Sunday, March 2, 1975
MARY MAGDALENE
Luke 8:1-3

In the popular rock musical of a few years ago, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” one of the most engaging characters is Mary Magdalene. She is portrayed as a close follower of Jesus, one whose life has been changed by her association with him. In the beautiful song, “I Don’t Know How To Love Him,“ she recounts what has happened to her and how she has changed. Yet she remains mystified by the person of Jesus Christ and wonders what the future will hold for her and for him.

Is the characterization of Mary Magdalene in the rock musical accurate? Who was she really?

There are two main traditions about her, and which one is accepted depends a great deal on the interpretation that is given to the passage from the Gospel of Luke which was read as our scripture lesson. In this account it is reported that Jesus had cast our seven devils from her.

1. The older tradition concerning Mary Magdalene finds its roots in the Talmud which mentions the fact that Magdala, the town from which Mary came and which is significantly associated with her name, was well known for its prostitution. The vicious living there was so notorious that the town was destroyed by the Romans. Thus, if Mary Magdalene was associated with a town famous for its prostitutes, it is easy to assume that she was a prostitute also, and that the demons cast out were sins of evil living.

Another source of the identification of Mary Magdalen with being a prostitute has been the story of the woman anointing Christ’s feet with ointment at the house of Simon the Leper which comes directly before the introduction of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50). Here the woman in question is called a sinner and it is implied by the re-action of the Pharisees that she was a prostitute.

Because of these sources, other scholars indicate that the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and was brought to Jesus and was about to be stoned to death, might have been Mary Magdalene. Jesus literally saved her life. He said to those who were going to kill her--"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” Then after all the men had gone, Jesus said to her, “Is there no one left to condemn you?” “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more!”

If Mary Magdalene was indeed a prostitute, she is a convincing example of his forgiveness. Jesus understood the drives of hunger and poverty which forced some women into prostitution or the sensuality which led them to choose it. In forgiving them, he restored their self-respect and respect for their own bodies so that they would not continue being used by men. There was no condemnation in his, “Go and sin no more,” only a releasing of the women from their past to lead a new life.

2. Romantic as the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute may be, another tradition holds that the possession by seven devils, as reported by Luke, referred to a kind of mental illness. Possibly Mary Magdalene was a multiple schizophrenic, who had been cured by Jesus in the same way as he had cast out demons from many other persons. The term, “possessed by demons” is one way of explaining the confusion and mental strife of a person who is not herself. It is not difficult to imagine how Jesus could’ve banished the many possessions and

ambivalences of conflicting spirits by pointing to the one true way, by helping a person “get it all together” as we like to say in today’s jargon. Instead of Mary Magdalene being at war with herself, she became the follower of a person who was truly her savior and her deliverer from mental darkness.

In our time we sometimes used the phrase “identity crisis” to describe the doubts we have about who we really are and the strivings to find direction as individuals. All of us have many possible roles we can and do play and we’ve often worn so many masks that we sometimes wonder who we really are. We are pulled in many directions just as Mary Magdalene had been pulled in many directions by temptations, desires, and other demons before she met Jesus.

Whichever of the two traditions we choose to accept is not the important issue. The fact is that Mary Magdalene was a changed person because of her association with Jesus. She is mentioned several other places in the New Testament. Evidently, she became one of the regular followers and she and several other women frequently traveled with Jesus and the 12 disciples.

Three of the Gospels tell of Mary Magdalene and other women watching the crucifixion and staying there at the cross until the end. They may even have helped place him in the tomb.

It must’ve been one of the most painful moments in Mary Magdalene’s life. Here was the man who had recognized her as a person, who had released her from a life of captivity, and she could do nothing to help him. All the powers of the Roman state and the Jewish hierarchy were behind the crucifixion and Mary Magdalene and the other women were helpless to change the situation.

Not only did they stay with Jesus through his death, but Mary Magdalene and some of the other women were first at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Tradition tells us that after the resurrection meeting with Jesus, Mary Magdalene continued to be a faithful worker in the early Christian Church until the time of her death.

She has been variously portrayed as a repentant sinner, a converted hysteric, a prisoner of the flesh and a devoted follower. But more than anything else, she was a woman who could see with clarity into the reality of things. She had seen much of the world and suffered much. She had learned to separate the real from the unreal. She loved much and was ready to give everything in love. She dared to go to the tomb because she had found something more important than herself.

But what about Mary Magdalene and us? This is not just a story about someone who lived some 2000 years ago. What can we learn from her meeting Jesus and the way in which her life was changed?

1. First of all, if we accept the tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, we need to remember that prostitution is not a thing of the past and there are other kinds of prostitution than sexual. A person can sell himself or herself in many ways. Some people sell their integrity or become enslaved to a business or a company. Whenever any part or all of us can be bought, no matter how subtly, we have lost something of ourselves and then we are less than God intends us to be. So, the story of Mary Magdalene causes us to ask — "Do I sell myself at times? In what way and to whom?”

2. Secondly, the story of Mary Magdalene reminds us as do other incidents in the New Testament, that Jesus always sought out persons who were in special of love and forgiveness. Because Jesus did this, he was often accused of consorting with sinners with the implication that he was guilty by association. But Jesus would have none of it. He pointed out that it was precisely those who were hurting that needed help.

Today, the church is Christ's presence on earth. In the New Testament, the church is called the "body of Christ." Practically speaking this means that we as a congregation are to be constantly seeking out individuals who are most in need of love and forgiveness, those who need friends, or who are trying to find themselves or to make some sense out of life. If a church is not serving such people, it's not really a church.

To put it another way, the church exists not only for us who are members of it, but also for those who are not in it. Much of what we do in our benevolence program is based on this principle. Next Sunday, we will receive the ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING offering, and this too is an effort to be of help to those in greatest need.

Like Jesus, the Church is to be on the side of those who are most pushed down by society, those who are crushed and hurt, those who are discriminated against for whatever reason. Contrary to ·popular opinion. which likes to say that "God helps those who help themselves!" The message of the Bible is that "God helps those who cannot help themselves!" Of course, doing that often can get the church into some unpopular situations. In fact, it's one of the reasons Jesus was crucified.

3. Thirdly, the story of Mary Magdalene reminds us that while it is our job to seek out people to help, heal and forgive and restore, there are at the same time always those among us and around us who are quick to condemn our efforts and want only retribution. The Pharisees wanted to stone to death the woman caught in adultery, instead of trying to save her. That kind of attitude still exists in our society.

At the same time, on the positive side the story of Mary Magdalene says to us who are Christians — before you judge too quickly, look beneath the surface of the person; look beyond the label with which the person has been tagged. See the human being that is there. Several years ago, I preached a sermon entitled, "Hello, Human Being!" and in that sermon pointed out our tendency to judge people too quickly. We all know how it goes. We quickly say--"He's a grouch!" or "She's a reactionary, or he's a radical, or he's a bum and no good."

Jesus, however, always saw the human being in a person. And by so doing, he was able to give new life to that person. He called forth the best in that person! The more we can identify with persons unlike ourselves, the more fully we enter into humanhood. That is why Jesus moved among the poor, the afflicted, the outcasts, the disreputable, the dregs of society.

4. And the fourth item which applies to us from the story of Mary Magdalene is that the kind of faithfulness which Mary displayed has a way of running into joyous surprises.

Once Mary's life had. been changed by her association with Jesus, she became a uniquely faithful person. She was one of those who stayed near the cross until his death as we have seen, and she was one of those who went to the tomb early Sunday morning following the crucifixion and burial.

Because of Mary Magdalene's dogged determinism to remain faithful and to stay with Jesus through his death and even visit the tomb after his death, she met the risen Christ. When a person goes on faithfully with duty, doing in times of darkness and disappointment or defeat what is done when times are better, such a person usually meets the unexpected. Faithfulness has a way of running into wonderful surprises.

This happens not only in our religious life, but in other aspects of life as well. A few weeks ago, the newspaper carried a story about a Chevrolet dealer in Edmond, Okla., who had this happen to him. One day a man from the Middle East showed up and placed an order for 750 heavy-duty dump trucks and 250 pickup trucks, plus spare parts, tools, maintenance equipment and some construction apparatus.

Why did he order from this Chevrolet dealer and not direct from General Motors in Detroit? It all started when an Iranian foreign-exchange student named Bob Azarmi was treated kindly at the showroom in 1961. Azarmi said he was 26 and shopping around for a new car. He said that this particular Chevrolet dealer offered him the best deal. But what he remembered most was how he was treated.

"I had a hard time to find out what kind of car it was, and I didn't speak English too well at the time," he said. I remember they respected me as a human being. Other places I would walk in they acted. like, 'Who is this guy?' They wouldn't believe I wanted to buy a car. They acted like I wanted to steal something rather than buy something.

In those times a foreigner to these people was something like a black person. But I was treated just like the good customer at this particular Chevrolet dealer. Even the manager bothered to come up and talk with me.

Today, Azarmi is a purchasing agent for the Iranian Contractors Association in Iran. So, he said, "I know these people and I trust them. They treated me with respect and so I'm buying all my equipment through them."

Little did that Chevrolet dealer realize some 14 years ago how his faithfulness at his job and his treatment of all persons with respect and as human beings would pay off. But as Mary Magdalene discovered, faithfulness has a way of running into surprises.

Even though her main song in Jesus Christ Superstar is entitled, "I don't how to love him," the fact is that after the resurrection she did learn how to love him. As a faithful member of the early church she found out that treating and loving all persons as human beings is really the way with love God. Amen.