

Title: “A Church that Includes You”
Series: What Kind of Church is This?

The need to belong is perhaps the most powerful emotional need experienced in modern times. Society continues to fragment, families disintegrate, and technology isolates until the opportunities to truly belong become more and more limited. But the *need* to belong has not diminished. Individuals today are seeking those places where they can belong, and then giving themselves fully to the relationships they find.

It is by targeting inclusion that our church can establish its ministry. By becoming a place of belonging, the local church opens itself up to ever-broadening opportunities to proclaim its message – a message of love and belonging in the family of God. How does the church establish this kind of ministry? Many times Jesus provided the example through His own ministry of including people. Let's take a look at one such occasion:

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. – Luke 8:1-3 (ESV)

There are few people that we read about in the Bible who evidence more commitment to Jesus than Mary Magdalene who is mentioned here as one of Jesus' companions. Such commitment doesn't just happen, it must be carefully cultivated and developed. Jesus the Master shows us the way to include those who have a need to belong in his treatment of Mary.

1. WE MINISTER TO PEOPLE'S NEEDS

We just read the names of three women that followed Jesus as a direct result of Him meeting their needs, along with other women not named. We specifically want to focus on Mary Magdalene as we know more about her than the others.

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out. – Luke 8:2b (ESV)

Here is a lady who had a very serious need that was met by Jesus Christ. There are at least three areas of meeting Mary's need that we can examine and see how they stand as an example of how we can meet people's needs today.

1) Her Need Was Identified

Jesus saw Mary as an individual, not just as part of the crowd. He didn't just see her as a generic human being, but as an individual person with her own experiences, history, intellect, and emotions. Mary was distinctly Mary, and there was no one else like her. Jesus recognized this and treated her as a person created in the image of God.

He does the same for each of us – He calls us by name, He sees us for who we really are, He cares about us as individuals. And this is what we are called to do as a church. Oftentimes when we talk about growth and outreach and numbers it can all sound so impersonal, can't it? But behind every number is a name, is a history, is a person for whom Jesus died for, and a person that has specific needs that we can meet. We want everyone we try to reach to realize that we don't think of them as a number on the attendance board; but that we recognize their individuality and that we love them for who they are.

2) Her Need Was Prioritized

The needs of the people that we meet oftentimes must be met before we share the Good News of the Gospel with them. Jesus prioritized the need of the individual first, and then He shared His heart. While the most intrinsic need of us all is to come into a relationship with Christ, sometimes the other needs that people have must be met first. If I run across a person that is starving and say to them, "Well, I really have this cool Gospel tract that you need to read" I don't think I'm going to get very far. But what if I give them some food first? And then begin to get to know something about them? And let them know that I value them as a person first? What happens then? They see that I am not just out to win converts, but to take care of real physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. They see that I'm not out to put another notch on my belt, but that I am really there for them, even if they never respond to Jesus Christ. Before Jesus shared the Gospel with Mary, He

prioritized her need. If we expect people to open their hearts to the message we bring, we must first open our hearts in prioritizing their needs.

3) Her Need Was Met

Jesus cast seven demons out of this woman – we don't have all the details of this encounter, but it is evident that Jesus took care of her problem. I am well aware that we cannot fix every problem that every person has. I also know that we do not have every material resource at our disposal. Some needs we can meet immediately, some we can meet by networking with other people, and some needs will never be met completely. But those facts cannot be legitimately used as an excuse to not at least try to meet the needs that are out there.

The biggest need of most people that we run across can be met – it is the need to know that you are loved and cared for. This has always been true, but is perhaps more true today than at any other time in history – people are lonely, confused, and have lost direction. They need us to show that we care, and are willing to assist them on their journey to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

2. WE BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Before I go any further, I need to ask you a question and I want you to just keep the answer in your own head – it would be a great thing to discuss with others later, but for now, just think about it on your own. Here's the question: *How many unchurched people are you in a relationship with?*

I can already tell you that most of us that have been in the church for a long time would have to answer "None." It seems that the longer we are Christ Followers the more disconnected we get with those that are not – and that is a real problem. The problem is that I cannot possibly hope to reach people for Christ if I am not in a relationship with them. If I don't have any non-Christian friends, how can I tell anyone about Christ? This is the biggest detriment to fulfilling the Great Commission that we have today – we don't know any non-Christians well enough to share the Gospel with them Jesus went out of His way, and we must go out of our way, to build real friendships with people outside of the church. By building a relationship with Mary Magdalene, Jesus was able to change her life.

1) Jesus Gave Her New Identity

Tradition holds that Mary made her living as a prostitute. There is no biblical text that completely supports that, but many times these traditions ring true. Even if she was not a prostitute, we do know that she would have been an outcast from society based on the fact that she had been demonized by either seven demons or had demons cast out of her seven different times. Once Jesus met her need by casting these demons out of her, He was able to show her how she could be a brand new person. He taught her how she could move from being a sinner to being a saint; how she could change from demonized to being filled with the Spirit of God; how she could go from being an outcast to being adopted into the family of God.

Our job is to build relationships with the unchurched and show them the same. We have the greatest job in the world – we get to tell people and show people that they can be remade and transformed into the image of God. People say they don't like who they are or what they've become – I've got great news – they can be made anew and be identified as a child of God.

2) Jesus Gave Her Purpose

He showed Mary that there was more to life than getting up, and going to work, and taking care of the kids, and paying taxes, and watching TV. He showed her that she could have an impact on the world around her, that God could use her as a warrior-servant in His Kingdom, that she was significant in the eyes of God and could do significant things that would last for eternity.

Concerning these women that were following Jesus, our text says that:

...(They) provided for them out of their means. – **Luke 8:3b (ESV)**

In other words, these women were helping to finance the ministry of Jesus. Mary had learned that she could make a lasting contribution to her world. Formerly she was despised and rejected, but now, as a remade human being, she found purpose in this life that would drive her until she experienced the life yet to come.

And this is the message that we bring – that there is more to life than what you think – that you were made for a purpose – that you can contribute – that God views you as a significant person made to serve Him and experience His blessings. We build relationships by sharing and living out this truth.

3) Jesus Gave Her Love

¹Jason Tuskes was a 17-year-old high school honor student. He was close to his mother, his wheel-chair bound father, and his younger brother. Jason was an expert swimmer that loved to scuba dive. He left home on a Tuesday morning to explore a spring and underwater cave near his home in west central Florida. His plan was to be home in time to celebrate his mother's birthday by going out to dinner with his family that night. Jason became lost in the cave – then, in his panic, he apparently got wedged into a narrow passageway. When he realized he was trapped, he shed his yellow metal air tank and unsheathed his diver's knife. With his tank as a tablet and the knife as a pen, he wrote one last message to his family: "I love you Mom, Dad, and Christian." Then he ran out of air and he drowned. **[end of illustration.]**

A dying message – something communicated in the last few seconds of life – is something we can't ignore. God's words to us are etched on a Roman Cross – they are blood red – they scream to be heard – they too, say "I love you." These are the words Mary knew to be true when she met Jesus – His words, His actions, His caring, all were a demonstration of His love. When He died on the Cross, Mary stood there and watched Him die.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. – John 19:25 (ESV)

Here again, she saw the ultimate demonstration of love. It is this kind of love, authentic, caring, and willing to go to the ultimate extreme, this kind of love that shows people that we really care about them. It is this kind of love that we must demonstrate as a church to those we are trying to reach – Again, Jesus has set the example.

4) Jesus Gave Her Belonging

Mary the outcast, Mary the possessed, Mary the one on the outside looking in, is now an integral part of Jesus' band of disciples. She's listed here in our text, along with the 12, and the other women, as one Jesus has chosen to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. She now belongs to something greater than herself. Jesus has shown her what it means to be a part of a group that is on a mission from God. And that is what the church is here for – to let people know that they belong, that they are a part, that they are included as an integral part of what God is going to do through us – this is how we build relationships.

¹ 750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers, Rubel Shelly

3. WE SHARE THE GOSPEL

Sharing the Gospel means letting people know about the Good News that Jesus, God in the flesh, has come to this earth, has died for our sins on a Cross, has risen from the dead, and that He wants to be in relationship with us. It is our great privilege, as a church, to have this message to share with all those around us. When Jesus shared the Gospel, two amazing things happened.

1) Jesus Revealed His Power

When Jesus cast the demons from Mary he revealed that He had a power that was beyond that of the evil forces in the world. He showed her and us that His power was supernatural – that He could bind the forces of darkness, that He could heal the sick, that He could forgive sins, that He could grant to us eternal life with Him forever. Jesus revealed that there was nothing beyond His power, and in doing this He showed us that He had the power to save us. When we have met people's needs and are building relationships with them, we share with them the awesome power of Jesus Christ Himself. Our job is to reveal to them what Jesus revealed to Mary and what He has revealed to us – that He has the power to fulfill all of the promises that He has made, that He can make us whole, and that we will be empowered ourselves to become His new creation.

2) She Responded With Passion

No one mattered more to Mary than this One Who had loved her so. She responded to Jesus' love with an undying loyalty to Him and His cause. When Jesus was nailed to the Cross, Mary was there – after He was placed in the tomb, Mary went to visit His grave and found that His body was missing.

*Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). – **John 20:11-16 (ESV)***

Mary was the first of His disciples that Jesus appeared to – and she responded to Him again, with joy and love. The result of inclusion in the way that we've described today is an undying passion for Jesus Christ and His kingdom. This is what happens to people when we share with them the Gospel of Christ. This is what happens when we are living out what we are called to be as the church.

Conclusion:

Reaching out to the world around us is not an exact science, but we know that the need to belong is widespread. As Christians we are compelled to meet the unchurched at their point of need and show them the way to true life. Christianity is more than a commitment to belief – it must also include the opportunity to belong.