

Mary of Magdala: Our Spiritual Mother

I had quite the dilemma picking a sermon topic this week. On the one hand, the gospel reading (especially verse 6) is one of *the* centerpieces of my work on *The INTRAFaith Conversation*. The big question for Christians who want to be inclusive of other religious beliefs is what to do with the exclusivity of “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to God but through me.” I love talking about this verse and others equally as problematic. But I’m not going to talk about it today. If you’re really interested in what I might have said, you can check out the YouTube video of my interview about just this verse (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZJLx_X-AOQ&t=27s). You can also find a good sermon on my blog (<https://wordpress.com/posts/intrafaithconversation.com>) by Pastor Dawn Hutchings of Holy Cross Lutheran Church near Toronto. So that was my original intention for a sermon topic today.

But it’s also Mothers Day and since we’ve been reading from the Gospel of Mary throughout the Easter season, it seemed right and good to give the woman apostle her due. My mind was made up when I read a Facebook post yesterday from another pastor who noted:
Tomorrow: Mother's Day
Tomorrow's Gospel Text: "Father" 13 times

Sometimes I forget – or take for granted – the freedom we have in using an inclusive translation of the Bible and in sometimes including sacred writings that never even made it into any of our Bibles – inclusive or not. And why they’re important.

As Jesus Seminar scholar Karen King wrote in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*:

“Few people today are acquainted with the *Gospel of Mary*. Written early in the 2nd century, it disappeared for over 1500 years until a single, fragment came to light in the late 19th century. Although details of its discovery are obscure, we do know that it was purchased in Cairo and brought to Berlin in 1896. Two additional fragments came to light in the 20th century.

“Still there is no known complete copy of the *Gospel of Mary*. Fewer than 8 pages of the papyrus text survive, which means that about half of the *Gospel of Mary* is lost to us, perhaps forever.” But, you may ask, why should we care?

Karen King offers seven (a good biblical number) reasons:

- . . . these scant pages provide an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost 1500 years.
- it presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual

knowledge

- it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life
- it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is—a piece of theological fiction
- it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership
- it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power
- it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians
- it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority.

All written in the name of a woman.

Because it's so unfamiliar to us, reading from it isn't like reading from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Most of us have been hearing passages from those gospels over and over again for years. And it will take some time for us to have the same familiarity and understanding of this one. Each of the seven points would be an area for study and discussion. One thing we can say is that although the *Gospel of Mary* is largely about the teachings of Jesus, it also paints a picture of conflict among the disciples.

In the beginning of the gospel, Mary is held in high esteem by the others. Peter even acknowledges there were times Jesus spoke to her when the other disciples weren't present. But then things change. Our passage today comes after Peter asks her what Jesus had said to her in private and Mary tells them.

Afterward, Andrew says basically, "I don't believe her." Peter turns against her as well. Then, to the chagrin of every woman in a leadership position, Mary cries. She's obviously hurt that they'd think she was making things up - or out and out lying.

Now I'm of two minds about her tears. On the one hand, I wish she could have held it together and responded to Andrew and Peter in a calm, collected manner. We've been taught that weeping is a sign of weakness and diminishes our effectiveness as leaders. On the other hand, I applaud and celebrate Mary's tears as a sign of liberation. We don't have to buy into that judgment. Of course, we still have a long way to go in transforming our culture, especially in the political arena, but also in the church. This is one of the reasons why this gospel is so important. For too long, there's been one model of leadership and women have been expected to fit into it. But with Mary as a role model, we can begin to redefine strong leadership from a religious perspective.

But beyond the crying issue, what were Andrew and Peter so upset about? We know this gospel was written in the 2nd century and undoubtedly reflects conflicts within Christianity at that time. There appear to be two issues. One is the rejection of new teachings based on private revelation. The second is gender. And these two issues are still with us today.

One of the reasons that the creeds were written and the canon of biblical books was set was to gather Christians under one banner of belief – because there were so many different ideas being talked about and taught in the early days of Christianity. We became a church in which right belief was required; personal experiences of God were suspect. Gospels and other writings that didn't reflect the party line were suppressed.

Today, with the discovery of these writings and accessibility to information about them on the Internet - and with interest in other religious and spiritual practices - this bulwark of orthodoxy has been crumbling. And the conflict can be seen in the divide in Christianity between those who hold to the authority of scripture alone and the church as the mediator of Divine presence and those who are open to individual, private experiences of the Divine. Mary, portrayed here as a model disciple, spiritually mature, wise, and steadfast would be a representative of the latter group, while Andrew and Peter try to hold the line of orthodox church authority. No matter which side you're on, this gospel shows us that both ways were part of the earliest church.

The other issue that Mary faced was that of gender. Peter was OK with the fact that Jesus loved Mary more than all the other women. But he couldn't accept the fact that Jesus preferred her to the male apostles as well. And Peter most certainly drew the line at accepting instruction from a woman. However, this gospel proposes that the basis for leadership is spiritual maturity not a person's gender.

That sounds like a no-brainer to us, right? But there are places within the church where Mary would still be silenced. And places within even our progressive churches where the experience and leadership of women are more subtly devalued.

This gospel is important. We haven't even gotten into some of the teachings of Jesus contained within – that's another sermon. But the teachings of Jesus are most definitely behind the witness of Mary in this text - even the ones that may sound strange to us because they're different from what we've always read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As we study their differences, they can help us break out of thinking we know everything there is to know about Jesus and about the early days of Christianity and break open new insights into what these teachings have to offer us in this day and time.

Someone asked me once what I would name a church if I had the opportunity to do so. I immediately said St. Mary of Magdala. There aren't many of them, but they do exist. The closest, I think, is the one in Berkley, founded in 1923, then the one in Bolinas founded in the 1870s. However, they still have male priests, so there's still work to be done.

Now, nowhere do we have any historical indication that Mary had any children – *The Da Vinci Code* aside. So it might seem strange to honor her on Mothers Day. But I would argue that Mary of Magdala is a mother of the church and spiritual mother to us all. On

this day, when we rightly honor the moms who gave us physical birth, we can also honor those who have been part of our spiritual upbringing as well.

Mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, aunts, godmothers, friends, Sunday school teachers, pastors, authors, activists. Even those women not specifically affiliated with church or even Christianity yet have embodied the teachings of Jesus are worthy of our honor.

And so we honor Mary. I want to share with you the picture of an icon. This icon was commissioned for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to commemorate the election of Barbara Harris in 1989, the first woman bishop in the Anglican communion.

According to the ancient tradition of the East, Mary went to Rome after the resurrection, where she was admitted to Tiberias Caesar's court because of her high social standing. After describing how poorly Pilate had administered justice at Jesus' trial, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. To help explain the resurrection, she picked up an egg from the dinner table. Caesar responded that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. The egg turned red immediately, which is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East.

So, here's to you, Mary of Magdala. And Happy Mothers Day, everyone!

Amen

THE GOSPEL OF MARY OF MAGDALEN 10

The Gospel of Mary was written when Christianity, still in its nascent stages, was made up of communities widely dispersed around the Easter Mediterranean, communities which were often relatively isolated from one another and probably each small enough to meet in someone's home without attracting too much notice. These first Christians had no New Testament, no creeds, no commonly established church order or chain of authority, no church buildings, and indeed no single understanding of Jesus.

It is written . . .

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, "Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe that the Savior said these things, for indeed these teachings are strange ideas." Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?"

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the Savior?"

Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why He loved her more than us. Rather we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as He commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said.”

After he had said these things, they started going out to teach and to preach.

JOHN 14:1-14

The problem in today’s reading emerges in verse 6: “I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” How often have people been brutalized by this passage! This passage becomes the antithesis to the “greater things” God imagines for it when we interpret it individualistically, exclusively, and literally. Moreover, it can be theologically destructive if taken out of the context of John’s gospel and a holistic understanding of Jesus’ life and message.

It is written . . .

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God’s house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going.”

Thomas replied, “But we don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I myself am the Way - I am Truth, and I am Life. No one comes to Abba God but through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Abba also. From This point on, you know my Abba and you have seen God.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don’t know me? Whoever has seen me has seen Abba God. How can you say, ‘Show us your Abba’? Don’t you believe that I am in Abba God and God is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is Abba God, living in me, who is accomplishing the works of God. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me, or else believe because of the works I do. The truth of the matter is, anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do – and greater works besides. Why? Because I go to God, and whatever you ask in my name I will do, so that God may be glorified in me. Anything you ask in my name I will do.”

