

“The Gospel & The Da Vinci Code”

Texts: II Timothy 3:14-17 and I Corinthians 4:1-5

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Today we begin a new series of Sunday morning messages under the overarching theme of *“Making the Gospel Real.”* I’m excited about this new series of sermons, as we connect the timeless power of the gospel to the timely issues of our day. The current array of pressing concerns, especially those which connect with aspects of popular culture, offers us brand new ways to share the gospel. Through this series, we will discover again that the Christian faith is a spiritually trustworthy path that is, as one poetic cleric in New England put it some 225 years ago:

*‘as considerate of persons as the teachings of Jesus;
as devoted to justice as the Hebrew prophets;
as responsive to truth as science;
as beautiful as art;
as intimate as the home;
and as indispensable as the air we breathe.’¹*

Now, I would remind us that the Chinese ideogram for “crisis” is made up of two characters, one meaning “danger” and the other meaning “opportunity.” Today, we take up the gospel in connection with the runaway best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown and the famous blockbuster movie by Ron Howard as an *opportunity* for learning and growth. Dan Brown’s book enjoys a top-ten ranking on most bookseller lists, now some three years after its debut. And who can argue with the prolific nature of this pop culture phenomenon? There are 43 million copies of Dan Brown’s book in print,² and Ron Howard’s movie will surely rake in at least a half billion dollars before the movie goes to DVD.

We are taking a look at *The Da Vinci Code* because it provides us an *opportunity* to sharpen our understanding of the basics of the Christian faith as informed by the Bible and the history of the Church. Some commentators have pointed out the unusual alliance between two groups whose basic approaches to faith are traditionally mutually exclusive: fundamentalists and the Catholic Church. *The Da Vinci Code* is offensive to each group, I believe, for different reasons. For fundamentalists, *The Da Vinci Code* challenges the notion of “the inerrancy of Scripture.” For the Catholic Church, *The Da Vinci Code* challenges the hierarchical authority and integrity of the Catholic Church itself. Since most mainline Protestants and significant numbers of evangelicals are troubled neither by the necessity of Scriptural inerrancy nor by challenges to the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church, books and movies like *The Da Vinci Code* become for us opportunities and not dangers.

There are so many questions that have been asked in relation to *The Da Vinci Code*:

"Is this true?"

"Did the Bible come to be in the way that 'The Da Vinci Code' says it did?"

"Was Mary Magdalene really married to Jesus?"

And more!

Brown's novel prompts such questions in a better-than-average "whodunit" format, with a focus on Leonardo da Vinci's dazzling painting of "*The Last Supper*" and the search for "The Holy Grail." In the course of his 454-page page-turner, Brown raises intriguing questions about how the Bible came to be, the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and the development of the Church.

The characters are rather simple; the plot is rather complex.

Twisting and turning in an on-going sequence of clues and riddles having to do with Leonard da Vinci, his art work, and his supposed membership in a secret society, the storyline involves "Robert Langdon," a Harvard "symbolologist," and "Sophie Neveu," a French cryptographer, as they seek to uncover the murder of the curator at the Louvre (described at this early juncture in the story as Sophie's grandfather), found naked and mysteriously sprawled near the Mona Lisa. Along the way there's a seeming titan of encyclopedic knowledge named "Teabing" and an albino monk assassin named "Silas" punctuating the action of the plot with their nefarious doings.

Before proceeding much further, I need to say something quickly about the nature of reading novels and the upshot of *The Da Vinci Code*. Don't fret, I'm not going to give away the plot's conclusion, lest I spoil a fairly good read and/or movie for those who haven't yet discovered *The Da Vinci Code*. Rather, I want to point out that *The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction, an imaginative leap meant to entertain. Or let me put it another way, with an illustration from a reporter.

Each summer, a Washington Post columnist runs a listing of notable T-shirts observed on the beach at the Ocean City, Maryland. "*I child-proofed my house, but they still get in.*" "*Buckle up. It makes it harder for the aliens to snatch you from your car.*" Some have to do with how crazy life is: "*My reality check just bounced.*" ... "*Earth is the insane asylum of the universe.*"

There are some very good ones about identity, who one is and is not: "*I'm not 50. I'm \$49.95 plus tax*" "*I'm not a snob. I'm just better than you are.*"

And, of course, there are some for cat devotees: "*It's my cat's world. I'm just here to open cans.*" "*We got rid of the kids. The cat was allergic.*" "*Cats regard people as warm-blooded furniture.*"

But my favorite is one that you choco-holics will adore: "*Every time I hear the word 'exercise,' I wash my mouth out with chocolate.*"³

Allow me to add one that can be worn on the beach in Maryland or in the Plaza in Kansas City or anywhere else in America: *"The Da Vinci Code: It's Fiction!"*

What *"The Da Vinci Code"* does do, and does so plentifully, is weave a story that has implications for the Church (the Catholic Church in particular) and for our common understanding of the Christian faith in general. Unfortunately, as one commentator has stated, *"Brown's approach seems to consist of grabbing chunks of his stated sources and tossing them together in a salad of a story."*⁴ By the way, as many of my clergy colleagues are well aware, there is a boatload of commentary about *The Da Vinci Code* available. Two of the best books about the novel are Brandon Gilvin's *Solving the Da Vinci Code Mystery* and Greg Jones' *Beyond Da Vinci*.⁵

Throughout the novel, there are questions about the veracity of the New Testament. For example, there is the claim that the Emperor Constantine squashed all but his own version of the Bible in the year 325. Which isn't true, given historical evidence that shows that the canon of the New Testament was in formation beginning in the first century of the Church's existence, and that the canon, as we have it today, was formulated in 387 CE.

The Da Vinci Code further claims that the Holy Grail was not the legendary chalice from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, and for which the mythic round table knights labored, but rather the actual person of Mary Magdalene, who was married to Jesus and with whom she had a child. The sacred relics of her bones are objects of considerable interest and fascination throughout the latter parts of the story.

About the questions which *The Da Vinci Code* raises for us as Christians, I want to point out three key themes in Dan Brown's book and Ron Howard's movie that run counter to the essential, basic teachings of the Christian faith.

Secrecy

If *The Da Vinci Code* is about anything, it is about secret knowledge and secret ideas contained in secret documents, and that secret knowledge and those secret ideas being carried on through the centuries by elite secret societies. Yes, the Knights Templar was a group that existed, but it was disbanded by the 14th century. Yes, Opus Dei has existed and even exists today, but, according to all trustworthy sources among respected scholars, both liberal and conservative, not in the way *The Da Vinci Code* depicts it.

The books of the Bible, and particularly the words of Jesus in the New Testament, do not focus on secret knowledge and secret codes for the secretly privileged. The gospel isn't about secrecy but rather about *mystery*. Christians are, says the apostle Paul, *"servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries."* (I Corinthians 4:1) There's a world of difference between secrecy and mystery.

A secret has to be kept. A mystery, while ultimately impenetrable, is in plain view.

A secret is coded. A mystery is written in the language of everyday life.

A secret can harm, if not kept or shared or protected rightly. A mystery can heal, and often does, when it is shared widely and warmly with one and all.

Only a select few are privy to secrets. Mysteries may be encountered by the multitudes.

Conspiracy

Conspiracies, as conspiracies always do, run wild in *The Da Vinci Code*. There are so many in *The Da Vinci Code* that it's really hard to keep track of them all. That may be part plot device on Brown's part, to keep you plowing through the chapters. But it's also the nature of the beast called "conspiracy." (And before you say it, let me say it for you: "Well, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that they're **not** out to get you!")

In contrast, except as a metaphor, "conspiracy" is not a word that fits easily into the repository where the Church keeps its best words. Instead of conspiracy, the Church focuses its life on – that is, it lives, breathes, and has its being by virtue of – God's spirit moving in and through the gathering of Christians in *community*. Community, the very name for our family of faith, is what Christ was and is all about, which any intelligent reading of the New Testament and any insightful interpretation of his message and meaning will show. We may want conspiracy, but Jesus offers what his followers – from the first disciples down to us – know to be the essence of his message: "the kingdom of God is among you" ... in *COMMUNITY!*

Duplicity

Another, final "main issue" that *The Da Vinci Code* raises about the Church and Christian faith, is the matter of duplicity. In the course of the storyline, one of the characters proclaims, "*Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.*"

There is the notion that Christ's divinity was a matter of a duplicitous vote in a church council.

There are also the declarations that : (1) the beloved apostle situated next to Jesus in Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" masterpiece is actually Mary Magdalene; (2) the Early Church Fathers tried to suppress this knowledge and other extraordinary variances from traditional understandings about Jesus and his followers; and, (3) subsequently, Da Vinci knew this and tried to convey it – in coded fashion – in his art.

In the face of these charges, and others, allow me to offer some categorical responses – based on *truthful complexity* – to some of the more pressing questions many of you have sent my way since you picked up *The Da Vinci Code* (and ripped through it like a hot chain saw through butter) or went to see the movie:

** *Did Jesus and Mary Magdalene have children out of wedlock?*

** *Did Jesus and Mary Magdalene get married?*

*** Did Jesus and Mary Magdalene create a bloodline of inheritors detectable today?*

*** Did the Catholic Church in conspiratorial secrecy connive to suppress this "knowledge"?*

*** Is there an explanation other than the one Dan Brown offers for the formation of the Bible and the New Testament in particular?*

The answers to these questions, according to the best of historical and Biblical research are "No," "No," "No," "No," and "Yes."

From all reliable documents we have at our disposal, Jesus was never married, and he didn't have children. I say that in faith, as one can only say it when you're dealing with documents nearly 2000 years old. I also say it with confidence that the truth of Jesus' life and teachings are found in the Bible and among the followers who have walked after him – by the billions! – in the light of his wisdom, mercy, and saving grace.

What we have in the Bible are testaments, and about Jesus specifically, a *new testament*. And the main testament for Christians is not about a secret being transmitted to only a select few, but the wholesale sharing of a dependable truth: the love of God is made manifest and eternally real, available, livable in Jesus Christ. In short, *Jesus gives us a way of life – resplendent with possibilities for joy, reconciliation, growth, community, fulfillment, hope, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and transformation – and then he bids us to give that way of life to others.*

Some folks want Jesus to be more like us, let's face it. That would solve a lot of intellectual problems. We want Jesus down on our level – to tame him, perhaps, to domesticate his radical ideas, maybe. Maybe it's just so we can get close to him. But Jesus doesn't stoop to our level. Fully human, fully divine, as Irenaeus reminds us, Jesus tenders a loving invitation to us in order to raise us up to his level.

So, not duplicity, but truthful complexity. Not a fiction created as the figment of someone's imagination, but rather the testimony of those who were touched in a loving, chain-reaction of grace by the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, not only theoretically in the world but actually in their lives.

Now about the Bible and how it came to be, let me offer three brief observations that are extremely important to note.

Three Criteria for adjudicating the placing of the gospels in the Bible

Taking into consideration some suggestions from John Ortberg, who echoes most contemporary scholarship, here's the "AAA" test for the overall process for how the Bible came to be as we have it today and especially the basic criteria for how a gospel came to be included in the New Testament. (And even though Ortberg, as an evangelical, and I, as a mainline Protestant, hardly hold to the same theological posts, we do share a conviction about these solid principles for assessing the validity of the gospels and their placement in the New Testament.)

- (1) *Antiquity* – Ancient authorship
- (2) *Apostolicity* – Approximate closeness to Jesus’ apostles, and, then, next, those closest to the apostles.
- (3) *Acceptance* and common use by the early church at large.

The Bible as we have it is very nearly like the scriptures that arose among the first followers of Christ as the Church in his name was taking shape. They were confident in the time of Paul’s missionary journeys that the sacred writings – i.e. the Hebrew Bible, for the first followers of Christ – were trustworthy, dependable, and powerful enough to instruct Christians in the ways of a righteous and lovingly graced life before God. In II Timothy, the Church heard a truth it would stake its life on: *“... from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”* (II Timothy 3:15-17)

Conclusion: An Ineffable Mystery!

Allow me to close with a word from a wise soul, one of the wisest souls ever, who long ago gave an assessment of how we can ascertain the veracity of statements about who Jesus is and the claims and power of his gospel.

A classical musician, a medical doctor, and a philanthropist par excellence, Albert Schweitzer was the first theologian in modern times to set out on a quest to debunk the past, to get at the actual historical facts and figures that could, somehow, anneal the seeming hurt that science and other disciplines of human reason had done to Christianity’s claims. Long before any of the members of the New Hermeneutic folks rallied around the “God is dead” flag (and attempted to unfurl its myriad meanings), and long before the Jesus Seminar chose any color of beads to cast their votes for what truly are (or are not) the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth, there was Schweitzer. In addition to bequeathing to the world the marvelous phrase, *“reverence for life,”* Schweitzer set all modern followers of Christ on a “Quest of the Historical Jesus,” the name which he gave his massively important book one hundred years ago. In short, the good Dr. Schweitzer, at the last from Lambarene, Congo, is the “grandfather” of all the modern movements to delve into what really happened at the time of Christ and how we can really know who Jesus was and is.

At the end of his ground-breaking book, Schweitzer concludes that clinging to Christ is a matter of faith. Christ is made real, not by the vindication of a stack of incontrovertible evidence, but by believing in Christ’s truths *despite* the lack of factual evidence. On the last page, in the final paragraph, there is this, which is an answer to any fiction such as *The Da Vinci Code*, about the matter of how we relate to the carpenter from Nazareth and his meaning for our lives:

*“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, ‘Follow thou me,’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who HE is.”*⁶

So, enjoy the book. And enjoy the movie. And remember: they’re fiction. And remember too, what the Christian faith is about: not secrecy, but mystery; not conspiracy, but community; not duplicity, but truthful complexity. AMEN.

ENDNOTES

¹ The First Congregational Church, Lee, Massachusetts, lays claim to this smart adage as emanating from their “Founders”.

² The tallies for sales keep mounting. Compare the ranking by David Grainger (“*The Passion of the Da Vinci Reader*,” *Fortune*, March 4, 2004 issue, <http://www.fortune.com/fortune/articles/0,15114,593670,00.html>) and the most recent status of *The Da Vinci Code* on The New York Times paperback best sellers list.

³ Many thanks to Karl Roscoe for this bit of T-shirt humor. The application, for better or worse, is all mine.

⁴ Sandra Miesel, “*Dismantling The Da Vinci Code*,” *Crisis* magazine, September 1, 2003).

⁵ Brandon Gilvin, *Solving the Da Vinci Code Mystery* (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 2004; and Greg Jones, *Beyond Da Vinci* (New York: Seabury Books), 2004.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906, p. 401