This has been a hard week in our nation, following the tragic, deliberate sniper murder of 5 Dallas police officers, and wounding of 7 more and also of civilians, by an angry and vengeful gunman – following two equally deliberate killings and unnecessary killings in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis, once again of black men by police officers. There were shootings of police officers in Tennessee and Missouri in the aftermath of this. Most of us are alarmed and disturbed by what is happening to our country: a growing alienation between police departments and citizens, the notion that racism is suddenly acceptable again, the realization that a black man or black woman can die simply for having a tail light out, that for all our efforts over the last many decades, racism is still deep and systemic and with us, that things are not as we thought and hoped they were. You may be looking to me to have something to say about that, and I am not sure I have more than grief and lament. I have prayed to understand this, and no answer has been given me. BUT if I had tried to preach a sermon this morning without framing it at the beginning with this week’s events, you might have found yourself waiting for at least that acknowledgement, the whole time. So let me propose that we put that on hold for several minutes, go about our interpretation of the scripture we have read today, and see what, if anything, Word has to say to us.

About four years ago a respected Harvard professor of antiquities, Karen King, revealed a papyrus fragment of ancient Coptic writing, and in it was the phrase: Jesus said to them, ‘My wife…’, and the fragment “seemed to describe a dialogue between Jesus and the Apostles over whether his wife – possibly Mary Magdalene - was ‘worthy’ of discipleship.”¹ The papyrus passed more tests than any fragment in history, and its age would be about right. King, herself, was cautious and would never ruled out forgery (you can make ink from ancient recipes that can pass), and said even if it turned out to be authentic, all that it proved was that a Christian community in Egypt, a couple of hundred years after the crucifixion, believed Jesus was married. Always the provenance, the trail of ownership, is essential in verifying authenticity. King had promised secrecy, but journalist Ariel Sabar tracked down the previous owner, who turned out to be a real sketchy and questionable source. But the idea that Jesus was married is not new, and has been speculated on – with no real evidence – for at least over a thousand years.

You may have read The Da Vinci Code², by Dan Brown. A work of fiction, the plot revolves around an alleged discovery that Jesus and Magdalene were married, and that their offspring were the Merovingian Kings of France. Plot spoiler – cover your ears if you intend to read the book – the ensuing search for the Holy Grail turns up a tomb revealing that the Grail was not a cup from the Last Supper, but was Mary Magdalene herself!

What is this long fascination we have with Mary Magdalene? She is a character of what would seem minor significance in the gospels, beyond being this – the first one at the tomb to learn that Jesus had been raised from death. That’s pretty significant. Still, she lingers in legend larger than life. She was a frequent subject of paintings in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – where she was often depicted as a prostitute, although scripture gives us no evidence at all of that. She appeared in the same eras everywhere in songs, poems, sermons and folklore – imagined in a tomb in Italy, in the poetry Petrarch and the sculpture of Donatello, into the present era.
The great German Poet Rilke wrote:

Until his final hour he had never
refused her anything or turned away,
lest she should turn their love to public praise.
Now she sank down beside the cross, disguised,
heavy with the largest stones of love
like jewels in the cover of her pain.³

And the author of Doctor Zhivago, Boris Pasternak, about our text for today:

Groping round, I cannot find the shoes
For the tears that well up with my sighs.
My impatient tresses, breaking loose,
Like a pall hang thick before my eyes.

I take up Thy feet onto my lap,
Wash them clean with hot tears from my eyes,
In my hair Thy precious feet I wrap,
And my string of pearls around them tie.

A portion only, of either of those poems. Pasternak’s Magdalene speaks her story through to the Resurrection, where she says (in Russian, of course), “They will find me with such crushing dread,
That I’ll see the joyous truth at last: I shall know Christ risen from the dead.”⁴ And it was my favorite theologian, Kris Kristofferson, who introduced me to his version of her, back in 1974.

Oh, the lights of Magdala flicker dimly on the shore
Holy sailor sailing on the sea
Patiently waiting, she walked quietly to the door,
Another lonely night in Galilee.
Magdalene, don’t wrap your dreams in sorrow,
Save them for tomorrow if it comes.
When we’ll meet in the circle round the Son
Oh if heaven were a lady, don’t you know you’d been the one.⁵

Who was this person, and what is behind our fascination and imaginings about her? Little, other than she was one of the disciples who had, as our Luke text says, been exorcised of 7 demons, and who traveled with the others and helped finance Jesus’ traveling troupe. First to discover the empty tomb, she was presumably from Magdala – a town on the shore of Lake Galilee, near Tiberias. Our text of the woman who kissed Jesus’ feet, anointed them with oil, and dried them with her hair, never says this was Mary Magdalene, only tradition says that. Martin Luther believed that the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene – one Mary. There is not textual evidence for this, other than John’s gospel putting this same event at Mary and Martha’s in Bethany.

Why, though, would tradition assume either that Magdalene was a prostitute, or that prostitution was the unnamed sin of the women with the ointment, in our text? Could there have been an early effort to disempower Mary Magdalene, in the company of disciples?
There is a case to be made for this. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan compares the different gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances, guessing that some were annoyed that it was Mary who had been first to the tomb, and that varying stories have been altered. John, especially, may have told it the way he did in order to reduce both Peter and Mary Magdalene in influence, and elevate the authority of “the Beloved Disciple”, (himself, or a member of a John-based church). Some of the non-canonical Gnostic gospels, and the Nag Hamadi scrolls (discovered in 1945) tell of arguments between Peter and Magdalene in the early church – Peter saying authority is handed down through the hierarchy, and Mary M. saying it comes directly from the inspiration of Jesus, who appeared to her (and not the others) in a vision, and from the kisses of inspiration he gave her, the divine breath, before his crucifixion.

Luke, unlike John, spends over half his description of the formation of the early church to the inclusion of the Gentiles and others or less status. At the point of our text, Jesus had already healed a Roman centurion’s servant, touched an (unclean) funeral casket, and consorted with all manner of excluded folk. “Among the unwanted who are invited and embraced in the community, women get equal billing with the Gentiles in Luke’s time and attention,” Peterson writes. And in another version of today’s lesson, Mark chose the unnamed woman with the ointment for the supreme model of the Christian faith. Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

Maybe she was Magdalene. Or, more likely, someone like her, with a similar experience of grace. Frederick Buechner writes of Magdalene, “She seems to have teamed up with Jesus early in the game and to have stuck with him to the end. And beyond…” About John’s Resurrection story, where Jesus said to her, ‘Don’t touch me,’ Buechner writes, “because life in him was no longer a life she could know by touching it, with her here and him there, but a life they could only know by living it: with her here, old tart and retread, old broken heart and last, best friend – and with him here too, alive inside her life, to raise her up out of the wreckage of all that was wrecked in her and dead.”

Kristofferson returned to this theme some 6 or 7 years after the first draft.

Magdalene, are you thinking of the gentle man who turned your life around
Magdalene, did he leave you any reason to go on
Magdalene, does it make it any better that you know he really loved you
Magdalene, all your sins have been forgiven, and he's gone.

What matters in our text today is that Jesus himself contrasted the woman’s actions with those of the religious leader. Simon the Pharisee gave Jesus none of the customary hospitality, and Jesus called him on it. The Pharisee was guarded and stingy, the woman was self-giving and lavish. Simon’s righteousness is the kind that says, “God can’t abide sinners.” Hers was the kind that casts itself at the feet of God in longing. What does God require? Self-giving love. Clearly her sin, whatever it was, was public knowledge. And Jesus publicly valued her. She did a risky thing, coming into the religious leader’s house, dropping onto all fours to bathe his feet with her tears and her oil. It would seem they had met before, and she had already received forgiveness from him, and in a daring act expressed the depth of her gratitude for grace already received. She became a means of grace herself, for us, for we know her story. The one who knows herself or himself to be a sinner can receive grace and forgiveness in a way that religious pedants who don’t think they need it cannot.

It is a story of desire, no matter how you cut it. Catholic theologian Ian McFarland says, “…desire draws one irresistibly toward the other in a manner that reflects, even in broken fashion, that one’s life before God is fulfilled only with another.” Or only with each other.
Is Magdalene a symbol for us of desire for all that is holy, that we creatures of the earth can only express in earthier terms? She has found her place in legend beyond what the text warrant, even with its hints at her import. What is it that draw us? Perhaps longing for some intimacy with the very heart of God? To know and be known, and know we are loved by the one who invented love?

Okay, you may be thinking. What does this have to do with the price of bullets in America, after the public killings of too many people this last week? Some people are speaking some truth with love. In Minnesota, Castile’s family was quick to condemn the shootings in Dallas. In Texas, Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said yesterday: “Today we find ourselves here again… to honor the 5 police officers who lost their lives. We must start with an attitude change, and attitude of humility and gratitude. We are thankful for our lives, others lost them last night. We are thankful for our city and for each other. We must face our challenges head on. We will not shy away from the fact that we as a city, as a state, as a nation, are struggling with racial issues. Yes, there’s that word “race.” This is on our watch, that we have allowed this to fester, that we have led the next generation down a vicious path of rhetoric and actions to pit one against the other. The question is, can we as citizens speak against the actions of a relatively few officers who have blemished the reputation of their high calling, and support the 99% of officers who do their job professionally, honestly and bravely? Can we as a community, truly and deeply understand the pain that racial discrimination and the greatest sin in America, slavery, created through history? Can we understand that, yet accept God’s grace and forgiveness? Can we build the city and the country that Dr. King dreamt of?” We have to be honest, he said, and we have to love one another. “If we don’t, this cancer of separatism will kill this body.”

Mayor Rawlings seems to sense the truth that love cannot happen without justice and hard work. Racism is a nuanced and difficult challenge. But we are finally call created beings, made by the same God, of the exact same raw materials, and breathing the same Holy Breath. What is more ridiculous than racism, than living in fear of each other? In the Bible, nearly every time the angels show up, they say, “Fear not!” The woman in our text today was the despised and rejected one, but the one who didn’t hate. Who, in her nearly sensuous desire for forgiveness and the love of God, taught us to love profligately. The text suggests that our response to God should be to become lovers, not as in a romance novel, but lovers of the world, and of God’s people, and of each other, with actions of mercy and grace. The kind of love we have learned at the feet of Jesus.

Kristofferson once more:

Look sister, look brother, we’re killing each other.
We’ve got to stop, and get started today.
Because life is the question and life is the answer,
And God is the reason, and love is the way.12

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12 Kristofferson, Kris. “Love is the Way,” Repossessed.