

Mary, Mary, Mary

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Today we come to Mary. You might ask yourself: Which one? As a matter of fact, there are eight women in the New Testament named Mary. We shall consider three of them.

The three Marys are: 1) Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazareth, 2) Mary Magdalene, and 3) Mary, Jesus' mother.

It is important to remember in all of this that the name "Mary" in Hebrew is **Miriam**. We know from Exodus that Miriam was Moses' sister. Perhaps the earliest piece of the Old Testament which we have is "Miriam's song," found in Exodus 15:21, the great song of victory: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."

The first Mary is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. The Mary-Martha story from Luke 10:38-42 reads as follows:

"Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her: 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken from her.'"

It seems terribly unfair. Someone has to do the cooking, cleaning, and serving. Here Martha is trying to do that and she is chided while Mary sits at Jesus' feet.

In fact there is a very good way of understanding this account. We have to think of the tenth chapter of Luke and the way it is put together. This account is at the end of the chapter. Right ahead of it is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and right ahead of that is Luke's account of Jesus giving the two great commandments (Luke 10:25-28) and Luke's way of doing that. (For the preacher: A kind of chiasmus.)

After the two commandments comes the question: Who is my neighbor? Then comes the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable answers the question: "Who

is my neighbor?" (The Second Commandment). The account of Mary and Martha eating with Jesus is the response to the First Commandment: "With all your heart, soul, strength, and mind." It is saying something about priorities.

When we read the temptation accounts (Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13) in which Jesus is tempted by the devil, Jesus says: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4).

What we're looking at here is not diminishing the need to do the cooking, but asking: What is your perspective? Your priority? What is number one? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind," because that is the perspective of eternity, and not be always thinking of here and now. What's here and now lasts but a short time, and we need to keep the perspective of eternity.

Back in the Twelfth Century in Chartres, France, a man saw they were building a structure, and he asked one worker what he was doing and the fellow said: "I'm cutting stone." And he asked another what he was doing and he said: "I'm building a cathedral." The whole thing is a question of perspective. God comes first; and we don't live by bread alone. That's what this is about.

Mary and Martha appear in another account, too. John 11 describes the death and raising of Lazarus. Then John 12:1-4:

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?'"

John is the only one of the four gospels that says Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointed Jesus' feet. Matthew and Mark do not identify the woman. Their accounts are much shorter and without the extensive foot washing, although they both talk about anointing Jesus' feet and the three hundred denarii.

Luke's account is even more different. The woman who anoints Jesus is an unnamed prostitute, a sinner (Luke 7:37). She washed Jesus' feet; the lowest slave usually did that. Then she dried them with her hair, anointed his feet with costly

ointment, and then kissed his feet. The people around were horrified! Then comes the parable about those who are forgiven much rejoice much (Luke 7:40-48).

The gospels also differ on when the washing of Jesus' feet happened. Matthew, Mark, and John have this account at the end of Jesus' ministry, but Luke has it at the beginning (Luke 7:36-39). Earlier we saw how Luke 10 was put together (the two great commandments, followed by the Good Samaritan, then Martha/Mary choosing the good portion). Here again we see how Luke puts it together.

These accounts are very different. Only in John is it Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anoints Jesus' feet. In Matthew and Mark, it is an unnamed woman. In Luke, an unnamed sinner (a prostitute).

Remember how the gospels were put together. Nothing was written down until at least forty to fifty years later. Accounts of what had happened spread orally. That does not mean that things are necessarily false, but when things are passed along orally, they start to carry other messages.

The second Mary is Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is mentioned immediately after Luke 7 in Luke 8. It lists some women who were with Jesus and says of her: "Mary called Magdalene from whom seven demons had been cast out" (Luke 8:2). Mary Magdalene is not a prostitute. Someone who had been relieved of demons was not therefore a sinner, not a prostitute. This is a different Mary than the one who washed Jesus' feet.

What we remember most about Mary Magdalene is the Easter story. John 20:1 states: "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early." Then moving ahead to John 20:11-16:

"Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stopped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' Saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." But then Jesus said to her: "Mary." She turned to him and said in Hebrew: 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher)."

Mary Magdalene was the first witness of the resurrection (John 20:1-18). It is important to realize that in that time women had no value as witnesses. In Luke it is said that the Lord appeared first to Peter (Luke 24:34), but in John, Mary Magdalene is the first one to whom he appeared.

Of course, Mary Magdalene has become a sensationally distorted figure after the publication of the book, *The Da Vinci Code*, which sold millions of copies. It's a totally fabricated story claiming Jesus and Mary Magdalene got married and the like. Even the Discovery Channel ran a show claiming that archeologists had found a family tomb of Jesus with stone boxes with the names of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and then Juda, whom they claim was their son. The scholars who have looked at this have been uniformly scornful and said it's trash and nonsense.

The third Mary is Mary, Jesus' mother. We always look at her the third Sunday of Advent. She has a particular importance, but we also need to keep that in perspective. At the Third Ecumenical Council of the Church at Ephesus in 431 A.D., the church universal decided she is "the God-bearer" (The technical term is "Theotokos."). It is really the same thing that is written by Paul in Galatians 4:4 "born of woman, born under the law." In that way, we don't go off into all kinds of material that becomes a cult of Mary.

It's important to remember that neither Mark nor John have stories about Jesus' birth. Mark 3:20-35 has a fascinating account of a crowd gathering around Jesus, and his family grows concerned because people were saying "He is beside himself," which is a nice way of saying he is crazy. The Jewish authorities come and accuse him of being possessed by demons because he does miracles. Then in Mark 3:31 his mother and brothers come out to get him. His answer comes in Mark 3:33-34: "'Who are my mother and brothers?' And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'" We see here in Mark a straightforward view of Mary his mother.

In the Gospel of John, which also has no account of Jesus' birth, there is the account of the wedding feast at Cana. Jesus and his mother are there and she comes to him and says: "They have no wine" (John 2:3). And he rebukes her: "Oh woman, what have you to do with me?" (John 2:4). Again, we see a straightforward account about Mary.

These three Marys help us think about the place of women in the Bible and in the Christian church. We Western Christians ought to include women from Eastern Orthodoxy in our thinking. The United Nations has made declarations on the rights of women, which are promoted by church women in the West. But not in Eastern Christianity. Women in Eastern Orthodoxy have a different sense. They understand that they have an important place in the family, church, and society which is established by their tradition. This is a good reminder that there are other Christian voices that should be included in our thinking.

[Today Islam is on the march and in that world, women are truly second-class citizens with problems in terms of polygamy, children, and divorce. Our concern should be to help these women because we Christians in both the Western and Eastern worlds see the place of women as something different.]

Our look at Mary, Mary, and Mary comes together in three points:

1. Jesus gave women a place of respect and honor. Luke 8:1-3 gives a list of all the women who followed him. It was just as difficult in those days as it would be today because they looked like groupies. And yet he was able to continue in the same way and be respected. He taught them, which was absolutely forbidden by their purification laws. In the account in Luke 7 of the woman who washes his feet, it goes on to say something for which there is no parallel, namely, that she kissed his feet, and he allowed this. It was shocking. It is not only that he appeared first to a woman, but also that he gave them a place of respect and honor.

2. Your mother is your first minister. Luther famously said "Your mother is your first minister." Mothers have a role not only in raising children in the usual ways, but your mother teaches you about the faith and guides you. We respect that. On the other hand, there is conflict with Roman Catholic thinking over against our Lutheran thinking. In Roman Catholic thinking, using church fathers, they call the church "Mother" or "Mother Church." We don't. We call ourselves sons and daughters of the Word. The Word is that which comes to us and we are hearers, receivers. But for us the church is not Mother Church, who like a mother hen is brooding and caring for us – and in charge of us. Basically, we say the church is sinful, and the Catholic Church will not say the church is sinful.

3. What about Gal 3:28?: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Some have said this verse is a manifesto for all time. We remember, however, that the

first Christians did not think the world would continue. They thought it would end in their generation. They were not planning for generations and hundreds of years. They only wanted to be able to live now until the end came. Of course, they wanted things to be better for the poor, and they did not want to abuse slaves, but slavery was not opposed. The institution of slavery is not opposed in the New Testament. It was said that life should be bettered and improved, but they were not social revolutionaries because the important thing was: We have to bring the Gospel. We're not trying to build the Kingdom of God on earth. (For example, as in Colossians and Ephesians there are lists of duties for the household and it says women be subject to your husbands and slaves to your masters. Children obey your parents.) We're not for chaos. We're for proclaiming the Gospel. Amen