

“From Object to Subject”

Sermon from the Gospels of Philip & Mary Magdalene

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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From the Gospel of Philip:

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary.

And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples [...]. They said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?"

From the Gospel of Mary the Magdalene:

The soul came to the third power, which is called ignorance.

The power questioned the soul, saying, "Where are you going? In wickedness are you bound. But you are bound; do not judge!"

And the soul said, "Why do you judge me, although I have not judged? I was bound, though I have not bound. I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly." When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, which took seven forms. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven powers of wrath.

They asked the soul, “Whence do you come slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?”

The soul answered and said, “What binds me has been slain, and what turns me about has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a aeon I was released from a world, and in a Type from a type, and from the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence.”

When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her.

But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, “Say what you wish to say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.”

Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: “Did He really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?”

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, “My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?”

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Are cats better than dogs?

Turns out, if you enter this question as an internet search, the answers you get will tell you unequivocally that yes, of course, they are.

The first result says this:

“Cats, as anyone who has one will tell you, are better than dogs in every conceivable way. They're softer, sweeter, and smarter. They're quieter and cleaner. They're masters of both the art of lazy lounging and the one of skillful hunting (of rodents).” This little paragraph is accompanied by a picture of a content, smiling woman, snuggling a kitten against her cheek.

The following titles you can click on for more information include: 10 Reasons Why Cats Make Better Pets Than Dogs; Why Cats Are Better Than Dogs; Cats Are Better Than Dogs, Even Science Says So; and Cats Are Better Than Dogs (at Catching the Coronavirus).

But: Are *dogs* better than *cats*?

If this is the question you type into the Google search bar, you come up with these titles: 35 Reasons Why Dogs Are Better Than Cats; if that's too many and you're more discriminating, there's Ten Solid Reasons Dogs Are Better Than Cats; and then there's just Dogs: Objectively Better Than Cats.

This phenomenon, of finding titles that conform to the ways we phrase our questions, is one aspect of what's called confirmation bias. It's a term psychologists use to describe our tendency to seek out, find, and trust information that conforms to what we already

believe to be true. There are reasons we do this that make good sense: there's a ton of information out there. We have to make choices about it, all the time. This is one way of more efficiently processing information. We also, turns out, aren't big fans of cognitive dissonance, of the challenge that comes when we're presented with the possibility that we've been wrong, that we might have some rethinking to do, so this is one way we protect ourselves. It's an adaptive strategy.

Just for fun, I searched "which is better, dogs or cats" and got a mix of the previous two collections of search results, alternating pretty evenly...

I think of poor Peter and Andrew here, listening to Mary, and just not able to take in what she's saying. They had all been with Jesus. They had all listened to him. They had all been confused by some of the parables, been amazed by some of the healings, been mystified by the ways he seemed so connected to the God he called Abba, Father. There was often a crowd, people coming to be healed, to be taught, but they weren't those people, pestering Jesus when he came to their town; these guys were traveling with him. They were part of this inner circle. They thought they knew him; they prided themselves on knowing him, better than others. Then he's killed, and Mary has this vision of him, reborn, and he teaches her things that don't sound a lot like what he's taught them. And they don't know what to do with it. And they say, "This can't be true." They say, "This sounds strange, and not like what I know, so... I'm not sure I can believe it."

She had always been like them but not, among them but set apart. A woman among men. From a small town none of them hailed from. A follower of Jesus but also a companion; they'd noticed she'd been treated differently than the rest of them, close to him in a way they hadn't been. But the idea that that closeness might mean she now has something to teach them - that's pushing it. That's hard for them. The idea that this new teaching has come from a vision, and not a teaching on a hillside; that stretches what they're ready to accept.

Did you ever read George Lakoff's book on political discourse? It's title is the same as a thought experiment it describes: Don't Think of an Elephant. Lakoff says if you try to win an argument based on facts alone, you lose. People don't make decisions based on facts, but values, and the way we use language can matter much more than what we're actually saying. Case in point: *Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute*.

Wait, what? That's the church's official line about her? You know who else was not a prostitute? My roommate in grad school. My Aunt Angie was not a prostitute. None of the women in the Mom's Group here, are prostitutes. But I would not introduce any one of those people to you like that. (Richard Nixon is not a crook, right?)

When the Vatican issued this denial in 1969, it served to correct the teaching that it had been itself perpetuating since the sixth century: and then, the characterization had been served two purposes - whether these were intended or not: it discredited

Mary's teachings, which had their own following, and did not always conform to more official church teachings *and* it made for a great story of repentance and redemption. If Mary had fallen so low, said Pope Gregory the Great, but came to be loved and forgiven by Jesus, then couldn't each of us, who are surely not as despised as she, couldn't each of us also find redemption?

It's a terrible oversimplification, and ignores the unjust conditions that often serve to give rise to realities of prostitution in the first place. But it worked, for a long, long time. It worked, really, to ostracize Mary the Magdalene, to sexualize and villainize her, until different old gospels were rediscovered, and new readers began to find a different story.

Mary was a companion of Jesus. The scriptures - the ones in the canon, now - tell us she'd been severely afflicted, and Jesus had made her well. We know she listened to him, learned from him, supported his work out of her own pocket. We know that she was nearby when he died, and all four Gospels - which rarely agree on anything - tell us that she was witness to the resurrection, that she had an experience of Jesus, real and present, after he had been killed. And now, from these other sources - maybe ones that challenge our confirmation bias - we know that she also was a visionary. That she also was a teacher, a leader. That she might have been a wife.

In her book *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, Margaret Starbird tells us that "Any version of Christianity that provides an alternative to the doctrines of the orthodox church would be

considered anathema. That is the definition of heresy. The question of heresy does not hinge on truth, but rather on whether or not the doctrine is in line with the official statement of the faith. Those who have been brought up in orthodox Christianity have been carefully taught to accept its doctrines on faith and have always assumed that these doctrines must constitute the one true version. However, there were several parallel versions of Christianity from the very beginning, each with its own beliefs and interpretations of the Gospel message.”

This re-imagining with Mary, this process of the church rediscovering her and taking her role seriously, opens up all kinds of possibility. I want to highlight just one this morning, and say that taking her seriously honors what Jesus does with each person he encounters in the Gospels that have been approved, and what, through that example, he calls us to do with and for each other.

At the end of her Gospel, Mary is pleading with her friends, her brothers, saying, “Do you think I would make this up, this story about what the soul is and does and knows, these ideas about how the soul can travel, and learn, and love, and know and use its own power? Do I think I would tell lies about that, or about the teacher we both loved?” She’s insisting, “Take me seriously.” She’s saying, “I am telling you about my life, and I need you to honor that.”

She can make that demand of them, because that’s what Jesus had been asking them to do, had been modeling for them, all along.

When he was in a crowd, and someone desperate for healing touched him, and he felt power go out from him, he stopped. And he searched the crowd. And he said, “Who touched me?” And when a woman came forward to confess, he commended her for taking initiative and for telling her story.

When he was at a well and a woman was questioning him about matters of faith and history and politics and community, he challenged her, asking about her life, and she told him the whole messy story, and he told her: “Yeah. That’s who you are. Let me tell you about me, too.” And that opening, that exchange, was so powerful that she left and told everyone she knew about it, naming it a sacred encounter.

The Gospels - not only the ones hidden in caves but the ones we have bound on our own shelves - are full of stories of people becoming who God has created them to be. Over and over again, Jesus invites people to step more fully into their own lives. In this old, long-lost story from Mary the Magdalene, and in the reconsideration of her role, there are new invitations to each of us, like to consider: what is the story given to you? What is the vision entrusted to you? Or, what is the revelation that someone else is trying to share with you? What is the truth they’ve been asking you to try to open to?

Sometimes at staff meetings here, when one of us is worked up about something, Ron, our building and grounds supervisor, will just lean back in his chair and laugh. And the rest of us will fall

silent. And then he'll ask us - good-naturedly, really, and just kind of curiously, he'll ask us, "How big is your God?"

When I think about all the stories out there - the visions and the wonderings, the revelations and the doubts and the dreams that are held by those who have believed throughout the centuries, even that are held in this very congregation, I think that's a question we could spend forever answering, always discovering deeper love, more profound truth, in and with and through each other. May it be so.