

The Garden Does Da Vinci

11 June 2006

Bible passage: **Matthew 17:20** (*The Message*)

Jesus said, "The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain "move!" and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn't be able to tackle."

Sermon nugget: Why do some consider the *DaVinci Code* as attacking the Christian faith? Where do we come down? It's good to question our faith, and find our own way to trust God.

Message part 1

I don't get it; I just don't get it. How many of you have read *The DaVinci Code*? Did you like it? Not like it? Frankly, it's not my kind of book—I'm not a thriller kind of person, but I thought it was a good read. But I don't get it—I don't get all the controversy.

Granted, I don't know a whole lot about art, and don't have full appreciation for it. I don't remember very much of my church history, so I can't speak to any historically-true data. I know nothing about the Opus Dei, one group that gets a bad rap in the book. I do know a little bit about how the sacred feminine in theology the role of women in the church have been kept under wraps and oppressed by the church for centuries, because that's been a topic of interest to me.

When I did my doctoral work, it was on the role of women in leadership in the church, and I did quite a bit of Biblical and historical research on that subject. The role of women has been understated through *almost* all Biblical writings (not all, but almost), and yet, there is some historical evidence that woman played a major role in supporting and even financing the ministry of Jesus. To my surprise, they are mentioned in a significant way in the writings of Paul, one who often seems opposed to women having a voice at all. So, from that little exposure, I felt that Dan Brown's representation of feminist theology was fairly accurate.

Nonetheless, I don't get all the controversy that's been going on, and is happening again with the release of the movie. I can't begin to tell you how many articles I've read with varying viewpoints on what Brown has written. I've read the book, and our Worship team had an outing to see the movie.

I guess what is most confusing to me is why everyone is attacking Brown and his facts. Wasn't this book on the bestseller list in the fiction category? It has never claimed to be nonfiction and totally factual, so I fail to understand why some segments of Christianity are so condemnatory toward the book and the movie.

Many actually see it as undermining the Christian faith, and find it very threatening to orthodoxy, but I'm not sure I understand why. Because it plants questions in our minds? Because it doesn't tout the party line? Because it may mean something other than acquiescence to the status quo?

Because people are afraid to be challenged? Why has all this been going on, almost to the extreme?

Tom Ehrich, in one of his Saturday columns, made a good point about *The Da Vinci Code*. He wrote, "Yes, it calls into question some doctrines and institutional decisions made in the early Christian era. But recent scholarship suggests those doctrines and decisions need to be questioned, because they distorted the Gospel to build a church."

He continued by saying, "...Much that was true about Jesus was lost, useful writings were discarded, male hierarchy took control and an apparatus worthy of Caesar replaced the circles of friends Jesus had formed." Do the "powers that be" in the church feel threatened by the exposure of such knowledge? Is it striking too close to the truth of the matter?

Not being one who is upset by the controversy makes it tough for me to speak on their behalf. However, I think part of it has to do with the authority of the church coming into question. Part of it may have to do with some questioning the Bible and how it was put together. Some believe that God revealed all that was necessary and that it is all contained in the Bible as we have it today. Those who take the Bible as absolute fact probably feel a little threatened by challenges to what they believe the Bible says.

However, what little I do recall of the councils that actually decided what was in and what was out of the Bible does make some of it a little suspicious. Frankly, believing that the Bible was written and also put together by human beings like you and me can put some of what we find there in question. Maybe, instead of insisting that we are so "right" on every issue, we might be better off to be open to some different possibilities.

As you may have assumed by now, I'm in a little different place from all those who are upset by *The Da Vinci Code*, and I thought, for whatever it's worth, I'd share where I come down on all of it. Many of you can guess what that is. In a nutshell, it's that it's OK to wonder about all that we have heard and have been told about the faith.. It's OK to explore our own beliefs more closely. It's OK to accept some and reject some of the traditional tenets of the faith. It's OK to be open to other possibilities as ways for God to reach us and be at work in our world. As far as I'm concerned, faith is a journey that only comes as we struggle and question and make our faith our own.

Part of my understanding is that our faith, our relationship with God is fluid and grows and changes as we grow and change. Certainly, most of us don't believe some of the same things we thought about faith or anything else that we believed when we were five or ten or 15. We grow in maturity and understanding, and our connection with God is changed by those changes. It's not that God changes; it's that we do.

There's something else that causes me to wonder what all this controversy is about. Those who are most upset seem to feel that what God has revealed are some essential truths, and that faith is about accepting those truths. It was all said and done, and we can find it in the pages of the Bible and in the orthodox proclamations of the church.

I don't believe that. I don't believe God quit revealing God's purpose and direction for us centuries ago, but continues to be active in our world and in our lives today. God is still communicating with us, and I, for one, believe that what we're experiencing today is relevant to our faith formation. That's called 'continuing revelation,' and it's about the fact that God continues to reveal Godself to us every day and in every way.

So what if, maybe, just maybe, some of the things that Brown suggests are true? Could that be? I'm not suggesting that's the case, but how do we know God and God's will today?

Elaine Pagels, who's one of the world's most important writers and thinkers on religion and history, was recently interviewed on NPR. In her interview, she said, "**He (meaning Dan Brown) raise the big what-ifs. What if the version of Jesus' life that Christians are taught isn't the right one? And perhaps as troubling in a still-patriarchal church: What if Mary Magdalene played a more important role in Jesus' life than we've been led to believe, not as his wife perhaps, but as a beloved and valued disciple?** Is our faith in God deep enough and firm enough to withstand some of those kinds of questions. I would hope so.

Obviously, I'm speaking from my own experience, and I wouldn't be here today if I hadn't gone through a lot of struggling with what the church has traditionally offered as truth. Years ago, long before I entered ministry, I read a book which opened my eyes to a whole new understanding of my faith. It was a classic entitled *The Christian Agnostic*, written by Leslie Weatherhead.

The author said something in the introduction to the book that gave me the permission I needed to start questioning and struggling on my own. He urged his readers not to discard everything, just because we don't believe this or that about something. Rather, put whatever we have trouble with in a metal box awaiting further light, light that may be from God's further revelation. I don't have a metal box, but I do have a shelf, which is stacked full of faith issues that are awaiting further light. Occasionally, something that's been on the shelf comes down, and gets incorporated into my core beliefs, but the shelf remains laden with all kinds of things which haven't yet seen the light.

VIDEO: Last segment on DaVinci

Message part 2

How do we figure this all out? Where do we begin to formulate our own belief system? I have to admit that there aren't always a lot of things that I like about being a United

Methodist, but one of the things I do like is our emphasis on how we work out our own beliefs through something we call the "quadrilateral."

Let me explain what that is. We claim that there are four foundational pieces on which we build our faith: scripture, tradition, reason, experience. Scripture is what we find in the Bible, but it is stated that scripture is understood in the light of higher Biblical criticism. That means that we incorporate some of the scholarly understandings that have come over the years through intense prayer and study.

Tradition refers to what the church has historically said throughout the centuries. Reason means that you and I have a brain and intellect that we are to use, and experience means that we value what we have learned and discovered as we have lived our own lives. If we are at a place to be trying to discern what we believe, I think these four are a good starting place.

The real heart of the matter is whether or not we have a relationship with God that is life-changing. All the doctrines and dogmas are worthless, if we don't have the vital connection with God. Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, writes about this very thing. He says that the common understanding of Christianity is that faith is all about holding a certain set of "beliefs," and "believing" that this set of statements is true. He writes, "**The preoccupation with "believing" and "beliefs" has a crucially important effect: it turns Christian faith into a "head matter." Faith becomes primarily a matter of the beliefs in your head—of whether you believe the right set of claims to be true.**"

He asserts that head beliefs are not what faith is all about. Rather, he tells his readers that faith, at its roots, is about matters of the heart, not of the head. He says that, in the Bible and in the early Christian tradition, the "heart" is the metaphor that best captures what faith is all about. He writes, "**Faith is not very much about believing. Instead faith is about the relationship of the self at its deepest level to God.**" Faith is really "**radical trust in God.**" That means that we trust in God as the one upon whom we rely.

Jesus talked about our faith being our source of strength and courage. In our Bible passage, he said, "**The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain "move!" and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn't be able to tackle.**"

That's what's essential; that's what's important—our faith and radical trust in God, the one who never, ever fails us.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us will be open enough to question and struggle with our faith, and make it our own, not someone else's.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.