got us in its clutch.
Set us free from all the powers of darkness.
Lord Jesus, I believe.
Set me free. Set me free.

Amen.