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Easter 5 B
John 15: 1 – 8

The Truth of the Vine Code

It's been called a brainy thriller.¹ Exceedingly clever. A gripping mix of murder and myth. A spell-binding re-examination of 2,000 years of religious history. You've probably read it: *The Da Vinci Code*.

Dan Brown's popular page-turner soared to the top of the New York Times best seller list, and continues to be a topic of heated conversations in book clubs and Bible studies across the country. Some of you will recall our adult Sunday School class on it—Decoding the Da Vinci Code.

The movie opened this last Friday. It sure has caused an uproar! You would think this movie was going to somehow crumble the foundation of our faith!

I like fiction, and especially murder mysteries and that's essentially what the Da Vinci Code is. --a fine mystery yarn with an intriguing plot line. Movie critiques say it's actually a bit of yawn. I haven't seen the movie yet.

But I found the book a page turner. And of course it has all the popular elements that appeal to the popular imagination—an unsolved murder, a handsome hero who is mistaken for the murderer, a beautiful heroine who falls in love with the hero and a puzzle of clues leading to the answer of a great secret that supposedly the Roman Catholic church has protected and kept suppressed for two thousand years—

-----and what the answer to that secret is keeps us turning the pages as we dash through Paris, the Louvre and London from one historic site or artifact to another, because we are fascinated with the possibility that Jesus and Mary of Magdela were actually a married couple who produced a child and that somewhere today that blood line continues.

The author weaves a fascinating hunt for the answer and plays on the power of suggestion — such as the very feminine looking John in the famous painting by Da Vinci of the Last Supper is actually a woman and none other than Mary of Magdela. Furthermore since there is no cup of wine on the table in Da Vinci's picture the idea is that the true Grail is not a cup of wine but the womb of Mary carrying the child of Jesus.

So John is not John —he's Mary. And Mary is the Holy Grail. Believe it ----or not.

The Da Vinci Code raises a number of provocative questions. While the disciple of John certainly does look feminine in Da Vinci's Last Supper, as Art Historians have been telling us on TV for the last week or tow, the fact is such representations were pretty typical for the time.

And the absence of the Holy Grail doesn't make a case for Mary Magdalene as a human vessel either, because Da Vinci based his painting on the gospel of John, and John's story of the Last Supper doesn't have a cup. In his story, the focus is on washing feet, not drinking wine.

“As it turns out, the best way to crack the Code and get the goods on the Grail is to go straight to Da Vinci's source: the gospel of John.

In today's passage of scripture, we learn that Jesus is the True Vine, and that each and every one of us is a sign of his fruitfulness. To be connected to Christ has nothing to do with an intimate relationship of Jesus with Mary, but everything to do with being a productive branch on the Jesus Vine.

Jesus did have a love child. No doubt. Love CHILDREN, actually. And you are all sitting right here. You are the child of Jesus. Each one of us is a child of Jesus, with a direct link to the True Vine. This is an ancient and awesome secret, one that has been hidden by the church for far too long. Of course his blood line continues! What is all the fuss about!

Jesus uses the wonderful metaphor of a grapevine with its many intertwining branches to describe how our life flows from him through the careful tending of our God, the vinegrower, and

¹ Homiletics May 21, 2006.

out into fruitful discipleship in the world around us.

We know children grow best in a family where they are connected to their parents and siblings and extended family members. In this intertwining system of support are deep roots of common history, culture and the life blood of daily life that shape, form, nurture and encourage the child to grow strong until they too become a branch of the family's vine ready to produce their own fruit.

Parents have the role of tending, nurturing and pruning the new vine growth—their children --and of keeping them connected to the family.

Jesus tells us true life is like a grapevine family of branches twining around him, the main vine—and if we are to live we must stay connected to him, and to all the other family branches of the vine. Together we are a family of believers called to be productive—called to bear fruit.

We can't do that if we cut ourselves off. Jesus tells us, "apart from me you can do nothing."

What happens when a branch is cut from the vine? It withers. I like that word—wither—it means die of course but it implies slowly, over time a drying out occurs--the life blood drains away and we shrivel up—our souls shrivel up.

Disconnection from God shrivels our souls. When we are cut away from the vine we lose our self—our real and true self—we become shallow and cut off from the true meaning and purpose of life which is found in the vine life of Jesus who connects us to the vinegrower—our creator and sustainer—God.

Using this metaphor of the vine is a beautiful. But let's not permit our enchantment with the poetics obscure a very important truth Jesus is telling us: We have a choice here: to stay connected and thrive or to choose to be cut off and to wither away. The choice is between life or death.

The world is full of shallow ways to invest our lives. And our western culture teaches us

that salvation lies in working to become an enlightened self through education and through our own efforts to succeed.

These things are not bad. But they are not enough. They are not an end in themselves. They are simply gardening tools for using what God has in mind for us to do.

The tragedy of modern society today is that there are thousands upon thousands of successful, well-educated, enlightened people living cut off from any source of spiritual strength, any source of meaning for all of their efforts, any extended family community where they are named, known, shepherded, tended and pruned —called to account—for their own wellbeing.

As they grow older that ultimately discover they are dispensable—like a fast food container that is thrown out when the food is gone.

Whatever great machine of activity they have devoted their lives to—whatever great enterprise of business, commerce, institution of education, community or government will go on without them and they will soon be forgotten—if not dispensed with in short order once they are no longer needed.

How many—after giving their best efforts feel duped or betrayed later in life? And yet how many human enterprises have the capacity to do what only God can do?

Only God can provide ultimate meaning and purpose to life.

Perhaps it is we ourselves who have engaged in self-deception with our misplaced allegiance in these human organizations.

If our allegiance was to a greater resource for goodness and truth and life—to the power of God—then all we do in these other places where we spend our lives will not define us so much as WE will make God-informed contributions to them-- because our true life is in the True Vine.

It is in being connected to the true vine that we are able to bear much fruit.

And what does it mean to be productive? Jesus tells us in this gospel: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit---“and what is that fruit?

Brilliant loners like Robert Langdon, the hero in the Da Vinci Code, don't make much of a contribution to a community that is trying to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind (Luke 4:18), or peaceful relations among the nations of the world.

To do the work of Christ requires self-giving with other self-givers in commitment, coordination, service and generosity—a whole family community pulling together—not occasional flashes of brilliance and daring individual efforts.

To be true disciples, we need to love one another, just as Jesus has loved us (John 15:12) and together share that love with the world. Model it so others can benefit—so others can get connected to the life giving source of God through Jesus Christ.

Memorial, our purpose statement as a church is to “show and tell Jesus' love everywhere.” We identify ourselves to the world as the “show and tell” church.

We show and tell God's love in Jesus when we do as he did. When we engage in projects and actions that provide life-giving opportunities for others such as the community garden, such as our new Hmong church start up, such as sharing our facilities with the Korean United Methodist Congregation, such as our monthly Healing ministry service, such as working with Love Inc. to feed the hungry with the food pantry, and cloth the needy through the Mission Thrift Shop, or through those of you who tutor the Hmong students at HART Academy or serve on HART's Board, or who attend the Fresno Metro Ministry sponsored forums on public issues such as childcare or health care reform, or who go annually to the Empty Bowls banquet to feed the hungry, --

---or who do countless things in this community through your every day work such as hire those coming through welfare to work

programs through the country human resources programs in your business,

--or who remember each and every day that you are a disciple of Jesus as you go about handling people's finances with integrity, or serving in medical facilities with compassion and competence, or teach in the public schools with dedication to the sparrows with broken wings and not just the shining stars.... Or check in on your elderly neighbor regularly and bring that person dinner or go for their groceries.

And then come here on to join with all the other branches of this part of the vine of Christ to “report in” for praise and worship and renewal for another week of service. This is what it means to stay connected to the life giving vine of Jesus. This is what it means to “show and tell Jesus love everywhere.”

“As Martin Luther King said so well, ‘Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.’ The love of God. The secret of the Vine code –that we are all God's children, called and gifted to serve is not a secret to suppress—it isn't a secret at all but a gift for the whole world!