



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Mary Magdalene's Manner Of Life

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell
July 26, 2009

Today we celebrate The Feast of Mary of Magdalene – which is *officially* July 22nd but since here at All Saints Church (for more years than anyone but Anne Peterson can remember) we transfer her feast to the closest Sunday, for us today IS Mary of Magdalene Day! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Now, I may not remember when All Saints started doing it, but I *do* remember when it was considered kind of an edgy-if-not-radical thing: moving "her" feast day out of the shadows of weekday observance into the center ring on a Sunday. That was in the pre-Da Vinci Code Days when the work being done to reclaim Mary Magdalene's identity by feminist scholars was finally leaking into the pew and pulpit. It seems a very long time ago.

We've been at this for decades now – do we really *still* have to point out that biblical scholars agree that for centuries, Mary Magdalene was misidentified as a prostitute, although nowhere does the New Testament identify her as one?

Do we really need to revisit how that came about: how Pope Gregory the Great made a speech in 591 A.D. where he lumped together the actions of three women mentioned in the New Testament and incorrectly identified an unnamed woman prostitute as Mary Magdalene? Do we need to remind ourselves and each other – and anyone else who's listening – that this erroneous view was not corrected until 1969 when the Vatican issued a "quiet retraction"? And do *really* we need to footnote all those sources that name Mary Magdalene's "manner of life" as a prominent disciple and leader of one wing of the early Christian movement that promoted women's leadership?

I mean really: in a church with a woman Presiding Bishop that just finished a General Convention with a woman President of the House of Deputies and in a parish with a long history -- not to mention current staff & vestry -- of women in leadership ... haven't we "been there, done that" on the sad history of systemic sexism in the church in general and the distortion of Mary Magdalene's manner of life in particular? Haven't we reached that point where all that sexism stuff is old news ... is, well ... passé?

If you're asking those questions this morning, then you obviously didn't read the Times of London this week and this report from religion reporter Ruth Gledhill:

Worshippers at a Church of England cathedral are being offered a two-track Communion service with a separate supply of "untainted" Communion bread for those who object to its being consecrated by a woman priest.

A special container, for the hosts which have been previously consecrated by a male priest, is brought out during Sunday morning services at Blackburn Cathedral if a woman priest is presiding.

The special arrangements ... were introduced because of the recent installation of a woman priest as one of three [cathedral staff clergy]. ... It means that when she is celebrating the Eucharist those who dispute the validity of her orders can make sure they receive “untainted” sacrament consecrated earlier by a man...

“Untainted sacrament.” While the rest of us are worrying about Swine Flu, these guys are worried about Girl Cooties. And these are some of the same folks who are blaming the decline of the Church of England into irrelevancy on the Bishop of New Hampshire? Some of the very same folks who managed to blackmail the Episcopal Church into bigotry three years ago at the General Convention in Columbus when it adopted the now infamous Resolution B033 that called upon *“Standing Committees and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.”*

Thankfully, what I have to say about that this morning is: “That was then and this is now and **WHAT a difference three years makes!**”

And that – my brothers and sisters – brings me to the “General Convention 2009 report back” part of this sermon: the part I have subtitled: **“Lamaze Training Finally Pays Off.”** Those would be the Lamaze classes I took twenty-some years ago intended to equip me to get through the pain and stress of childbirth by finding a focal point and breathing through the pains. I have to confess, they really didn’t help all that much with childbirth – but they sure came in handy these last two weeks as we labored to give birth to legislation that would bring new life and energy for mission to this Episcopal Church we love and serve.

A “theme song” for that labor of love could be this one familiar to us here at All Saints Church:

*Summoned by the God who made us
Rich in our diversity,
Gathered in the name of Jesus,
Richer still in unity:*

*Let us bring the gifts that differ
And, in splendid, varied ways,
Sing a new church into being,
One of faith and love and praise*

“Singing a new church into being” is arguably what we did in Anaheim – where we gathered for our triennial fix of liturgy, legislation and shopping AKA “The General Convention of the Episcopal Church.”

This year, we gathered in the shadow of dire predictions about bishops who had “drunk the Lambeth Kool Aid” and weren’t going to let any movement forward happen **and** under the watchful eye of the Archbishop of Canterbury – who joined us for 48 hours and began his July 9th sermon at the convention Eucharist expressing his “*hope there won’t be decisions that will push us further apart.*” (Which was, of course, code for “no decisions at all”/“let’s just not talk about it.”)

In spite of all that, the Holy Spirit showed up (as she is wont to do) and the General Convention that wasn’t going to do **anything** passed a whopping 361 resolutions. Unlike our last two General Conventions, where the resolutions regarding human sexuality so consumed our legislative process that there was precious little left for anything else, this 76th General Convention worked long, hard and diligently to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God” – acting on everything from lay equity in pension plans to ending torture; on labor issues and human rights violations; on universal health care and climate change; on human trafficking, immigration reform and ending the blockade in Cuba.

And, oh yes, thirty three years after promising “full and equal claim” to the gay and lesbian baptized, in resolutions passed in Anaheim, The Episcopal Church affirmed equal access to ordination processes for all orders of ministry for all the baptized, approved a broad local option for the blessings of our relationships and called the church to work together toward common liturgical expressions of those blessings. During the adult education hour this morning, Canon Jim White – chair of the Los Angeles Diocesan deputation – will give a summary of these and other legislative actions but for the purposes of this sermon, let’s just pause for a moment and let the church say “Oh Happy Day” – **Amen and Amen!**

Because at least as noteworthy as the *content* of these resolutions for those of us committed to an agenda of peace, justice, inclusion & compassion is the *context* in which they were adopted.

These resolutions passed not by narrow margins after rancorous debate. They passed by overwhelming consensus after respectful dialogue that left no doubt that **those who gathered in Anaheim are committed to an inclusive Anglicanism that keeps at the table all who desire so to do.**

And having been an eyewitness to most of those debates, I urge you **not** to give credit the news reports or the blogs that suggest there is no room left in the Episcopal Church for differences. In point of fact, there were *many* who gathered with us in Anaheim who spoke in opposition to the majority opinions and who go back to ministry contexts where our decisions as a whole church are not causes for celebration. We need to keep them in our prayers as they labor to make the Good News of God in Christ made known and to give thanks for their commitment to the unity of this church in spite of our diversity of opinion.

In my mind, **THE** most significant change for our work at this General Convention was not the absence of difference – for we had that – **but the absence of those who have for so long insisted that our differences *HAVE* to result in divisions.** Those who chose to make their criteria for being part of the Episcopal Church being agreed with have taken their marbles and gone elsewhere. I believe it grieves the heart of God that brother and sister Anglicans cannot find enough common ground in their differences to remain in communion with each other in spite of them. **Yet, without those insisting that our differences must divide us there to drive the discourse,** we *were* able find enough common ground to tell the truth about who we are as the Episcopal Church in 2009 -- and to commit ourselves to our common mission of proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ Jesus to a world in desperate need of it!

And that brings me to the “what next” or “therefore” of this morning’s sermon. And for that I want to turn to the words of Episcopal layman and broadcast journalist Ray Suarez from his sermon to us in Anaheim:

So many people need what we’ve got. They are spiritual wayfarers who are already looking for us; who would love to join a church that’s ready to love them back. [The Episcopal Church has] a calling for the 21st century – and it’s the same calling it was for the 1st century ... We’ve got the knack of standing on two platforms at one time: of clinging to what’s eternal and of understanding what’s changing while we open the arms of the church to say, “Welcome! You’re home!”

“Welcome. You’re home!” Those are words we’re used to speaking to those who come seeking God’s love, abundance, care and compassion here at All Saints Church. And as we move forward into God’s future I pray that we will be given the grace to redouble our efforts as a congregation to welcome, incorporate and then deploy in the service of the Good News those coming toward us in the days and weeks and months to come.

And I wonder this morning if the words Jesus is speaking to this church of ours in the 21st century are not like unto the words he spoke to Mary Magdalene in the 1st: Do not cling to what you think you know ... but trust the Holy Spirit to continue to transform this church – to birth this church – to guide this church into all truth.

One of the truths we face in our 21st century world is that the same root issues that made racism "news" this week in Cambridge connect the sexism we read about in The Times of London with ALL the "isms" that keep this human race from being the human family God created us to be. There is MUCH work to be done to overcome those evils – those things that keep us from being all that God would have us be – and yet, we trust that the One who has called us to do this work will give us the grace, the power -- and **the Lamaze breathing technique** to accomplish it.

For the new church we are committed to singing into being is not one clinging to fears about a “manner of life that causes strain on communion” but one liberated to welcome *all* into God’s loving embrace – and the focal point we look to when we need to breathe through the pains of breathing new life into old church is Jesus:

the One who is our chief cornerstone
the One who promised us that the truth will set us free and then called us to speak both
truth in love AND truth to power.
the One who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to walk in
love with God and with each other

*Draw together at one table
All the human family;
Shape a circle ever wider
And a people ever free.*

*Let us bring the gifts that differ
And, in splendid, varied ways,
Sing a new church into being,
One of faith and love and praise*

Amen.