

March 10, 2024

Women's History Forum

Howard University professor Joyce Camper discusses women of the Bible from a feminist/womanist perspective.

Please read these two essays by biblical scholar and minister, Renita Weems.

Please Read for March 10

Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible by Renita Weems

Mary Magdalen

IMAGINE HOW DIFFERENT history might have been that week leading up to the festival of Pentecost if Peter and the other apostles had had the courage to elect Mary of Magdala as the apostle to replace Judas? Not only had Judas' suicide left the movement one person short of the twelve leaders needed to symbolize itself as God's instrument to bring peace and hope to Israel's twelve tribes, but some action was needed to restore confidence in Jesus' cause.

Peter, the acknowledged leader of the group since Jesus' execution, probably saw the chance to vote for Judas' replacement as an opportunity to vote for one's confidence in the movement as a whole. If those gathered could be convinced that with Pentecost around the corner (a time of first-fruit harvesting and new beginnings) the moment to vote on Judas' replacement was now, one could probably interpret the same vote as a show of confidence in continuing their mission despite all that had happened. Taking Jesus' gospel to the ends of the known world was still a mandate worth risking their lives for. They needed a vote of confidence to symbolize their renewed sense of mission. Replacing Judas should do the trick. But with whom? The task was to find a safe, stable, uncontroversial replacement, someone who was not overly ambitious, someone who would not upset the balance of power Peter and the others had worked out.

This explains, at least in part perhaps, why the Magdalene's name never made it onto the ballot. I took part in a ceremony, in 2000, given by the denomination that ordained me (the African Methodist Episcopal Church) that elevated its first female prelate to the office of president of the council of AME bishops. Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie became that evening not only the first woman bishop in a mainline black denomination, but also the first woman to preside over its council of bishops. Her elevation to the post prompted shouts of praise and peals of laughter from everyone in the audience. Laywomen in the banquet hall waved their white napkins in victory.

Clergwomen, including myself, wiped tears from our eyes, recalling all the times we'd been barred from a seat on the pulpit next to the male clergy, or the times we'd been introduced

as “Sister” instead of “Reverend.” The men in the audience applauded loudly, no doubt proud that theirs was the generation to begin the work of righting some of the wrongs done against black church women. Even the bishops of the church, especially those whose tenure dated back to the days when the notion of a female bishop was laughable, seemed pleased with and prepared for this new inevitability.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, which in centuries past had been at the forefront of advocating for social and political justice on behalf of black disenfranchised people, was now making steps toward addressing gender injustices within its own ranks. What if the men who’d followed Jesus had had the courage to elect Mary as an apostle? Those of us with leadership gifts would not have been forced, as women have been for centuries, to defend our right to preach, teach, and hold leadership positions in the church. Just imagine how many women might have been rescued: women who were burned at the stake, branded as witches or heretics, driven to depression and madness, made to feel maladjusted spiritually, and condemned to the pain of ridicule and ostracism for being born a gifted female instead of a gifted male.

If only Peter had had the temerity and foresight to defend Mary’s eligibility for the post of apostle, to remind the audience of her leadership and contribution to Jesus’ ministry and to point out that as one of the first to witness Jesus’ resurrection she was especially qualified for the job. If Mary had been chosen, the church today would probably be a radically different place for both its male and female followers. How much more peace, justice, love, compassion, and reconciliation might the church have been able to champion in the world had it not been spinning its wheels century after century asserting the putative natural order of creation, in particular the alleged superiority of some whom God created and the alleged inferiority of others whom God created.

Reading the first chapter of Acts, however, one gets the impression that elevating a woman to leadership in the post-Resurrection movement was the furthest thing from anyone’s mind. That despite Mary’s faithful service, her leadership among the women, her contribution to the ministry, and her witness to Jesus’ resurrection, Mary Magdalene’s name never came up. Neither did any other woman’s name, for that matter.

But can this be the full story? Were the male disciples so hopelessly Middle Eastern and provincial in their world that not one of them could bring himself to imagine having a woman as a colleague?

A thousand years earlier Barak, a military leader from the tribe of Naphtali, refused to go into battle against Israel’s enemies without the prophet Deborah as a comrade on the battlefield (Judges 5). Numerous references in Paul’s letters suggest that women rose to the rank of leaders in some of the house churches (Apphia in Philemon 2; Prisca in 1 Corinthians 16:19). This practice is confirmed by other texts that also mention women who headed churches in their homes, such as Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16:15) and Nympha of Laodicea (Colossians 4:15). Euodia and Syntyche are called his fellow workers in the gospel (Philippians 4:2-3). There’s also evidence that women held offices and played significant roles in group worship. Paul, for example, greets a deacon named Phoebe (Romans 16:1) and assumes that women are praying and prophesying during worship (1 Corinthians 11). The point is that women functioning in a leadership capacity was not unheard of in biblical antiquity. It may have been rare, yet it did happen.

How could men like Matthew, himself a previously despised tax collector and outcast, or Simon the Canaanite, whose militant political leanings would have made him a pariah among humble fishermen, or even the beloved disciple John, who surely endured teasing and jealousy from the others because he was close to the heart of Jesus—how could these men not notice Peter’s omission of Mary’s name? Were they too concerned with their own position and safety to do what was right? Who could stand up and argue with the reasonable explanation Peter and the whole brotherhood probably offered for not acting rashly so soon after the Crucifixion? The fact that Jesus had been only recently executed, coupled with the scandal of Judas’ betrayal and suicide, had left everyone nervous and fearful about doing anything that would attract undue attention to the movement. Fear would make some conclude that it was better to err on the side of caution. Why call any undue attention to themselves by putting women out front as leaders, thus feeding the rumors abroad that they were a radical, subversive group warranting close watching by the government?

The smartest thing was to delay doing anything radical. But there is no such thing as waiting or putting off doing the right thing until the time is right, Martin Luther King discovered. Writing from a Birmingham jail in 1963 he argued with those who protested that he and those involved in civil unrest were moving too fast, that on the mouths of those in power wait more often means never, and that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” That the apostles were at heart good men goes without saying. But even good men have been guilty of postponing doing the right thing until a better time.

And so it happened that despite the group of qualified women in their midst the apostles cast lots that evening to keep the status quo and to elect a man who wouldn’t rock the proverbial boat. In doing so that day, they lost the chance to truly turn the world upside down. Even those who know better, those whose whole lives have been a dress rehearsal for that one moment in history when they can make a difference for God and humankind, even they find many times that it’s more prudent to play it safe and do nothing. We want to be remembered as prophets, but only if we can stand up for God with the roar of the crowd’s approval in the background.

Strange isn’t it? Peter, quoting from the prophet Joel, would go on record, explaining to a crowd bewildered by the unusual outburst of tongues among the followers, that the new dispensation of God’s spirit that was evident in the ecstatic speech that day at Pentecost was a universal gift from God to all believers, overturning tribal barriers between nations and social barriers between men and women. “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). Unfortunately, Peter’s homily that day about a new social order never translated into a principled stance on his part. Sensing the power of God’s spirit to bring nations and people together, he missed the chance to effect change in his own organization by not recognizing women as equal partners with men in the ministry of Jesus.

It’s not surprising that the men passed over Mary for the job; but it is crushing to consider that her female companions might never have mustered a word in her defense. It’s difficult to contemplate the possibility that even the women who knew her best remained silent when no woman’s name showed up on the ballot. Did no one protest Peter’s decision to stack the ballot with two anonymous men (men who never before had been and never again would be heard of in

scripture)? Who knew better than Susanna, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and the other women of the Magdalene's qualifications? Having worked closely with her they knew firsthand Mary's sacrifices on behalf of the ministry.

More than a few of them had been there with Mary when Jesus appeared to her at after his resurrection and commissioned her to pass the word of his resurrection along to the male disciples. Was it so impossible for them to see that by keeping quiet they were complicit in their own invisibility? Or was each of them too absorbed in her own individual bid for attention from and favor with the men that they couldn't mount a united and persuasive argument that Jesus respected women and honored their gifts to his ministry, that women have rights, and that women are strong, capable, independent creatures who deserve places of leadership alongside men in the emerging kingdom God wants to create on earth? It's not uncommon for women to scrap among themselves for crumbs from men's tables. Knowing full well the odds against their making it to the top in an all-male establishment, knowing beforehand that the men in power have already decided that only one seat (at best, two) will go to the women or minority constituency, knowing how unlikely it is that women (or minorities) will be taken seriously among this group of men, women are prepared to pay with their selfhood for token admiration and approval. They will vote with the majority against the qualified woman candidate, arguing that "change takes time" or "we must be patient."

Despite Mary's obvious qualifications for the job of apostle, perhaps it came down to the fact that it was more expedient to be prudent than to be prophetic. I can almost hear one of the women of that era admonishing the group that there was no need to call more attention to themselves than necessary. Such a woman would have accused the other women who were pushing for change of being radical or ungodly in their ambitions. She might have gone on to insist that she had never felt oppressed and, thus, didn't understand what others were in a fuss about. Her aim would have been to create as much distance as possible between herself and the women pushing for change. Settling for indulgence over respect, for being noticed over being taken seriously, for tokenism over justice, for gain of place without the benefit of power, is a dangerous strategy for women.

Make no mistake: we women are all prey to it. Who among us hasn't felt stung when we heard ourselves described as "angry women," "bitter," "man-hating," "too aggressive," and who among us hasn't thought seriously about retreating and pursuing the matter no further? We know the rules: women are expected to sacrifice for the ministry without thought of promotion or gain; men are expected to work hard and take their place within the hierarchy.

"I don't want you anywhere near my wife," male colleagues tease me when we're exiting the meeting and they are slapping me on the back in praise of what they perceive as my candor and courage for tackling the issue at hand.

"I can tell when my wife has just read one of your books or been around you," male friends tell me when we're sitting at lunch catching up with one another. I'm always dumbfounded. I don't doubt for a moment my colleagues' respect and admiration for me. What floors me is that they wouldn't want the same qualities in a wife, their partner for life. Sadly, from the record you would think that Mary quietly had receded into the background and, without a murmur, given the spotlight over to the men.

Mary Magdalene fades from the scene after the Gospel writers are done telling of Mary's encounter with Jesus at the tomb and her testimony to the disciples about what Jesus proclaimed to her (Luke 24:1-12). It's not known for sure what happened to her after Jesus' death. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, she went to Turkey. A Western legend says she went to Provence. But extant records from the second-century gospels (gospels that never attained the same status as our Protestant scriptures) suggest that Mary Magdalene may have gone on to become an important teacher during those early years of the church. Extra-biblical documents, one of them the "Gospel of Mary" written in Greek dating back to the second century, exalt Mary Magdalene over the male disciples of Jesus and provide important information about the role of women in the early church. In the second-century gnostic text, Mary Magdalene appears as a disciple, singled out by Jesus for special teachings.

Emboldened by her conversations with Jesus at the tomb she stands out as one who confronts and reveals to Peter the error of some of his teachings. From this gospel we see also perhaps hints of some leadership tensions that arose in second-century Christianity. Whereas a faction within the growing church movement embraced esoteric gnostic teaching and probably supported women's leadership, Peter and Andrew would go on to represent the orthodox position which denied the validity of esoteric revelation and rejected the authority of women to teach and lead.

But the notion that women were qualified to lead was never summarily obliterated from historical memory. One tradition has it that the beloved disciple who is referenced several times in the Gospel of John was none other than Mary Magdalene. Artists living and working centuries after the New Testament was written were familiar with the story of Mary's authority among the disciples. Leonardo da Vinci was one of those artists. His fifteenth-century mural of Christ's last meal with his disciples continues to be the subject of much controversy among scholars and laity alike centuries later. Although many scholars insist that in Leonardo's famous Last Supper the disciple sitting closest to Jesus on his right side is John as a clean-shaven young man, others argue that the decidedly feminine features of this disciple suggest that the painter was perhaps familiar with the story of Mary's unique place during Jesus' lifetime. According to those who see Mary in the famous mural, Leonardo used his mural to poke fun at orthodox teachings whose conventional view was of twelve men surrounding Jesus at the supper.

Amid the debates that have sprung up in recent years over Mary's precise relationship with Jesus—lover, wife, mother of his child(ren)—the question of whether she might have held an official religious position among disciples gets sidetracked and overshadowed. Speculations about a possible sexual relationship with Jesus are far more interesting than any inquiry into official leadership capacity she may have enjoyed in the early Christian movement. We should take heart that perhaps stories about her other talents won't just disappear quietly into the night. The Magdalene created by fiction and fantasy is more exciting than the real Mary who lived and probably died hoping for nothing more than to be recognized and remembered for the gift even Jesus recognized in her. Despite the effort of the establishment to silence them there have always been women who refused to stay put.

My own denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, began in Philadelphia in 1787 in protest against segregation in the Methodist Episcopal Church, which confined freed blacks to the balcony for worship, comfortably away from white members who congregated and

worshipped without interference downstairs on the main floor close to the pulpit. Richard Allen, a blacksmith and freed black man, led the black worshippers from St. George Methodist Episcopal church that Sunday in 1787, convinced that black people should not be prevented from worshipping as they pleased. But thirty years later, when Jarena Lee came to Allen, now the bishop of the church, asking him to bless her right to preach, Allen could bring himself only to authorize (not ordain) Jarena Lee.

Sarah Hughes would become the first woman itinerant deacon (one step short of full ministerial ordination). She was appointed by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who was famous for his abolitionist sermons, only to have her deacon's license rescinded two years later in 1887 because the climate toward preaching women had changed. Not until 1960 did women gain full access to ordination in my church.

Forty years later Bishop McKenzie became the first elected female bishop, even though scores of clergywomen had dreamed of and fought (unsuccessfully) for the right to become bishops in the AME Church in those intervening forty years: Carrie Hooper, Elizabeth Scott, Louise Harris, Delores Jacobs, and Gloria Barrett, to name a few. They were laughed at, scorned, maligned, and roundly ignored. But their efforts to transform the church must not be obliterated from our memory. Every time a woman gains access to new areas of leadership in the church, the women who went before her, both those who couldn't bring themselves to dream of such a thing taking place and those who dreamed it and fought for its reality, are probably standing around breathless in heaven.

When we read the biographies of women who stepped out from the shadows to run for leadership positions in their churches, some winning and some losing, we wonder: What makes a woman throw her name in the ring for a job she knows she doesn't have a snowflake's chance in hell of getting? What makes a woman seek out a job where she will be subject to ridicule, criticism, suspicion, and all-out disdain? So strange seems this path of women like the Magdalene, medieval mystics like Claire of Assisi or Julian of Norwich, self-ordained women like Jarena Lee, and selfless women like Mother Teresa, that it takes a certain amount of imagination on our part as Western women to embrace them.

They strike us as extremists in some cases, fanatics in others; and they often seem to be bizarre -- women surely unlike ourselves. But are they really so different? I don't think so. They are passionate women. And only a woman who's never felt ignited by a fire that burns deep within, a fire not lit by sex or the promise of love, a fire she's convinced was put there by God, a fire that transports her to places she's never been and makes her see herself doing things she never imagined doing in her lifetime, finds these women too radical to follow. What makes a woman like Mary Magdalene point out to Peter that he overlooked her, knowing full well that her gall in raising the matter is a kiss of death to any future (albeit unofficial) role she might have enjoyed in the organization? What makes her risk having her name and contribution all but erased from the history books by her presumption to call attention to herself? What makes a woman campaign for an office no one wants to see her in, other than herself and close friends?

"I ran for the Presidency, despite hopeless odds, to demonstrate the sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo," the late Shirley Chisholm wrote in her 1973 book *The Good Fight*. Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Congress, in 1968, and the first to

campaign for the presidency, in 1972, was known for her incisive debating style and uncompromising integrity.

“The next time a woman runs, or a black, a Jew or anyone from a group that the country is ‘not ready’ to elect to its highest office,” wrote the congresswoman from New York, “I believe that he or she will be taken seriously from the start.” Chisholm was right. Since her tumultuous tenure in Congress, blacks, Jews, women, and others from groups previously kept out of the political process have made major gains in the political process.

Thirty years ago, Chisholm’s bids for the U.S. Congress and eventually for the presidency were controversial at best and laughable more like it. Almost thirty years later Condoleeza Rice, an African American woman, was confirmed in 2005 as Secretary of State. And no one thinks it odd to see black women rise to such ranks.

How different might our history have been had Jesus’ disciples the courage and foresight to elect a woman apostle when they had a chance to. But they didn’t. They played it safe and kept with the status quo. Clearly the word of God in the story of Mary is that you either grow or allow yourself to be diminished by the decision of others. You figure out what you’re supposed to learn from your experience and make up your mind to reinvent yourself. Losing is the risk you take for stepping out. But it’s also the feedback you need for how to take women’s pain and use it for growth. As a result of the past two centuries of gains women have made in the church, both as lay- and clergywomen, we hope that it will be easier for our daughters, granddaughters, goddaughters, nieces, and the students we teach.

Prayerfully, they will not have to swallow their gifts, squelch their anointing, extinguish their passion, deny their worth, unthink their thoughts, and pretend not to know what they know— just because they are female and not male, unmarried and married, plain instead of beautiful, older instead of younger. We will continue to raise our daughters to stand up and to speak up for themselves. And we resolve to equip our sons to know how to love such women as equals and partners in God’s creation, women whom they will respect and want to be surrounded by because they demand to be heard rather than to be tolerated. We hope for sons confident and courageous enough to know that sometimes the best man for the job is a woman.

Questions for Thought 1. Who and what in your life is draining you, leaving you with little or no energy to pursue your ambitions? _____

2. When are you most afraid? Of what or of whom are you most afraid right now?

3. Where did you get notions of what you could and couldn't do, should and shouldn't do?

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