

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Mary Magdalene has an image problem. If she had a PR firm, we'd want to avoid them. After all, Mary Magdalene's reputation is at best confusing and at worst defamation.

Over the centuries, some have called her a prostitute without any scriptural backing. You see, in Luke 8, she had seven demons cast out from her, but it never mentions the specifics of her sin. Then, some try to connect Mary Magdalene to the unnamed woman in Luke 7– that is, the woman who wept on Jesus's feet and dried her tears with her hair. Even if Mary Magdalene was that unnamed woman, that woman was only described as a sinner and, again, the type of sin was never mentioned. Throughout the Gospels, we find that readers and scholars have taken ambiguous or missing details found within independent and various Gospel accounts and have used them to assume that Mary Magdalene is a prostitute with no textual support.

And, it's hard to know exactly how this happened, but it seems to go back to a confusing sermon that Pope Gregory the Great gave in 591. In that sermon, he made the argument that Luke's unnamed sinner (remember: the feet, tears, and hair episode), Mary of Bethany (you know, Lazarus' sister), and Mary Magdalene were all the same person. It's a significant jump to lump these various women together.

Now, at best we can chalk it up to human error, and at worst we can say that the patriarchy was out to demonize and devalue women. Yet, regardless of the *intention* of Pope Gregory the Great, the *impact* was arguably defamation of character.

The thing is, we cannot chalk this up something that happened a long time ago, we cannot blame it on poor scholarship, and we cannot dismiss it as an error in ancient history. You see, this problem of intention verses impact is on-going. The situation where we blame the past for the injustices caused in the present, but where we don't look at our role in perpetuating the injustice cannot go on. Our acceptance, even passively, of those on the margins who are devalued, defamed, and demonized is characteristically a human problem. It is, to use a Christian term, sinful.

Here's what I mean: Every day, we justify the gender wage gap where women are paid \$0.82 for every dollar men earn. And, sure, we can say we're making progress since in 2015 it was \$0.79 to the dollar. But, get this: if we continue at this same pace, white women won't close the pay gap until 2059, while Black women will wait until 2130 and Hispanic women until 2224.¹ While our intentions might be to make this right, we cannot dismiss the impact it will have on communities for the next 39 years, 110 years, 204 years, and well beyond.

And, women's wage gaps are not the only place, for, as we talk about the impacts of racism during our congregation-wide conversations, we're learning to notice the impacts laws, policies, and bias have had on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. We are beginning to notice that our intention to work for justice and peace for Black and Brown communities is often negatively impacted by our inability to acknowledge the disinvestment, discrimination, and devaluing of difference. As we work to feed those who are hungry, we are beginning to understand more fully that charity and justice are both necessary parts of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked.

¹ https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/?gclid=EA1aIQobChMIInb7QtaXm6gIVjMDACh3TNQ9dEAAYASAAEgLVRF_D_BwE

Because, yes, a sandwich is important for someone who is hungry, and so too, working to reform the systems that have perpetuated hunger and poverty by using our political voice is equally necessary. You see, as people of faith who follow the resurrected Christ, we are called to notice the places where intention and impact are misaligned so that we might bring about life for all.

And that brings us back to the tomb where Mary Magdalene stood in today's gospel. What *is* clear in all four gospels is that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb that first Easter Sunday. At that tomb: (1) Mary first discovered it was empty, (2) she ran to tell the other disciples, (3) she returned to the tomb, and (4) eventually, she was alone in the garden. When all were gone and when it seemed like nothing would change, Mary Magdalene persisted.

I'd like to think that Mary Magdalene persisted because she knew how God works. I'd like to imagine that as gender-minority in a male-centric society, she knew that in the darkest of moments is when new life appears. I'd like to believe that without Mary Magdalene's persistence and preaching that you and I would not be here today. Because, Mary Magdalene was the first apostle. That is, she was the first person to share of the resurrection. She was the first person to share that Jesus was more than a nice teacher, but rather, that Jesus was the embodied Christ that continues to live! And, I don't fully understand why we haven't given her that respect, since it is oh-so clear in the Scriptures. But, I do wonder what it would have been like to have Mary Magdalene as the first pope. I wonder how her persistence to experience the divine presence could have shaped the ancient, medieval, and post-modern world.

And *that* is the beauty of today's feast day! Today, we reclaim Mary Magdalene's image as the church's matriarch and founder. This day, we name the Biblical truth that she

was the first witness who told everyone else. Today, we have the opportunity to emulate Mary's response to the divine resurrection—an opportunity to be persistent in seeking out God's resurrection in the darkest of places, an opportunity to share with others the experiences of God's presence in the world, and an opportunity to name that our intentions are to love God, neighbor, and ourselves but that sometimes our impact fall short.

Mary Magdalene's witness has taught me so much. Her understanding of Christ's presence and resurrection, has allowed me to see that being gay is not a liability for God, but rather, that being gay is a gift where I can more clearly see God's new life, God's resurrection, and God's liberation in the most unexpected of places. And, so too, Mary Magdalene's example of how to share her experiences has rubbed off on this faith community when many were vulnerable while sharing Spirit-filled stories. And, Mary Magdalene's witness was palpable as we gathered together to discuss and respond to the impact this community had on harming Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. And, Mary Magdalene's witness is visible as we prepare to welcome our new Pastoral Intern so that we might help her grow, shape her journey, and form the whole church as we embody the witness of Mary Magdalene.

But, here's the thing: our embodied experience, following the witness of Mary Magdalene, is the embodiment of Christ. For, as we gather, we are reminded that Christ's gifts of boundless love and endless grace gave Mary Magdalene her persistence and witness. That Christ's presence and promise are found at the Communion table and the baptismal font. That Christ's gifts are given to all with an intention and impact that are so perfectly aligned. Thanks be to God for the witness of Mary Magdalene, and thanks be to God for the embodiment of Christ with us, in us, and working through us. Amen.