

Feast of Mary Magdalene
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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Here in the United States, we're gearing up for the mid-term elections. As the election gets closer, I seem to notice more "smear" advertisements. If you haven't heard of smear, it is an effort to damage an individual or a group's reputation. The purpose is to call into question one's credibility with unverified rumors, distortions, half-truths, or lies. Yet, smear is not exclusive to elections. Even Western Christianity engaged in such abhorrent practices.

One such instance was given fuel to burn in the year 591. Then, Pope Gregory I took to the pulpit and delivered a homily about Mary Magdalene. While he spoke highly of her devotion and love of Jesus, he made some connections that were not Biblically supported. He labeled Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner with an unsavory reputation. And, despite the name Mary being one of the most popular names of Jesus's time, the Pope argued that Mary Magdalene was the same person known as "Mary of Bethany" and she was also the anonymous sinner with perfume in Luke's gospel. Since Pope Gregory started to foster inaccuracies about the persona of Mary Magdalene, others jumped on the bandwagon. Soon, Mary Magdalene's story was conflated with Saint Mary of Egypt who was known as a repentant prostitute. By this point, Mary's story was written, her reputation damaged, and no one corrected it.

And that's how smear works. It's a recipe with a dash of truth and a sprinkle of inaccurate distractions. While you and I might not intentionally work to damage an individual or group's reputation, we perpetuate and participate in socially and religiously sanctioned hierarchies that give

one group power over another. So, while we may not directly see our smear, we still disobey God's desires.

Let me give an example using the ELCA's draft social statement on Women and Justice.¹ This document reminds us that our church and culture have often taught that there are only two types of people, male and female, one that is dominate and the other subordinate. These stereotypes can cause harm because they shape our understanding of others and ourselves from a young age. For example, boys are groomed to avoid tears in public while girls are taught to dress and act in particular ways to be accepted. Boys are socialized to step into roles with power, means, and visibility, which gives men particular benefits that we call "male privilege." Girls, on the other hand, are often socialized for roles that give them less access to power, agency, and visibility. Oftentimes, when individuals do not comply with these socially accepted expectations they are rejected or become invisible. We might hear these marginalized people labeled as an "effeminate man," a "tomboy," "a geek girl," or a "sissy guy." Some of those who are rejected might claim labels such as "genderqueer" or "non-binary."

And, if I were forced to label Mary Magdalene, I might call her a tomboy or even genderqueer. After all, she was financially independent and, in a time where men had power and money, she likely funded Jesus's ministry. Based on the ordering of her name in eight of the fourteen passages where she appears in the Bible, she was likely a strong leader. It was clear that she was utterly devoted to Jesus as a disciple standing by his side at his execution and after his death. She was not your typical woman. In fact, it seemed that she understood more about Jesus's ministry than the twelve male disciples. One thing that cannot be disputed is that in three out of the four gospel accounts of Jesus's resurrection, Mary Magdalene is directly named.

¹http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Social_Statement_DRAFT_on_Women_and_Justice.pdf?_ga=2.219621145.1286741440.1532098049-822579962.1481467824

Today, we heard the resurrection account from the Gospel of John. In this episode, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found it empty. She quickly ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. Although we didn't hear it today, the disciples came running to see but eventually went back to their normal business. However, Mary Magdalene stayed in the garden and became the first to see the resurrected Jesus. And, yet again, Mary went and told the disciples of her experience. We know for certain that Mary was the first person to announce the resurrection. Mary was the first to share the good news. Mary was an essential witness that inspired the birth of our faith.

Despite these clear biblical stories, Pope Gregory I and others developed and perpetuated inaccuracies about Mary Magdalene. Although religious leaders would use Mary Magdalene's experience as the basis for our faith, they'd smear her character. You see, around the same time that the smear campaign began, another pope banned the ordination of women. Smear was used again by a respected teacher of the faith in the 4th century when he described women as "malformed men." Smear was also used when the Bible's creation story was inaccurately used to vilify women.

You see, in our human desire to make everything neat and tidy, we created hierarchy. Humanity developed rules and structures that gives value to some things and withholds it from others. However, in the Scriptures we see that God desires diversity, interconnectedness, and equity for all. When humanity tries to put things into neat little boxes, the Holy Spirit breaks open those boxes. For example, when humankind became obsessed with legalistic interpretations of the Ten Commandments, Jesus expanded our understanding with a broad statement to love God and love neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10). When humankind tried to argue that our particularities divide us, Saint Paul reminded us that there is no longer slave or free, male or female, but rather all are one in

Christ (Galatians 3). And again, when humankind tried to smear Mary Magdalene and reject the truth, the Scriptures proclaimed that Mary Magdalene was the first apostle and the first witness of the Resurrection (John 20).

Because God's work through Mary Magdalene could not be covered up, we have been the recipient of the memories of Jesus's actions found in the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, we find that we are loved by a God who values diversity in all its forms. We come to learn that we do not have to resort to smear to survive. Instead we are reminded that truthfulness, honesty, mercy, and justice are God's gifts to us. Then, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we discover abundant life. An abundant life shaped through Jesus's call to associate with social outcasts, to advocate for the disadvantaged and unjustly treated, to have compassion for the sick, and to boldly criticize those who neglect justice and mercy.

Friends, that is the good news of today's gospel. We have a God who has chosen all people, without exception, to share the good news. Even when people are smeared by the Church, nothing can stop this story. So, when you feel like you're not living up to the culture's expectations of you, remember God's work through Mary Magdalene. When they go low and try to smear you, go high and cling to truth. When injustice rear its ugly head, cling to our God's example that sets us free to boldly proclaim love in word and deed. Amen.