

THE MESSAGE for June 5, 2011

Luke 8:1-8

Mary Magdalene... Living Out Of Gratitude

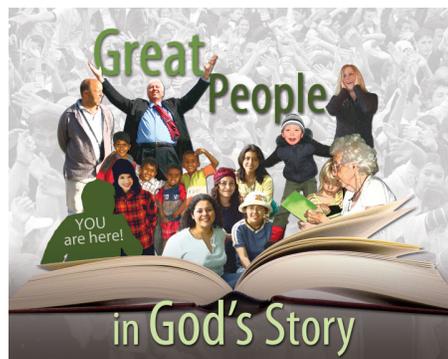
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Bad Girls of the Bible is the title of a book published in 1999. It tells the stories of less-than-perfect women like Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, and Rahab. The author (Liz Curtis Higgs) tells the faith stories about these women. Apparently, a lot of people are drawn to their stories, because in 2000, Liz printed Volume II, *Really Bad Girls of the Bible*, with stories of Bathsheba, Herodias, Tamar, and others.

I've not read these books, but I like the titles. I was thinking about writing a book about the bad boys of the Bible. Maybe not! Point is, the Bible is filled with the stories of less-than-perfect men and women that God used in amazing ways. We can learn a lot from their stories.

We continue our summer worship series of "Great People in God's Story" and our place in God's story (*Picture on the screen*). Today we focus on Mary Magdalene - one of the *Bad Girls of the Bible*. Or, at least, that's what many people have come to believe.

In the Bible, only Mary, the mother of Jesus, is named more often than Mary Magdalene. Google her name and you'll get over 4 million hits and read all kinds of things about her (4.39 million hits to be exact).



For instance, many people believe she was a reformed prostitute. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that she was ever a prostitute. This idea comes from Pope Gregory the Great in the year 591.

In Luke 7, there is a story about an unnamed woman, a sinner, who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and anoints him with perfume. She does this out of gratitude. The Pharisees condemn her. Jesus praises her. Mary Magdalene is mentioned at the beginning of Luke 8 (our text for today), so Pope Gregory made the connection.

He suggested the woman in Luke 7 was a reformed prostitute (even though the text does not say that) and this reformed prostitute was none other than Mary Magdalene in Luke 8. The text doesn't say that either. And yet millions of Christians still believe that about Mary to this day.

In the book and movie, *The DaVinci Code*, Mary Magdalene gets a really bad rap. Mary is married to Jesus, and together they had several children. It's suggested that Mary wrote the fourth Gospel under the name John (because women were not allowed to write a Gospel) - to cover for her being the disciple whom Jesus loved. Legend suggests

that Mary was also crucified. This is all fascinating stuff. It helps sell books and movies but that's not the story we find in the Bible about Mary Magdalene.

Here is what we do know about Mary. Her name, "Magdalene," suggests that she grew up in or lived in Magdala, a town on the Sea of Galilee. When her name appears in a list with other women, her name is always listed first, suggesting that she was a leader among these women. All four Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene was present at Jesus' crucifixion and at Jesus' burial. Her love for Jesus, her devotion to Jesus is best expressed by the fact that she goes to Jesus' tomb early to prepare Jesus' body for burial with spices.

She is the first person to see the resurrected Jesus in John's Gospel. Jesus calls her by name, revealing a deep relationship between the two. Mary is the first person to bear witness to the good news of the resurrection. She tells the disciples that Jesus is risen -- most of them don't believe her. In a culture that doesn't value women, and won't even allow them to bear witness in a court of law, Mary Magdalene's role in God's story is truly stunning.

(Read Luke 8:1-8) Luke reveals five things about Mary's story.

First, she traveled with Jesus and his disciples providing financial support for their ministry. She was committed to Jesus and his ministry because of what he had done for her.

Second, Jesus had exorcised seven demons from Mary. We don't have any details – mental illness or physical ailments – we don't know. Jesus set Mary free from whatever was holding her captive. Jesus changed her life.

Mary's story was written at a time and in a culture where women were considered less than second-class citizens. She was not the woman our traditions have made her out to be. Mary is a remarkable character in God's remarkable story.

Third Mary lived out of gratitude because Jesus had set her free. In the Bible Jesus is always reaching out beyond the boundaries of what people think is right, or proper, or fair, and shares God's love, and forgiveness, and healing grace. Jesus touches the untouchable, reaches the unreachable, loves the unlovable, and forgives the unforgivable. And he's still doing that today.

Question: what is holding you captive today?
 Guilt or shame for something you've done?
 Anger or frustration about something that's been done to you?
 A label someone pasted onto you?
 A fear that has you paralyzed?
 An addiction that holds you in its grip?

What is holding you captive today?

Know this, Jesus has the power, and the love, and the desire, to set you free. Know this, you are a forgiven sinner. We need to be reminded of that regularly. And since you are a forgiven sinner then Jesus has already set you free.

Fourth, Mary's story is driven by gratitude and a life that's been transformed by Jesus. Can you say that about your life? Is gratitude and generosity part of your daily walk? Are you living a transformed life with Jesus?

Here's what I've noticed. Participation leads to transformation which leads to gratitude which leads to more participation. It's a life-giving cycle of joyful living!

Those who have been involved in a LIFE Group – raise your hand. Speak with any of these people, and they will share with you how their life has been transformed participating in a LIFE Group.

Those who have gone on a Mission trip – raise your hand. Speak with any of these people, and they will share with you how their life has been transformed participating in a mission trip.

Get involved in the mission and ministry of this congregation. It'll change your life for good! Our big ministry opportunities coming up are VBS (the week of June 19) and our Summer LIFE Groups (this week). Get involved!

Fifth, Mary planted seeds of faith by sharing her story with others. Think of a famous person you would love to meet. Now consider talking with them and then you sense that person wants to be your friend. This famous person wants to hangout with you. Wouldn't you want to hangout with them too and then go and tell others about it?

That's how Jesus was with Mary. And guess what? That's how Jesus is with us. Jesus wants to be your friend – your best friend. He wants to hangout with you. He wants to go with you wherever you go. He wants to share in your joys and struggles.

Mary Magdalene was committed to Jesus because he had changed her life and she lived accordingly. Mary wasn't a bad girl of the Bible as our traditions have made her out to be. She is an inspiration for us to live the faith every day on the path of generosity.

Who or what are you committed to? Know this, believe this, Jesus is committed to you and that makes you part of God's story. You have a place in God's great story. Live it – today and every day! Amen!