

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 20, 2006
Sermon Series #2

HOLY FRIENDSHIP

"There were also some women in their company...Mary the one called
Magdalene..."

Luke 8: 3

"Should we all turn and listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"
Gospel of Mary

As we continue our sermon series on Mary Magdalene today, I wanted to share with you a cartoon from one of the many resources I've used in preparation. There is a priest holding a Bible and standing next to him is a male detective.

The detective asks: "If the book doesn't say harlot, padre, what have you got?"

Well, what have we got? We discovered last week in our exploration and introduction to Mary Magdalene's identity that there is no biblical evidence to support that she was a prostitute, harlot or public sinner. And that my intent for this series was not to prove or disprove that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

Regardless, much of the interest and excitement around Mary Magdalene, along with the help of many scholars of theology, archaeology and other wise have aided in providing a more accurate view of history in relationship specifically to early Christianity. Specifically, the discovery of previously unknown ancient texts (called Gnostic writings - Gnostics were a significant force in Early Christianity and stressed salvation through study and self knowledge rather than simply through faith) -- texts like the Gospel of Mary from which I read an excerpt moments ago, and the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Phillip, Dialogue of the Savior to name a few, are a part of approximately 46 different works known as the Nag Hammadi Codices, all of which were previously unknown. Scholars tell us these Codices were uncovered in 1945 by two Egyptian peasants on a cliff near the town of Nag Hammadi in Middle Egypt. These and other original writings are offering new perspectives and show that early Christianity was much more diverse than we ever imagined. As Elaine Pagels, author of *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* suggested - "the discovery of ancient texts challenges the idea that Christianity always had a single, authorized set of beliefs."

While the early Christian communities debated such basic issues as the content and meaning of Jesus teachings, the nature of salvation, the value of prophetic authority, the role of woman and competing visions of ideal community, they

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had no New Testament, no Nicene Creed, no established chain of authority and certainly no single understanding of Jesus as well as those that surrounded him in his earthly life, including women. "All of the elements we might consider essential

to define Christianity," writes religious scholar and theologian Karen King, "did not exist." Far from being starting points, the Nicene Creed and the New Testament were the end products of these debates and disputes. They represent the distillation of experience and experimentation notes King, and not a small amount of strife and struggle.

So what we've got, with the help of King and many others, is the ability to ascertain that one consequence of these struggles is that the winners were able to write the history of this period from their perspective. The viewpoints of the losers were largely lost since their ideas survived only in documents denouncing them. Until recently.

My desire to include some, though brief, discussion of these Gnostic writings such as the *Gospel of Mary*, in this series is because they illustrate the fact that alternative voices in early Christianity do exist. The Nicene Creed was never intended to be the full statement of Christian faith.

"After all, it does not ask believers to affirm anything in the teachings of Jesus, even though they were of fundamental importance to faith and practice. Instead, every article of the Creed was formulated as a hedge against views that were considered to be wrong," wrote Karen King in *Letting Mary Magdalene Speak*, an article originally published in 2003 during the rising popularity of the novel *The DaVinci Code*.

It is King and others who argue that the *Gospel of Mary*, for example, offers an alternative voice in the ancient debate and expands our understanding of the dynamics of early Christianity. Needless to say, we must remember too that it does not offer a voice that is beyond criticism. To take these texts seriously as historical documents does not mean they have full theological authority for us today because as it has always been done - these determinations are done by communities of faith. "At minimum, an accurate historical account that takes into consideration these texts might help ensure that Mary Magdalene will not continue to be prostituted for polemical purposes as she has been for centuries" says King, "but it does restore some dignity to this important woman disciple," and I will add perhaps honored and holy friend, of Jesus. And though none of our texts say exactly why she followed Jesus, it has been suggested by scholars that it is not at all implausible that Mary Magdalene found Jesus' message not only persuasive but also personally liberating. The Gnostic Mary has been given

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a voice that is powerful, insistent and courageous. She enters into dialogue with Jesus, questioning him and giving theological explanations on her own.

These additional ancient writings, along with the New Testament canonical writings can provide or open, as I suggested at the conclusion of my sermon last

week, a view of the open sky in regard to our understanding of Mary Magdalene and the nature of her relationship with Jesus.

Consequently, I am compelled to think more deeply about the nature of a holy, abiding friendship among the women (others named in the Luke passage today as well as Mary Magdalene) that were part of Jesus life. What might that look like?

"People" writes Bart Ehrman, chair of religious studies at North Carolina/Chapel Hill and author of *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, "attach themselves to religious leaders for all sorts of reasons - because of the message, its life transforming power. Sometimes it is because of a personal interaction - special attention paid to one in need, repaid by a complete devotion to a cause - sometimes it is all of these things. This may well have been the case for Mary when she committed herself as one of Jesus followers. But it may not have been only Jesus' message that Mary found liberating. He may have personally liberated her - as it suggests in today's gospel of Luke - and freed her from a terrible affliction she was suffering. It seems clear that Jesus' disposition toward women didn't buy into the typical attitudes of 1st century Palestine. He treated women as human beings, just as he treated men. It was his talent to be able to speak to women perhaps in a way that would be meaningful to them, and to include them as recipients of his message.

In a short article, *Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle*, religious scholar Robert M. Price tries to show what the two starkly contrasting bodies of evidence - the Christian testament and the Gnostic documents - have to do with another, and with the historical Mary Magdalene. Price's suggestion is that both canonical and non-canonical traditions seem to preserve the memory that Mary claimed a privileged disciple relationship with Jesus, that she received unique revelations after the resurrection, and that these revelations included female equality with males based on the transcendence of sexuality and gender in a spiritual union (what I would like to call a holy friendship) with Christ.

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The *Gospel of Mary* suggests that Jesus knew Mary of Magdala completely and loved her more than the others. Importantly, Elaine Pagels makes the critical suggestion that the hint of an erotic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the Gnostic writings may indicate claims to mystical communion; throughout history, mystics of many traditions have chosen sexual metaphors to describe their experiences. So one wonders if it is possible, or should it be possible - to express the idea of the spiritual importance or significance of a woman - in Christian terms, of her intimacy with Jesus - without sexually explicit or implicit overtones? Is romantic love again the only possible interpreter of a woman of power - a diminishment that is of her power? And when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it's agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love

instead. "Love, as male novelists define it- and who speaks with more authority?" wrote one author - "Love has nothing to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity or poetry. We all know what love is."

Needless to say, Levi in *The Gospel of Mary* says that the Savior's love for Mary is based on his knowledge of her. It is love that is based on mutual knowledge. The Gnostic Mary does not substitute love for action. These depictions some scholars suggest, do not seem to be about romantic love, though they are ambiguous and still render us unable to draw distinct conclusions. Yet, in *The Gospel of Phillip*, Mary Magdalene, the companion of the Lord, is said to have always walked with him. Always certainly implies steadfastness and loyalty. She is also said to have received a revelation of truth that he conveyed to his disciples and that she understood even better than the others, thus giving her a place as one most intimate with Jesus, not sexually, but spiritually. She is not called the 'companion of the Lord' anywhere else in the Gnostic literature and no one else is called Jesus' companion. The Greek term for companion incidentally is *koinonos* (coin-o-nos) and has a wide range of meanings in the Bible and elsewhere: marriage partner, participant, co-worker in evangelization, companion in faith, business partner, comrade, friend. Scholars have suggested that the notion of sharing (interests, enterprises, material possessions, education, meals) is central to it.

By now you might be thinking: and so...so what? I happen to think that the so what is incredibly important because, like Mary perhaps being personally liberated by her association with Jesus, we might be liberated too from the presumptions of what intimacy is or is not (between 2 men, 2 women or a man and woman) and perhaps embrace more fully the impact and

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meaning that deep, abiding love and friendship can have in our own lives.

Aristotle said that there are 3 kinds of friends: those we cultivate for the sake of the good times they give us, those we seek out for what they can do for us and those we love for their own sakes. How do you think about friendship these days?

Author Joan Chittister wrote in *The Friendship of Women*:
"Real friendship requires two things: the transparent disclosure of the self and another's single-minded appetite to hear it and abiding commitment to treasure it. It means that I must be willing to be known and that someone somewhere must be intent on knowing me. Then in those long hard times when life is shale and rain, when I forget who I am and where I'm going, this other side of me brings me home to myself again. Friendship is not mere companionship. Friendship is intimacy. Friendship is the linking of spirits. It is a spiritual act, not a social one. It is not so much we find friendship, as it is that friendship, the search of the soul for itself finds us."

It is here where the memory of Mary Magdalene may become a bellwether (as Chittister put it) of the real relationship. A deeper look is essential, critical, into all of the sources available to us - Christian Testament and Gnostic writings - in order to find that it was she who understood Jesus long before anyone else did and supported him in his wild, revolutionary approach to life and state and synagogue. She was there at the beginning of his ministry and at the end. She was there among the cheers, and there when they were taking his very life, turning on him and jeering him. She tended his grave and clung to his soul. She knew him and did not flinch from the knowing. And too, remarkably, it is quite possible that Jesus did the same for Mary Magdalene, shattering all the stereotypes and limitations history past, present, and future may care to impose.

"The Magdalene factor in friendship", Chittister writes, "is the ability to know everything about a person, to celebrate their fortunes, to weather their straits, to chance their enemies, to accompany them in their pain and to be faithful to the end, whatever its glory, whatever its grief. It is about appreciation, affection and warmth. About being deeply valued, reverently respected, lovingly tended and warmly received. Whatever the uncertainty of the way, it is a redeemable bond, a nexus of spirits fit for both the doubts and the iridescence of dark nights in deep woods."

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I've pondered much about this idea of a holy friendship, a deeply spirited relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It seems to bring an intensely human aspect to Mary of Magdala, as well as to Christ. It seems of the highest spiritual order to celebrate this sacrament of friendship. It's made me wonder whether this kind of friendship provided such a bedrock of foundation for Mary Magdalene's spirituality that seemed built upon realistic self-esteem, a deep love for God, devotion to those around her, love for her community. And so I've wondered too: Did it provide somehow the ability for her to recognize her own gifts and have the self-confidence to be who she was and do what she did best? Did it inspire her to lead when leadership was called for, to refuse to be silenced? Does her legacy have any further instruction for us today?

I wonder.

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