

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 3, 2006

"FROM SILENCE TO LEADERSHIP"

As I've been considering how to conclude this sermon series on Mary Magdalene, I've heard the voice of my preaching professor echoing in my head: "Resist the temptation or urge to wrap your sermons up with a nice little bow." It's interesting how simple phrases stick with you. And I confess I've given minimal help with drawing any particular conclusions in my previous 2 sermons as I've ended each one leaving you dangling on a proverbial cliff with phrases like 'stay tuned' and 'I wonder.' How's that for embracing your professor's advice?

For those who've endured patiently by being here for the entire series either in body or virtually in spirit on broadcast or website, thank you for your commitment. While I cannot guarantee a succinct and tidy ending today (you'll be the judge of that!) it's actually been great fun and very interesting, as well as emboldening for me to prepare each sermon. I also must admit it's felt a bit like an athletic endurance event and today we're approaching the finish line. Needless to say, I will do my best to leave us not staggering, but sprinting across that line!

Call it serendipity, good luck or divine intervention, it gave me pause to discover an article that appeared in prominent view in the NY Times eight days ago on August 26: *Clergwomen Find Hard Path to Bigger Pulpit*.

It reads: "Whether they come from theologically liberal denominations or conservative ones, black churches or white, women in the clergy still bump against what many call the stained glass ceiling - longstanding limits, preferences and prejudices within their denominations that keep them from leading bigger congregations and having the opportunity to shape the faith of more people."

The Times article further illuminated that women now make up 51% of the students in divinity school. But in the mainline Protestant churches that have been ordaining women for decades, women account for only a small percentage - about 3 percent - according to one survey - of ministers or pastors who lead large communities. In evangelical churches, most of which do not ordain women, some women opt to leave for other denominations that will accept them as

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ministers. Women from historically black churches who want to ascend to the pulpit often start their own congregations. In the first decade after ordination, men and women hold similar positions, but in their second decade in ordained ministry, 70% of men had moved on to medium-sized and large communities compared to 35% women. Of clergy at the top of the pay scale, only 3% are women.

"It's a combination of age-old customs and democratic myopia: that in the marketplace of ideas and values, men matter most and that by definition, women

have to take a back seat," said Dr. Alton B. Pollard III, director of black church studies and associate professor of religion and culture at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Needless to say, that while several Protestant denominations (Quakers, United Church of Christ) began ordaining women in the 19th century, followed by the Presbyterians and Methodists in 1956, the Evangelical Lutherans in 1970, and the Episcopal Church officially in 1976, these congregations and institutions have limited women's leadership. Experts on women in the clergy say that while the leaders of mainline denominations support women in the ministry, not enough is done to back their rise. As one clergywoman pointed out in an interview: "When a senior pastor (or clergyman) is consulted about whom he would like to succeed him, there aren't any women on those lists. The good old boy network starts there."

But allow me to pause here and acknowledge, as a priest in the Episcopal Church, how incredibly thrilled I am about our denomination's election in June of a woman for the first time in its history - Katherine Jefferts Schori, who also happens to be a Stanford alum - as its 26th Presiding Bishop for the next nine years. This is truly monumental and a watershed moment. Regardless, Bishop Jefferts Schori has a challenging road ahead of her. As recently as August 18, it was reported by the Episcopal News Service that there are at least seven diocesan bishops and standing committees in this country that are asking for "alternative primatial oversight." In other words, they do not want to be led by or answer to a woman as their Presiding Bishop. Now, this is an astute crowd - you've probably surmised that these seven bishops are men.

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So I do wonder. What would Mary Magdalene have to say now about:

1. Our progress thus far regarding women's spiritual and religious leadership.
2. Whether things really have changed that much to suggest that women's ability to lead religious communities and institutions, while perhaps more accepted, has been truly embraced.
3. What in the world is holding us back?

For the sake of context, let's consider briefly what we've talked about over these last few weeks in regard to Mary Magdalene as a way of illuminating potentially some insight to these three considerations.

In essence, she does provide a leadership model, not only for modern women today, but for all of us, in our quest for spirituality. Mary Magdalene's presence at the 3 final scenes of Jesus' life - the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb - manifests the kind of courage and leadership that result from devotion and love. Jesus' male

followers seem not yet possessed of such all-powerful devotion: they are controlled by fear until after the appearance of the risen Christ. Mary and her women companions seem controlled by devotion from their first appearance in the gospels.

The intensity and intimacy of Mary's devotion is manifested tellingly in today's Gospel narrative of John, which is why I thought it seemed appropriate to hear it as we conclude this series on Mary Magdalene. Scholar Mary Thompson, author of *Mary of Magdala, What the DaVinci Code Misses*, postulates that the historicity of the account is not an issue here; the portrayal by early Christianity is. Mary of Magdala is selflessly searching for the body of Jesus. She has no hint of an understanding of resurrection - she is looking exclusively for a dead body. At a key moment in the narrative Mary is able to "turn herself around" and by this action we begin to see that her quest for the body may not be as important as she thinks it is. "Turn around or turn" is used twice in the narrative of John and indicates action on Mary's part that has to do with Christ, not herself. She is thus able to turn toward a belief and experience so complete and so strong that she can become the proclaimer of that news to the other disciples. She is

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also called upon to proclaim the ascension, for we hear in John's gospel also the inclusion of all of Jesus' disciples in his glory: "My Father and your Father, my God and your God."

It is perhaps for this reason that many people over the last 2,000 years have referred to Mary Magdalene as the *apostola apostolorum* which is usually translated in one of two ways: *apostle to the apostles* and *apostle of the apostles*. While the first way of translating the phrase usually is meant to suggest that her apostleship extended only as far as the other apostles and that her commission was to tell no one else, the second, *apostle of the apostles* recognizes Mary Magdalene as the primary witness who received a commission as legitimate as anyone else's.

The distinction of an apostle has certain requirements. The earliest canonical (New Testament) writings that revealed what these are come from Paul who seemed to think of them this way: you had to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus; you had to receive a command to proclaim a message from a divine source. (called a commission) This goes beyond the distinction of disciple, which simply means follower, of which Jesus' followers were all disciples.

It might be important to mention here that some feminist scholars and theologians have even gone as far as to suggest the word "successor" in relation to Mary Magdalene. In this case, the role of apostle perhaps goes even further to mean that Jesus not only gave Mary a commission to spread the good news, but may have also intended that she would carry on his mission. Readings such as the Gospel of John today may support this view, with Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple and the Gnostic writings providing supplemental material.

For example, in the non-canonical Gnostic reading from the gospel of Mary today that Will read for us Mary Magdalene is defended by Levi: "If the savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the savior knows her well. That is why he has loved her more than us. So we should be ashamed and put on perfect humanity and preach the good news...."

It is my hope that we've come to realize in this sermon series as I've attempted to reveal and disarm the 1400

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years of tradition that have maligned her as prostitute and penitent, that Mary Magdalene deserves her rightful place in history, and specifically in our understanding of Christian teachings. She is indeed, a new woman for a new age. In spite of the inaccuracy of the portraits that have misrepresented her for so long, the misinterpretation is perhaps instructive for us today. "It reflects," writes Mary Thompson, "a common experience of women today. Many women live through the opposition and hostility when they attempt to move beyond the traditional roles permitted to women in this society. A woman who manifested self-confidence, mature leadership, intense devotion and total competence became, at the hands of some men, a prostitute, a symbol of sin, a degraded human being who's chief claim to remembrance was her intense sorrow for sin and her extreme efforts to redeem herself from that sin."

While Mary Magdalene is and was an exemplar of devotion and intensity for the historical Jesus and for faithfulness to the risen Christ, she also led a group of women, and there is no evidence that anyone had any difficulty with that. She apparently was content to be herself and did not look for or notice opposition or hostility. It has been suggested that she was victim of very little of it during her lifetime, and I believe carried on to lead and shape the faith of many, if not Christianity itself. She was recognized as the *apostle of the apostles* in fact by many of the men who were responsible for the formation of Christianity.

So what is holding us back?

I began this series on August 13 by suggesting that someone thought I was getting on The DaVinci Code bandwagon by devoting 3 sermons to Mary Magdalene. I rebutted that with the idea that no, I was getting on the more to the story bandwagon. Thus, the inherent dangers of historical inaccuracy and 1400 years of unchallenged tradition can lead us and leave us, and in this case women, to accept and take a back seat to male leadership. Women in our society today who wait for men to yield places of leadership to them more often than not wait for a very long time. Women, who recognize their own gifts and have the self-confidence to be who they are and do what they do best, lead when leadership is called for. If hostility, opposition and suspicion occur, as it does and will for Bishop Jefferts Schori and other women, true leaders are not deterred. And

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I for one do not want the legacy of Mary Magdalene that informs our Christian heritage and tradition to

take a back seat and be forgotten. Frankly, I think we need its revival now more than ever. Call me delusional, call me naïve, call me idealistic, call me whatever you want, but I do not forget nor will I ever forget that it is upon Mary Magdalene's shoulders that I stand and the countless women spiritual leaders after her. She was a woman and personifies a willingness to pursue the ideal as she saw it, without regard to those who wanted to dissuade her or minimize, or at worst, exclude her full impact from the annals of Christian history.

I am hopeful nevertheless and specifically was encouraged this week by Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University who suggested: "As I write, I hear the voices of women who have never been given much narrative space in the history and theology of Christianity. Indeed, the voices of women have not been fully heard in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism either. Our voices have been suppressed in the texts and in the leadership of most of the world's religious traditions, though it is clear that women have done much to sustain the vibrance and vigor of these very traditions."

Eck also illuminates the examples of the emergence of women's voices worldwide - as priests and pastors in the Christian tradition, rabbis and theologians in the Reform and Conservative Jewish tradition, as feminists in the Orthodox Jewish community, as Gandhi an activists and scholars in India, as Muslim feminists insisting on their right to the radical justice and equality of the Quran. As the Buddhist tradition grows in new soil in the West, Eck notes that many of its finest teachers are women. As the Catholic Church experiences the turmoil of our century, many of its leaders, ordained or not, are women. "Even where women's voices are not yet fully heard," writes Eck, "they sound the beginnings of real religious revolutions. In every tradition, these are revolutions happening before our very eyes."

While I would agree, and know that we've made great strides, the statistics I cited earlier in this sermon are current ones. Within Christianity, where the narrative of Mary Magdalene resides, we still see that the gifts of women are substantially limited and lost on the fringes to

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age-old customs and democratic myopia. To fail to acknowledge that means we do so at our peril. Have we truly embraced women's leadership?

Women populate half the democracy - what if we occupied half the positions of leadership? It's been suggested that women, a natural resource, should be mined not only for gender equity, but also for energy.

Marie C. Wilson, author of *Closing the Leadership Gap, Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World* wrote this: "When I think of women in leadership, I think of it not only as the fair thing to do, but also as the only thing to do. In a few

short years, the world has become very unstable. Terrorists attacked us on our soil; in response we waged war. The formerly robust economy is sagging under the biggest deficit in history. Corporate greed has wiped out whole companies along with hundreds of thousands of jobs."

When Wilson looks at the issues we face and the changes we need, she is convinced more than she has ever been that our future depends on the leadership of women - not to replace men (though in some cases I happen to think this would not be such a bad idea) but to transform our options alongside them.

In religious institutions and communities, not to mention higher education, business, government, - we need the same revolutionary thinking. Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense League said, "You can't be what you can't see."

Whether it's the appropriate rendering of Mary Magdalene, more women moving from associate ranks in churches, synagogues or institutions to top ranking positions, we would do well to transform our proverbial silence to leadership. Am I grateful to be here in this fine university doing what I'm doing? Of course. But, I read some advice that in regard to women and leadership, we should never 'know our place or never shrink to fit.'

My hope and prayer for all of us, women and men together, is that we see ourselves as advocates and responsible for all gifts, abilities given the opportunity to flourish. I happen to believe that Jesus was Mary Magdalene's greatest

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ally and advocate, and that made an enormous difference in her ability to not only accept, but also truly embrace the commission she was given rightfully and equally. We have so much to gain from embracing her legacy, and to ignore it or deny it means that we also have so much to lose.

What IS holding us back?

Remember, I've been trained to resist the temptation to clarify, unify, make one all-encompassing, concluding statement, and wrap up with a nice little bow.

So...you decide.

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