Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage

The Courage to Let Go

Lent 3C-22

Luke 8: 1-3

3/20/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Luke 8: 1-3**

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages,

proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,

as well as some women

who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities:

Mary, called Magdalene,

from whom seven demons had gone out,

and Joanna,

the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza,

and Susanna,

and many others,

who provided for them out of their resources.

Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage

The Courage to Let Go

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It’s just three short verses. But within them, so many expectations and assumptions come crumbling down as Luke makes clear… women were counted among Jesus’ closest followers.

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Across the centuries… many have tried to minimize these three verses. Some have noted that Luke doesn’t explicitly call the women “disciples.” Or they’ve tried to minimize the women’s role as mere providers for the men… assuming the women were simply there to serve their needs.

But that’s not what Luke says. Not at all. Luke says these women were followers of Jesus. Granted… religious law meant these women couldn’t become priests or rabbis as Jesus’ male followers could. But as the great preacher and scholar Fred Craddock notes so well, because these women not only supported but participated in Jesus’ ministry and mission, there’s a strong case to be made that these women should be counted as disciples.

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It was these women who proved to be the only ones who followed Jesus to the very end. Even when the 12 either betrayed or abandoned him, Luke makes clear these women were the ones who stayed with Jesus. Through his trial… Through his crucifixion. And then, when he died, it was the women who found the courage to go to his tomb. And when they found the tomb was empty and heard an angel proclaiming news of resurrection… it was the women… these very women who ran forth proclaiming the very first Easter sermon, “He is risen!”

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Unfortunately, we don’t know all that much about these women… except for what Luke shares about two of them.

Luke mentions Mary first. This Mary is not to be confused with Jesus’ mother, or the Mary whose sister was named Martha. This Mary was known as Mary Magdalene, who had, at one time, known the horrific pain of possession. It meant she not only knew the pain of illness, but the pain of isolation and judgment that such an illness brought. Good Hebrews knew not to associate with anyone possessed with an evil spirit.

But evidently, once Mary was healed, once she was free from the shackles of her illness, nothing was going to keep her from following the love and grace she found in Jesus Christ. Certainly not cultural expectations… or religious restrictions of where women should be found… or what women should do with their time. So she committed to following Jesus, just like Simon Peter and James and John had done… devoting her life and her possessions to his mission and ministry.

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Joanna came to Jesus from a very different place. As the wife of Chuza, one of Herod’s right-hand men, Joanna knew the privilege of a politically connected family. She had it all from a societal perspective. Wealth, pollical influence, prestige.

But when she found the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ… she left it all to follow him. She could’ve just sent Jesus money. She could’ve easily supported his ministry from afar. But she stepped far beyond the expectations of a political steward’s wife… trampling the cultural assumptions of what someone like her should do or should value… all in order to walk hand-in-hand with women like Mary and men like Peter as they sought to follow Jesus Christ, supporting his ministry… joining his mission.

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It’s just three verses here at the start of chapter 8. But they are overflowing with profiles in courage. Profiles of women who refused to let the restrictions of the religious establishment and the surrounding society dictate who they were and what they were “supposed” to do with their lives.

It’s a travesty that, in the centuries that followed, both Judaism and Christianity developed more patriarchal boundaries… placing even more restrictions on women’s roles.

Just as it’s so sad that many Christian traditions today still do not ordain women or other minority populations as rabbi’s, or priests, or pastors.

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And lest we pat ourselves on the back, our own denomination hasn’t been ordaining women for terribly long. Rev. Margaret Towner was the first women ordained in our denomination… as recently as 1956. Just 66 years ago.

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Which, taken all together, stands as powerful testimony to the weight we *continue* to give the assumptions and expectations others place upon us. Whether it be the roles and responsibilities others say we’re supposed to just naturally assume… or restrictions and prejudices others want us to just blindly accept… it is hard to confront others’ expectations.

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And isn’t even more so when we’re talking about expectations or assumptions of those we’re closest to? Like familial expectations?

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Absolutely! Familial expectations are often the strongest ones we face… requiring the most courage to recognize and confront.

The recent Disney film, “Encanto,” portrays this as it tells the story of the Madrigal family in Columbia. In this multi-generational family, every family member has a role and responsibilities, and each member is *expected* to fulfill their roles and responsibilities without hesitation or questions.

But in time, things begin to go a bit sideways for the Madrigals. And some of the family members begin to struggle with their assigned role.

The character named Mirabel is a good example. She’s the family’s strongest member—physically speaking, at least. She’s so strong she not only does all the family’s heavy-duty chores… she’s also expected to do all the heavy lifting for her entire village. But eventually, even Mirabel—the strong one— show signs of cracking amid the extraordinary expectations others have placed upon her.

Let’s take a look:

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**CLIP from Encanto—“Surface Pressure” (0:00 – 1:40)**

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Did you catch how her song begins, with Mirabel singing,

“*I’m the strong one… I’m not nervous… I’m as tough as the crust of the Earth is.*

*I move mountains… I move churches… and I glow, ‘cause I know what my worth is.*

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She doesn’t want to admit she’s struggling… She tries so hard to live into her role and responsibilities as the family’s strong one…

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But as the song goes on she finally admits to her sister,

*“Under the surface, I’m pretty sure I’m worthless if I can’t be of service.”*

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The first time I heard that I thought, “Oh my gosh… how many people—including myself—have felt like that before!”

We think our worth is tied to our roles and responsibilities. We think our value is found in fulfilling expectations that others have heaped on us… or ones we sometimes heap on ourselves… even when those roles and expectations aren’t realistic… or healthy for us… because they aren’t God-given.

But still… we cling to them. As Mirabel sang at the very end, “*Who am I if I can’t carry it all?”*

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Expectations and assumptions of society… of our families… sometimes even ourselves… they can be dangerous… as it is so often expectations and assumptions that get in our way of living into who God calls us to be.

Which is why Luke—the only Gospel author to have offer these three verses—uses so much of his Gospel to depict how Jesus and his followers broke so many boundaries and assumptions with almost every step they trod.

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Luke wants us all to see the courage faith give us

* to step away from others’ assumptions.
* to let go of others’ expectation
* to release even the unhealthy expectations we place upon ourselves…

All so that we can each follow Christ amid our own unique call… filled with our own unique gifts… treading our own unique journey of faith as we go.

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It’s not that community doesn’t matter. It does. Community is one of the foundational aspects of discipleships. But as Jesus’ followers reveal to us, the purpose of our faith community is not to heap expectations or assumptions upon us… but to support one another as we each pursue the call to grow into who God has created us to be… in order to share all that God calls us to share.

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Like Mary and Joanna and Susanna and all the women and men who followed Christ from all kinds of backgrounds and varied circumstances, we, too, are invited to pursue the courage of our faith to let go of what others say we should do and be… in order to be who God knows we are. Amen.