



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Formation

Sermon

Author: Carol Penner

Church: The First Mennonite Church, Vineland

Date: November 18, 2007

Scripture Text: Luke 8:1-3, Acts 1:21-22, Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40-41

This sermon is part of a larger sermon archive available as an inspirational resource to teachers, ministers and others of Mennonite Church Canada ©2005. Posted by permission of the author. May not be reproduced or redistributed. Permission to quote excerpts is granted.

The Bottom Line

For the past months we've been following Jesus through the gospel of Luke. We've seen Jesus and his followers in the country, on the sea, on the seashore, in the cities and along the roads in between. This journey is summed up by Luke 8:1 - "Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." (NRSV)

We've been seeing Jesus' ministry in action and so today I want to ask the questions that you've been wanting to ask this whole time: "How much is this costing?" and "Where is the money coming from?" Basically, "What is the bottom line?!"

We're all practical people here, judging from the way we work in this church. When we want to do something at First Mennonite, someone is always quick to ask the bottom line question. If someone says, "Let's build an addition to our church," the response is always, "Well, how much is it going to cost?" If someone says, "Let's sponsor a refugee family," we soon hear someone ask, "Well, where is the money going to come from?"

And it's pretty normal for us to ask those practical questions because that's the way we live our lives. We are practical people. If we want to take a trip to see relatives far away, almost the first thing we ask is, "How much is that going to cost?" And if we want to buy a new car or a new house, we always ask, "Where is the money going to come from?" We are practical people!

That's why when we've been hearing these stories about Jesus' ministry, hearing about him doing all this travelling with his followers, we ask the practical question: "What is the bottom line?" Right?

Well, maybe you have asked that question, but I have to admit that for myself this has never crossed my mind before. I can't ever remember thinking about this. I know there was money involved in Jesus' life — Judas carried the money for the group—but it has never occurred to me to ask, "How much money did Jesus' ministry cost?" or "Where was the money coming from?" I never thought about it, until I spent some time pondering today's biblical text. Luke 8:1-3 - "Soon afterwards Jesus 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."

There are a number of surprising things about this passage; for starters, the idea that women were travelling with Jesus. This would have been very unusual for the time, where women had a very set role in society, and traipsing around the countryside with a religious leader wasn't within those roles. We don't really think about Jesus travelling with women. Think about the way you've pictured Jesus in all these settings that we've surveyed the past few months. We visualize him as travelling from place to place with his group of twelve male disciples. The scripture we just read suggests that it wasn't such a small group, and that the group included women.

Luke isn't the only gospel writer to mention this. The writers of the gospels of Matthew and

Mark both tell us that women were travelling with Jesus. They mention it at the end of Jesus' life. Here is Mark 15:40-41 - "There were also women looking on from a distance, among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem."

Also, Acts 1 tells us that when the disciples were looking to replace Judas, they decided to choose from the group of men who had accompanied them from the time of John's baptism of Jesus until the time Jesus went up to heaven. There was a group of men to choose from who had followed Jesus this whole time who weren't part of the twelve. So the followers of Jesus were a big group of people: the twelve disciples plus Jesus, plus Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Joanna, the other Mary, Salome and many others, both men and women, who are unnamed. How big a group of people? I would suggest a minimum of twenty-five, but maybe up to 40 or more. Now you are probably thinking what I am thinking, "That's a lot of people to take care of, how much did that cost and where did they get the money?!"

In scripture we often see people extending hospitality to Jesus, but if they invited Jesus to dinner, were they inviting his 40 followers? If they offered to put Jesus up for the night, did that mean that everyone else tagged along automatically? They must have experienced some hospitality, certainly, but this big group of people had to be fed every day, they had to find a place to sleep everyday, and they had to have clothing and sandals because they must have worn out their shoes walking from place to place!

It's hard to know how many day's wages, or denarii, it would have taken to keep this troupe in operation. It's easier to talk about it in present-day dollars. Imagine you were going to take a year to not work for wages, but instead travel and spread good news about Jesus. How much would that cost?

This week I talked to Al Rempel, who works for Mennonite Church Canada Witness, and he told me that the average cost for maintaining a mission worker in the field is \$45,000 per person, and more when there is a lot of travel involved, or if there are children who need to be supported or educated as well.

For the sake of easier mathematics, we'll round that down. Let's say it takes an average person's income to keep an average missionary supported. It's a full-time job to support one mission worker. The average yearly income in Canada is around \$30,000.

Let's say that Jesus travelled in a group of 30 people, and they travelled for around three years...then you would need 30 people working for three years to support them. Average yearly income \$30,000 times 30 people equals \$900,000. Then we multiply that by three for each of the years of ministry and that equals a bottom line of \$2,700,000!! That is just a guess at what it might have cost in today's dollars to support Jesus & his followers. It's no small potatoes to run a missions program!

So how much did it cost to support Jesus and his followers in their ministry? How many denarii are we talking about? A lot! An awful lot of denarii! So where was the huge amount of money coming from?

I don't think Jesus could have saved up enough personally to support this whole group. He was probably a humble carpenter, and he didn't come from a rich family. Did Jesus miraculously produce money or multiply money, the way he multiplied the loaves and fishes? There is that one story about Peter finding the coin for taxes in the fishes' mouth, but other than that there are no miracle stories involving money. I think the disciples would have recorded that if it happened. Imagine them having to go and pay a big hotel bill, but their purse was empty, but then they looked again and it was suddenly full! I am sure if that had happened, they would have recorded it in scripture. I know I would remember that if it happened to me. It would be seared in my memory for all time!

Could it have been the twelve disciples who were paying for Jesus' ministry? The gospels suggest the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. There is no suggestion that Jesus told them, "Sell your boats, and bring that money you've made collecting taxes, because we will have a lot of bills in the next three years!"

In scripture we never see Jesus doing any fundraising for himself. There isn't one place where he asks for money for his ministry. Think of when he meets the rich young man; he tells him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Jesus does not say, "Sell your possessions and give the money to my ministry."

So where is the money coming from? All three gospel writers who answer this question, the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all say one thing. Scripture tells us that it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and Salome and the other Mary—it was the women who paid the bills! It was women who were healed by Jesus and then supported him out of their own means. It was women who were personally committed, personally devoted to Jesus, and

some of them were wealthy. In our text today, the term “provided for him” or served him is the Greek word diakonia...from which we get our word deacon. They gave service to Jesus by supporting his ministry.

I don't know about you, but this scripture has really surprised me. Many of us grew up with bible stories, we know the name Mary Magdalene. What comes to mind when you hear the name, “Mary Magdalene”? Usually we think, “She's a sinner” or “she had demons cast out of her.” But three places in scripture it tells us that she paid the bills for Jesus' ministry! We have not given credit where credit is due! If there is one thing I want you to remember from this sermon two weeks from now it's this: “Mary Magdalene paid the bills!” Can everyone repeat that!!!

It is important to read scripture carefully and hear the story of the faithfulness of women like Mary Magdalene and Susanna and Joanna and Salome and the other Mary. They served Jesus with their money--substantial, sacrificial amounts of money. We're not talking small potatoes! AND they also served Jesus with their presence. They weren't just sending cheques from a distance. Their diakonia, their service, meant paying the bills and walking with Jesus in his ministry. Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna, Salome and the other Mary are present at mountaintop experiences. They are present at the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They are also present at that other mountain-top experience at Golgotha.

The gospel writers record the story of the women standing there at Golgotha, faithful to the end. The same troupe of loyal women that had walked together so many miles for so many years. Here they stand now, with broken hearts and perhaps with broken bank accounts, having spent all they had on Jesus. They loved Jesus to the end, in diakonia. And they were there at the tomb to see the risen Christ, and they were there with the disciples as they went out with good news from an upper room, filled with the Holy Spirit, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ!

Today I want to have us think specifically about the people we commission as mission workers to leave their homes and communities, who devote themselves to spread the good news of Jesus. They do this full-time for years at a time. This past week we had Mennonite Church Canada Witness workers Daniel and Joji Pantoja speaking in our community. They are Witness workers in the Philippines, in the conflict-filled island of Mindanao, where civil war between Muslim, Christian and indigenous people has been devastating.

Daniel and Joji told stories of how they are working for peace, encouraging Muslim and Christian people to get to know one another. They got the Christian general in charge of the Christian army to sit down with the Muslim general of the Muslim army, and to have a cup of coffee and to talk about peace. In fact, Daniel and Joji built a peace café, where they serve fairly traded coffee and people learn to know each other face to face. Rather than relying on stereotypes like, “All Muslims are terrorists” or “All Christians are right-wing US-supporters who want to destroy us,” they learn to know each other as people who hate war and long for peace. Daniel and Joji are doing this remarkable work and yet they are just normal everyday people like you and me. They are making an incredible difference in the community where they are because they are there in the name of Jesus Christ.

They showed pictures of their work, and what struck me deeply was the image of their peace café. It had a big sign on the front with the Mennonite Church Canada logo peace dove on it...four feet high! The same dove we have on the entrance to our building, the same dove that is on the front of our bulletin. The work Daniel and Joji are doing is the work of our church. Their peacemaking work, their diakonia for Jesus, is made possible by our diakonia of donations to Mennonite Church Canada—our conference! And Daniel and Joji are just two of the fifty workers in thirty countries that we support. You can see the website and the links that I printed in the bulletin to find out more information about our Church's mission program.

How important is the mission program of our Church to us? That's the question I have for you all today. Does the scripture that calls us to go and spread good news to all the nations have direct meaning for us today and does it have direct meaning for the bottom line of our budget here at First Mennonite?

If we have a shortfall one year in our budget, is our giving to conference, and thus our support of our international mission workers, the first thing to be cut? Looking at our budget practically, a shortfall is not something we've faced for a long time. Instead I think the challenge we are facing is what to do with what we have to give, and we have a lot to give! This year we raised almost \$20,000 above our budget for a special project to support a refugee family. If we can raise \$20,000 more in our budget, perhaps we should be challenging ourselves to do that every year. Soon we are facing the end of the mortgage payments for the renovations we did to our building a number of years ago. What does that mean for our bottom line? Does that mean, “Oh

good, now we can give less to the church?" or does it mean "We are used to being this generous, so now we can use this money to support missions more strongly because our heart is in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ ..."

If that is where we come out, and if we are committed to supporting the mission program of our Church, then how does this scripture from Luke 8 about Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna challenge us? Instead of just sending cheques, how can we walk with people in ministry?

The Witness program is calling us to be supportive of missionary work with money, in our prayers, and in partnering. What does this mean? If you were called to go to South America or Asia, and be a missionary (and I know some of you here are thinking, "She's talking about me, I think I may be called to serve"), if you were far away giving years of service in the name of our Church, what would you want our congregation to be doing? How would you want to be supported?

I think you would want to know that your funding is secure and that your work is undergirded in a stable way. You would want partners! You would want to know that people are praying for you, that they are reading the reports that you are sending back. You would want good communication back and forth. I think you would

also appreciate people taking the time and effort to see your work first-hand.

I think of how Tom & Maryanne & Conrad went on a Foodgrains Bank tour, and Jim and Joanne went on a Witness learning tour to Africa, and others like Jane and Harold going to see MCC workers. I am sure it meant a lot to the mission workers to see that you were interested and supportive. And I think that the tours you went on changed you, seeing the mission work first hand gave you passion for that ministry. You have shared that with our congregation and with other people you've met. Many of us travel on vacations, I wonder whether we should think of tithing our vacations, and dedicating one in every ten trips to church work, to visiting mission workers.

Partnering with missions means supporting mission workers, and it means being transformed ourselves. It means participating in all types of mountaintop experiences, and becoming passionate about service, diakonia as we spread the good news of Jesus Christ together.

When you leave the church this morning, I want you to remember one thing... "Who paid the bills?" "Mary Magdalene!" And because we are practical people, I want you to ask yourselves one thing, and I invite you to talk about this over the lunch table today, "Here at First Mennonite-- what is our bottom line when it comes to missions? And what are we going to do about it?"