

**Mary, Joanne, and Susanna**  
*Luke 7:36 – 8:3*  
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First & Central Presbyterian Church  
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Known by the company you keep!

It's a pithy bit of advice that's instilled in us by parents and caring adults, it's a tagline for a life insurance company, and it summarizes the last bit of the Bible story that Judie just read.

Known by the company you keep – when we're younger, that same sentiment might be said in the form of "choose your friends wisely," or to the negative, "you don't want to be seen with people like that..." I think most parents worry about who their kids pick as friends—I know mine did and I know that Walle and I scrutinized our kids' friends from a non-obtrusive distance,

There's a fine line between wanting your children to make friends, at a minimum to be sure that they have someone to sit with in the cafeteria, and making sure those kids won't lead your little darlings to the dark side.

As we get a little older we frequently scan different clubs, teams, and groups to see who else is involved and whether or not they look like us. It's typical to want to hang with similar folks – and we certainly don't want to besmirch our reputation by associating with those not of the right ilk.

It's amazing how quickly we stratify. The TV show "Freaks and Geeks" put kids into those two categories and more – and the current show "Glee" is a perfect example of the stigma attached to joining something like a high school glee club. We are known by the company we keep!

Fraternities, sororities, and service organizations all seem to attract a narrow stratum of folks and we define ourselves to the outside world by our affiliations.

Surely that critique spills over into the pews.

Think about it – as we drive by churches in the community it's pretty easy to make some snap judgments about who might be attending.

"That church over there is for the DuPonts and their crowd, the one on the other side of town – that's for snooty Presbyterians who want to be seen, the other one down the street—they're solid working class folks who like their religion on the simple side, and that rich church downtown – that's the gay church."

We are known by the company we keep. Those with whom we surround ourselves tells the outside world who we are.

That's likely the reason Luke tacked on a postscript about Jesus' entourage.

The main story – about the Pharisee and the woman who bathed Jesus' feet coupled with the parable about the two debtors – is chock full of meaning and message on multiple levels. Surely most folks preaching on this text today will mine that passage and spout forth with riveting and inspiring insights and conclusions. For this preacher, it's the little postscript, the snippet of verse that serves to connect two episodes of the travelogue that Luke has woven about Jesus.

What's grabs my attention is what he said that he didn't have to. When a writer includes detail, almost as an aside, it usually means something. Luke could have simply, and with economy of words, transitioned Jesus and his disciples from the events in the Pharisee's house to the parable of the sower which follows and never mentioned Mary, Joanna, or Susanna.

Now for one of those three women, that bridge is her cameo in the Bible. Susanna is mentioned here and no where else. Luke provides no short bio and leaves modern day readers to speculate some about her circumstances given what was known of the status of women of that era.

Chances are, Susanna and the other women, supported this group of itinerant preachers financially as well as by cooking, cleaning, and sewing. The fact that they are listed independently hints that they were well-to-do with their own means of support. While it was not unusual in the Jewish world for women to contribute money to teachers and rabbis, they were, however, never permitted to be students.

The women that Luke lists are not mentioned in relationship to a husband, hence, if we assume that they were single women traveling with Jewish men – more than a little scandalous.

Yet Jesus appears to approve of women supporting his ministry and he readily accepted them as traveling companions and disciples. If we're known by the company we keep, Jesus and his posse were, to be polite, "socially radical."

We know a little bit more about Joanna, as along with the same information that we deduce about Susanna's circumstances, Luke includes Joanna as one of the women who discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning, thus she's included in the elite group of people who were witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Joanna is also notable because she's listed as the wife of one of Herod's estate managers, a position of prominence, and is perhaps included as an example of how the gospel affected people connected with the established hierarchies of power, folks financially comfortable at the top of the food chain. Proof put forth by Luke of how the story breaks

down class barriers, a church without walls, and nullifies social taboos, one that welcomes without limits.

Jesus, with the inclusion of Joanna in his entourage, presents both a religious and a social threat to the structure of early Judaism.

And lastly – Mary Magdalene – the most threatening and consequently the most maligned woman of the Bible.

Mary Magdalene, a woman of faith and conviction, a trusted follower of Jesus, a benefactor of his ministry. Her work on behalf of Jesus and the first Christians would be difficult to overstate; and so it is a mystery why the early church fathers rewarded her steadfast contributions not with gratitude and appreciation, but by retrospectively, and inaccurately, portraying her as a prostitute.

Other than her appearances at the crucifixion and later at the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene shows up only here included along with “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.” Nowhere in any writings at all, are “evil spirits and infirmities” synonymous with sin of any kind, much less prostitution.

Mary’s reputation took a severe down-turn around the 6th century, during the time of Pope Gregory the Great. Between the founding of the church and that time, the church fathers of the Western Church had become increasingly convinced of two things: one was that sex was the root of most, if not all, sin. The second realization was that due to her prominence in the resurrection accounts, Mary Magdalene was overshadowing Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the primary female in the Christ accounts. Since Mary, the mother of Jesus had already been declared the symbol of ultimate sexual purity in the church. Therefore reconstructionist scholars began to associate Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman with the alabaster jar who anoints Jesus’ feet. By associating Mary Magdalene with sexual immorality, she became just another sinner in the fan club of Christ and Mary, Jesus’ mother, took center stage as the pinnacle of purity.

If one is known the company one keeps – then according to the church fathers, flee from Mary Magdalene.

Yet Jesus includes her among his most trusted and Luke all but puts her and two other women front and center in his gospel; by biblical accounts, moral and upstanding people—yet their gender alone made inclusion scandalous.

Perhaps the point is exactly that – that Jesus was known by the company he kept – and included, if not prominent in that collective noun, were folks one wouldn’t normally find traveling with a respected rabbi. The best way to know Jesus is to know the people he kept close.

We can promote ourselves by what we say, even by what we do – but it might just be the people we chose to associate with that tell our story with the least amount of ambiguity or

confusion. The best way to know us is to know the people we keep close. We are known by the company we keep.

We can surround ourselves with folks who build up our reputation, who enhance our image, who give us comfort and security – insulation of sorts. But we can also seek out relationships that pull us out of ourselves, that put us in the possibly awkward position of getting to know someone not at all like us, someone with a far different story and life experience. Someone who does little to promote our reputation and might even impinge it somewhat.

Perhaps those unexpected associations really do tell our story best. Luke makes sure that we know of the regular suspects that comprised Jesus' entourage – folks that we might expect – but it's the three unexpected women that tell us so much more.

Thanks be to God that if Jesus truly was known by the company he kept – then grateful are we to be counted among his followers – surprised perhaps that he'd be seen with the likes of us.

Amen.