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What Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan teach the church

Jamie Manson | Jul. 24, 2012

As *NCR* reported Monday [1], communities throughout the country offered special liturgies this weekend to honor Mary Magdalene, whose feast day was Sunday. A community in San Diego invited me to preach at its celebration of "the Apostle to the Apostles." Rather than choosing a Gospel narrative about Mary Magdalene, they chose instead the story of the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 of John's Gospel.

Looking at this text and comparing it to the story of Mary Magdalene, I was struck by the parallels that I found between these women. Those who have heard of Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman, or "the woman at the well," as she's also known, have in all likelihood been given the impression that both of these women were rescued by Jesus from their sexually immoral lives.

In truth, some of the finest biblical scholars, many of them men, have posited that the Samaritan woman's "five husbands" and the "man she is currently with" may just be a symbol of the six gods (in addition to Yahweh) that the Samaritans were accused of worshipping. The great scholar Raymond Brown points out that the Hebrew word for "husband" was also used for pagan deities in those days. In Jesus' time, the Samaritans were considered impure, so much so that even entering into Samaria was considered contaminating. That Jesus would not only go into that land but also speak with a woman there was unthinkable.

Some scholars believe that John the Evangelist, one of the great symbologists of scripture, may be using the character of the Samaritan woman as a symbol for Samaritans. This interpretation makes sense because Jesus never judges the Samaritan woman or tells her explicitly to turn away from sin or forgives her for any unlawful behavior. All he is does is reveal his true nature to her, knowing she will eventually recognize him.

Mary Magdalene is another woman from John's Gospel who is famous for recognizing Jesus. It's been tough, though, to grasp her true story, since everyone from Pope Gregory in the sixth century to Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber in the 1970s has had us believe she was an adulterer and a repentant sinner.

Mary of Magdala is perhaps the most misrepresented figure in the entire Christian tradition. Since the fourth century, stories, stained glass and paintings have portrayed her as a prostitute and public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. This interpretation has no basis in scripture. John depicts her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith. She is the first to discover the empty tomb. The risen Christ chooses her to announce the good news of his resurrection to the other disciples, which prompted some early church fathers to declare her "the Apostle to the Apostles."

That the message of the resurrection was first entrusted to women is strong proof the resurrection actually did take place. Had accounts of Jesus' resurrection been lies or fabrications, a woman would never have been chosen as a witness, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

The Samaritan woman is the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Mary Magdalene is the first to recognize the resurrected Christ. This is no small feat in the Gospel of John, where there are three kinds of people. There are those who bumble around the Gospel story knowing Jesus is special, but aren't quite sure why. The male

disciples would be a perfect example. Then there are those who know Jesus is the Messiah and are out to kill him for it. And, lastly, there is that small collection of disciples who, after a deep engagement with Jesus, recognize him as the Messiah and publicly confess it.

The Samaritan woman is the first disciple to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah, and her testimony brings him many followers in Samaria. Mary Magdalene is the first disciple to witness the resurrected Jesus and to proclaim the resurrection to the male disciples. They weren't simply the first women to recognize Jesus. They were the first *disciples* to recognize him. One doesn't need to read the Gospel of John through a feminist lens to see exactly how scandalous these stories would have been to a first-century audience.

It is ironic and tragic that the prominence of Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman in the Jesus story forced male tradition-makers to turn them each into different kind of scandalous woman. Rather than honor their model discipleship, they were sexualized and turned into weak, sinful women in need of redemption.

But it strikes me that many in the institutional church continue to do the same today to women and LGBT persons. Rather than celebrating the extraordinary gifts women have brought to the church throughout the ages, we are instead told that the female anatomy creates an insurmountable obstacle that prevents God from calling a woman to the priesthood.

So many LGBT saints, priests, nuns, theologians, social justice advocates and ministers have brought and continue to countless blessings to the church. Most of them, however, have chosen to remain closeted, because the hierarchy has insisted that the desires of their bodies, emotions and spirits are intrinsically disordered. If they came out, the institutional church would cease to celebrate the gifts that they offer to the church.

Rather than looking honestly at the countless ways in which women and LGBT people bring the life of God more fully into our church and world, the institutional church reduces us to our sexuality, and then makes our sexuality the reason why we cannot be the "chosen people."

In a time when the Roman Catholic hierarchy is fixated on defining who the privileged people are in the church (like male celibates and heterosexual couples) and who isn't entitled to share in sacraments like ordination and marriage, the Gospel narratives offer a crucial corrective. In the Samaritan woman story, for example, Jesus openly challenges and breaks open two boundaries: the boundary between "chosen people" and "rejected people" and the boundary between male and female.

Listening to the Gospel stories, the early church understood just how subversive Jesus' words were and how scandalous his work was. They heard in the Gospel narrative after narrative of unlikely disciples, people like Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman, who lived on the edge of society and become models of faith.

The institutional church seems to be working overtime to put up barriers to prevent God's people from participating in the church. The margins of the church seem to be widening every day. It's easy to despair of all of this exclusion. In those moments, it is helpful to remember the Gospel stories. Jesus constantly faced rigid religious leaders who were so preoccupied with maintaining purity and orthodoxy, they either could not see or refused to see the incarnation of God right in their midst. While the 12 disciples remained confused about Jesus' identity and the religious leaders were busy trying to undermine him, it was the marginalized who recognized him and helped him bring the life of God more fully into the world. Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman are two of the finest examples of this Gospel paradox.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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