"A Weed By Any Other Name"
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12 June 2016 + United Christian Parish
Luke 8:1-3; John 20:1-2 + the Gifts of Women

When Spring comes I look over my yard to assess the ravages of Winter. Not the yard in our current apartment of course, but in the homes I have owned over the years. Sadly one year in Oklahoma, a drought and a hard winter had taken their toll. Both the yard and the garden were loaded with weeds: Henbit, Chickweed, Crabgrass, Russian Thistle ~ all the scourge of farmers and gardeners alike.

Then suddenly I surprise myself. I remember how it is that I can identify all these weeds ~ because of one of the most enjoyable courses I took: Local Flora. In that wonderful course, it gave me a good excuse for spending months searching for illusive wildflowers.

Then it struck me ~ I could identify all the weeds in my garden, because in a different context, they were wildflowers!

Shakespeare’s thought on a rose: “A rose by any other name wouldst smell as sweet” is not quite accurate for our purposes here. Rather: “A weed by any other name is a wildflower!!”

That is especially true of the disciple we study today: Mary of Magdala, the First Apostle, the Apostle to the Apostles.

Today we celebrate the gifts of women. In the Bible, 40% of the leaders of the Christian movement listed were women. Leaders! Mary of Magdala was among the most prominent and most gifted. Objectively speaking she is up there with Peter and Paul, one of the foremost of all the disciples.

Celebrating the Gifts of Women
Mary of Magdala
the Apostle to the Apostles
Yet the church has not been particularly kind to Mary of Magdala. Church tradition has portrayed her much more as a weed than a flower. Yet, Jesus early on identifies the good character of Mary of Magdala, cultivates her, empowers her.

Down through the ages, artists, writers and directors have depicted Mary of Magdala in the most imaginative, surprising and provocative terms, but not necessarily showing her accurately according to the Bible.

Modern depictions all seem to follow church tradition rather than the Bible, always with a dramatic but fictional flourish.

- In *King of Kings* (1927), Mary is not a lowly backstreet prostitute, but a high class hooker. Not true.

- In the rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), Mary is portrayed as Jesus’ special friend, a scarlet woman washing Jesus’ feet with her tears. Not Biblical.

- In the controversial book and movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Mary is portrayed as a prostitute and Jesus’ former lover who gets angry when he follows the call of God. Again, creative fiction but fiction nonetheless.

- And in the most flamboyant assertion yet, Mary is depicted as Jesus’ wife in *The Da Vinci Code*, that they had a child together and that she and the child escaped to France to found the first line of Frankish kings. Fanciful, but even twelve year old Lily in the youth group could identify it as fiction.

*What the Bible does say* puts Mary in a central, if not the central role. The Bible says *“Mary Magdalene, from whom [Jesus] had cast out seven demons.”* [Luke
Church tradition dating from Pope Gregory the Great in 591 has decided rather arbitrarily that these seven demons included licentiousness and unchastity ~ pure speculation, which says more about the medieval Church Fathers’ views on women and sexuality than any truth about Mary.

In Jesus’ day, ‘demons’ were overwhelming associated with physical and mental illness rather than with moral or spiritual defect. The ‘seven demons’ actually denote a serious or recurrent physical malady.

Mary’s bad reputation among later church leaders may have stemmed from mistaken guilt by association. Like Las Vegas today. Is every citizen of Las Vegas a gambler? Her city Magdala was a gentile city, prosperous with a reputation for licentiousness. But just because her city was like that does not make her like that. Rather the Bible identifies Mary with the industry of the city, dyed cloth, rather than its party character.

Her bad reputation among later church leaders may have stemmed from envy ~ for Mary was a strong, devoted and exceptionally favored disciple ~ the one, the only one to be blessed with the first appearance of Jesus resurrected.

We do know that, far from being a scarlet woman, she was a woman of means. We know that because she is recorded to have funded Jesus’ and the disciples’ ministries. It would have been impossible for Jesus to accept the profits from prostitution to support his ministry.

We do know with certainty that Mary is not the unidentified “woman of the city,” the sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears as Mary is so often falsely portrayed in tradition and in art. Luke is at great pains to show this is indeed a different woman. Immediately following that reference in Luke to a woman of the city of Nain, Mary of the city of Magdala is introduced as a different person accompanying Jesus on that preaching tour. Mary could not possibly be the “woman of that city,” Nain.
John’s Gospel says the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Matthew and Mark simply say that she was a woman from Bethany. We also do know with complete certainty that Mary is not the woman taken in adultery in John 8 for equally compelling textual evidence.

The Interpreter’s Dictionary summarizes Mary’s life this way: “one of the most prominent of the Galilean women who followed Jesus.” What we do know from the Bible is that Mary was a woman of some means who served Jesus with devotion. She funded Jesus’ and the other disciples’ preaching missions. She had a serious illness which Jesus healed. She it was who put the money in the purse from which Judas embezzled.

Mary accompanied Jesus on at least some of his preaching missions. She went with Jesus and the other disciples on his final journey to Jerusalem. She most undoubtedly was in the upper room participating in the Passover Seder as women and children always did.

She was present at the crucifixion when all the male disciples had fled. She had the inestimable privilege to be chosen to be the first to see the empty tomb and the first to meet Jesus risen from the dead. This is one of the cardinal proofs that Jesus indeed rose from the dead. If the Resurrection were made up, the fiction would have never been written with women as the protagonists! It would have been far too easy for the cultures of the day to deny it on that basis. Mary makes the witness credible.

Then Mary mysteriously disappears from the narrative never to be seen or heard from again in the Acts of the Apostles or the balance of the New Testament ~ leaving fertile ground for popes and authors and believers to fill in the blanks with their own, often mistaken biases, preposterous
imaginings and fanciful dreams. Why? The simplest explanation is that the New Testament was written mostly by men.

Mary’s prominence in the Bible gives us strong evidence that Jesus calls men and women, poor and rich, people of all nations to be Followers. That means there is hope for us too.

At a men’s luncheon some years ago, we got on the subject of weeds and one of the gentlemen observed how it is that wildflowers can grow just about anywhere, but those high-bred flowers cannot.

The observation holds for Mary of Magdala as well.

Mary has been a weed in the eyes of the church ~ unwanted, inconvenient and needing to be plucked up ~ but in Biblical terms she is a gorgeous flower. And not a hothouse flower, but a hardy wildflower capable of blooming in all kinds of environments ~ at preaching stations, in the upper room, at the base of the cross, at the graveyard.

The faith of such a flower. May all of us, weediness and all, be found to be wildflowers in God’s garden. May our faith bloom even in the roughest environments of life and stressful times.

1 Luke 7:36-50