

Sermon for July 24, 2016: Why are you Weeping?

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Wednesday was “intake day” at the Federal Correctional Institute. That was the day that the seven of us – three full-time psychologists and four part-time Psychology interns – would each take an office and interview a steady stream of women to determine whether they needed mental health treatment. These women usually came to us directly from being “processed in” to the prison – after being searched, issued uniforms, introduced to the cells that would be their homes for the next “X” number of years, and apprised of the rules. The questions we asked were pretty rudimentary – “Do you have any history of mental health treatment”? “Have you ever tried to hurt yourself,?” and, “Can I do anything for you”? The majority of women turned down the offer of psychiatric help. Whether they were really okay or simply couldn’t stand the idea of participating in any more official “treatment,” I still don’t know. Sometimes I think they simply wanted to make it back to their respective cell blocks before t.v. time was over.

Maria was different. An attractive woman of around 40 with long ebony-colored hair liberally sprinkled with grey wearing a standard-issue khaki-colored prison uniform, Maria sat quietly, nodding when I asked if she spoke English and shaking her head resolutely “no” when I questioned as to whether or not she needed mental health treatment. But when I asked the most standard of my questions – if I could do anything for her - Maria began to cry. And she didn’t stop. She didn’t stop when I offered her a tissue. Or when I asked if she wanted water. She didn’t stop when I tried to comfort her

with my best gentle reassurance and professional smile. Maria kept right on crying even as I began to panic and look around for my supervisor while leafing through my diagnostic manual. “Why are you crying,” I asked her over and over. “What is wrong? How can I help”? And all the time I was fighting the urge to start crying myself, thinking “What did I do to bring this on”?

Because that’s the way my mind worked. *She* was crying her heart out and I was trying to figure out what it had to do with *me*. Not because I was a horrible narcissistic person, but because mine was the only lens I had through which to view her pain – a lens which was, in this case, hopelessly inadequate.

Just as Mary Magdalene’s viewpoint was limited by *her* simple, human understanding¹ when she saw the empty tomb. Making the decision to take on the task of anointing the body of her beloved mentor was hard enough, but to get there and find him gone – and two strangers sitting in his place – must have been unbearable. She could not stop weeping. She had lost not only the most important person in her life but her own sense of identity as well – because without Jesus she didn’t know who she was and what she was supposed to do without him.

It turned out that Maria had lost her identity too – her identity as “mother” – because she had lost her children- and she didn’t know what to do either. She had married quite young to an older and powerful man in her home country. Her marriage brought fortune and prestige to her family and she was expected to be grateful – even

¹Sandra M. Schneiders (2003). “Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the fourth gospel,” [New York: Herder and Herder], 213.

when he yelled at her; even when he hit her; even when he cheated on her. No one took care of her – not her parents, her sisters or friends. No one loved her. No one even really knew her– except her children. They were her only joy- her salvation- and the only thing that truly belonged to *her*. She would have done anything to keep them safe.

So when her husband told her that they were going on a trip and that she was to carry a certain suitcase, she did not question him. And when, after they arrived in the United States, that bag was found to contain drugs and money, she did as she was told and said it was hers. And when she was arrested and her husband told her to do as his lawyer said, she did so without question. And so it was that she found herself alone in a prison in a strange country, sitting in a tiny, windowless room with a strange woman - unable to answer a seemingly simple question: why are you crying. Because she didn't know where to find the ones she loved. She didn't know why they were gone or who had taken them. She didn't even know who she was – or what she had to live for.

Judith, the heroine of today's Hebrew scripture, had no such problem. She knew who she was – because her very name told her. She was “a Jewish woman,” a pious widow who was appalled by the oppression of her people at the hands of heretical and unfeeling outsiders. And she felt the need to *do something* about it. So she prayed. She prayed for the ability to take vengeance. She prayed for the power to deceive. She prayed for the capacity to hurt others as much as she believed her people had been hurt. And – spoiler alert – she got them. Because her vision of God was limited to a deity who felt and acted like a human being – a god whose actions were driven by *human*

desires like revenge, hatred, and fear – a god whose full scope could not be comprehended except through the gift of the compassionate and forgiving Christ that God had not yet shared with humanity.

It was that gift – the gift of the redeeming and sanctifying Christ – that made all the difference to Mary Magdalene. It allowed her to see beyond her heartbreak and to understand that her beloved had been taken by no one but God – and no *further* than her own heart. As Paul told the Corinthians, Jesus’s death created a new way for God’s people are to see one another. By cleansing humanity from the sinful – meaning *separating* – ways of human beliefs with his own blood, Jesus taught us “we [no longer have to] regard [one another] from a human point of view.” We are, instead, a new creation with a new understanding of the world.

It can be very hard to see things through the eyes of Jesus. Mary Magdalene, “spiritually blinded by grief,” “overcome with hopeless sorrow,” and “fixated on the loss of the *body* of Jesus,”² had to be called by name before she was able to turn and see what was right in front of her – to turn and see that Jesus was there – to turn and see that from that point forward, Jesus would *always* be there – because he would be *in her*.

He is also in *us* – in the community of Christ. So, why are *we* weeping? I believe it is because we sometimes forget that the real reason we regularly gather as a community is to *renew* our commitment to Christ and to one another –because we revert

²Sandra M. Schneiders (2003). *Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the fourth gospel*, [New York: Herder and Herder], 217.

to praying like Judith – against others instead of for them. It is because we believe that the ministry of love and reconciliation that has been given to us is too hard. That is why we weep. We forget that we, like Mary Magdalene, are apostles of the God of Jesus Christ - a *merciful* god of a *compassionate* way. A god that does not require us to thirst for him. A god that does not ask us to eat tears for food. A god that calls each of us by name.

But if we must weep, let us weep *together* – and together we will dry our tears. Together let us eat the body and blood of Christ- and together we will be refreshed and reconciled. Together let us move through through our individual and collective darkness so that together we can walk toward the light of forgiveness into the hope of the future that is the light of Christ. AMEN.