

No Longer An Outsider

(Lent IV, April 7, 2019)

Luke's and John's accounts of Mary Magdalene -- as the outsider, the rejected one who finds healing in the love of Jesus -- resonate with me on many levels.

As a child, I felt that I never belonged anywhere. I always felt on the outside of things. I was tall, skinny, shy, had big bucked teeth and was quite effeminate. And this turned out to be the perfect résumé to be picked on by bullies. Our family dog Bingo was my best friend. Time with him felt like my only reprieve from being so lonely. I desperately wanted to fit in. My main coping strategy was to keep a low profile and to just try to blend into the crowd as best I could. On the surface, this strategy worked for me, but it didn't really take away the stress and anxiety that I felt inside. Danger always seemed to be lurking around the corner, waiting to pounce on me. I couldn't really relax.

As I hit high school, I became more adept at conforming to what the cool kids were doing. I carefully and blindly followed the in-crowd. I excelled in sports. That gave me some more credibility socially, and I was always working hard to expand it, to be liked by as many people as possible. It was exhausting, but it paid off. Eventually I became Student Body President. And, at last, I began to feel that I was no longer an outsider. But deep within, I felt like an impostor, like I was trying to be someone I was not. I was smiling on the outside, for everyone to see, but on the inside I felt more like an empty shell, with no real substance or core. After all, I didn't know myself who Shaun really was. So, even though I was getting good at fitting in, the unease that I felt had never really gone away.

In my second year of university when I was completing my first degree, I was back home for the Christmas holidays to visit my family. I was in the kitchen helping my mother with the dirty dishes, and -- although this was about 25 years ago -- I remember it like it was yesterday. My mother very casually said; "You know Shaun, your father and I are extremely proud of you and whoever you decide to date in life is ok with us as long as you are happy." The words "whoever you decide to date" rang loud in my mind, and panic started to flood my body and overwhelm me. I thought to myself; "How could she know that I was gay? I've never told this to anyone before." I had always pushed that awareness down into the darkest recesses of my mind, because I knew if I didn't, I would become more of an outsider than ever. Everything in my being wanted to deny what she was hinting at, but as I was wondering what to say back to her, I caught a glimpse of the warm and accepting feeling in her eyes, and I started to softly cry. She hugged me and kissed me, told me that everything was going to be ok, and that she loved me no matter what. My few tears suddenly turned into an uncontrollable river of deep sobbing that went on until I was emotionally exhausted. And she stayed, comforting me, assuring me that it was going to be ok.

A mother's love is a very powerful thing and a true gift from God. I finally began to feel like I was ok, on the inside, and that I belonged. Years of pent up anxiety got released in that moment between my mother and me. I no longer felt like an empty shell of a person. It was as though I had been set free from shackles that I had worn my entire life. I no longer felt ashamed or that I needed to hide who I really was. That need to conform and fit in no longer held such a strong sway over me. I felt grounded in love, and I finally began to start loving myself. Over the years, I have come to believe that that beautiful, powerful, life-

changing moment with my mother gave me a glimpse of the divine love that is always flowing between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- always flowing to us. It's the kind of love that changes our lives deeply and forever.

Sadly, my mother passed away eleven years ago. I am still proud to be called her son and grateful for her gift of love that is with me even today. I know that she is with God, smiling down from heaven, whispering with God into my ear "I love you Shaun and I am proud of who you are."

At that time, I lived in downtown Toronto and worked for the City as a Human Resources Consultant in their Public Library division. I was successful career wise -- I developed expertise and made a lot of money -- but there was very little satisfaction in it for me. I wanted my life's work to have deeper meaning. I knew it would not be good for me to continue doing this kind of work until I retired. So, I did some self-assessment, exploring what else I might be able to do for a living that would give me joy and fulfillment. At that point in my life, I had been seeing a psychotherapist off and on for several years, and she had been a tremendous help to me. So I wondered about the possibility of becoming a psychotherapist myself. I am also a tennis fanatic; I love everything to do with that sport, and so, another thing I wondered about was becoming a tennis instructor. So while I was still working for the city, I completed the required training programs, both in psychotherapy, and in tennis instruction. I loved both of the trainings, and benefited from them greatly, but in the end, I just couldn't see myself doing either psychotherapy or tennis instruction full time for the rest of my life. And, truth be told, my government job was pretty cushy, and it had a lot of security and great perks, so even though I felt unfulfilled there, leaving it was still a difficult decision for me.

Around this time I met my future spouse, Rishi. He was completing seminary in Toronto at the time. And so, as we dated over the next couple of years, I not only got to know him -- I started learning a lot about Christianity as well, which was all new to me, since I didn't grow up in a churchgoing family. Eventually we decided to get married, and we've been together for 14 years now. A marriage like ours was something that I never dreamed possible when I was a child. But I was growing to understand that, through God's love and help, all things are possible.

When Rishi received his first parish in London in 2008, I knew that it was the right time for me to let go of my position with the city. In many ways, it was an act of faith. I had been closely watching Rishi's seminary experience for three years now, and I was getting very curious about the church, how well I would fit in there, and even beginning to wonder if this might be the vocation I was searching for. During our first year in London, I asked Rishi to baptize me, since I wasn't baptized as a baby. And I couldn't have imagined how significant this was going to be for me. Baptism reminded me of that life-changing moment I had shared with my mother 20 years earlier. In the same way, I felt that I truly belonged, I felt a deep sense of calm and peace, I felt embraced by a love that had no limits. Time seemed to stop. And I started to sob uncontrollably. That experience gave me a new inner direction. I wanted to know God more deeply and intimately. In my baptism, I had somehow, mysteriously, found faith in Christ, and I was eager to understand what it was all about. So I enrolled in a theology class at Huron College, and that fired up my desire to understand my faith even more. The next semester, I enrolled in seminary full-time and began, with the Diocese, to discern my calling to be a priest. I graduated seminary in 2013, went through the various steps of clergy formation in the Diocese, and was ordained to my first parish in 2016. And from there, in 2019, as you all

know, the call led me here to you, to embrace a new church family, with the hope and prayer that we will all grow in grace together.

It has been a wonderful but also a difficult journey for me to get to where I am today. My past experiences, including the heartbreaking ones, have educated and strengthened me. I know first-hand what it means to not fit in, to be deemed unworthy of a safe, respectable place in society. And my heart goes out to all the outsiders in this world who have been deemed misfits and cast aside, **because I know now** that they are also beloved children of God. And, like me, they can come to know that, and what it means for the choices they make and the actions they take in their lives.

Accepting that God loves us as we are, becoming genuinely comfortable with who we are, and learning how to live well is an **ongoing process** for us all -- whether we are straight or gay, black or white, poor or wealthy, young or old. As St. Paul suggests in this morning's epistle, none of us have fully "arrived." But I am finding that this process gets easier & easier as we build up a nourishing, healthy Christian community together, one that can not only take good care of **us**, but also become a place of refuge for the poor, for the outcasts, in our world.

I will close with the same image that we began with – that of **Mary Magdalene** -- the outsider, the rejected one who finally found a stable home in the love of Jesus. Just look at what became of her! She has come full circle. And so has Jesus. In the end, it is **Jesus** who has become despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. And it is **Mary** who loves him, anoints him, ministers to him in his darkest hours, just as he had first done for her.

Christ, who at first only seemed to be "outside" of her, is now clearly "within" her, operating through her. She is **living** the Good News. Her life itself has become the Message.

Thanks be to God.

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