

## Truthiness vs. Truth

John 15:9-17

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

We begin today with forgeries, fallacies, and fakes. They have all been used to attack the Gospel from the First Century until now. We'll take up two examples from this century, *The Da Vinci Code* and the "Gospel of Judas."

*The Da Vinci Code* is a mystery thriller written by Dan Brown (2004), based on the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, had a child, and their bloodline continued through history. The book became a massive bestseller and was translated into forty-four languages and made into a hit movie. As of 2009 over 80 million copies of the book had been sold. To be sure, the book was panned by many as second-rate. One British reviewer called it a "load of codswallop," that is, a heap of hokum and nonsense.

Nevertheless, it was hugely popular. Why?

To be sure, Christians around the world pointed out the many historical and scientific inaccuracies in it. There were about forty-five books written against it. Nevertheless, the book took on a life of its own that is still with us today.

Consider also the "Gospel of Judas," which was discovered in a cave in Egypt in the 1970's. It's not a forgery. Not a fake. It dates from about 150 A.D. It was around in the church. Ireneus called it an "invented history" from a long line of heretics. The "Gospel of Judas" was released to the public in 2006 to great fanfare, as if there was something new here that challenged and changed Christianity.

Why are people so intrigued by such materials? Four reasons:

**First**, people like a chase, a thriller, a puzzle, and *The Da Vinci Code* provides all three. Along with that there is an enormous ignorance of history. I'm not talking about obscure history. There's ignorance about the Bible; we all know that. But there's also enormous ignorance about history in general. People just don't learn history anymore.

Because people don't know much about real history, they're easily fooled by false history. *The Da Vinci Code* is based on an alleged, secret, French brotherhood called "The Priory of Sion." This, too, is completely invented, a complete fabrication, and the fellow who fabricated it in 1956 even forged documents to go with it. He admitted it was all fake. But many people who have read *The Da Vinci Code* think it just must be true.

We should all know about some of the huge falsehoods in the *Da Vinci Code*. One is what it says about the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed. We use the Nicene Creed regularly in worship and talk about its importance. As you know, in 325 A.D. Emperor Constantine

called the leaders of the church together, the bishops and others, and said: "I want you to find a unity among yourselves."

But this is not what is said in *The Da Vinci Code*. What the book says is that the Constantine imposed this creed, and that it was patriarchal over against a more feminine view of God. This is all a lot of hokum.

The early church had been working on this creed for at least two hundred years, and by the time the Council of Nicea met, they had agreed on all but one or two differing positions. What *The Da Vinci Code* says about the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed is totally untrue. And it's of utmost importance because it is about the Gospel and salvation.

Who was Jesus? Not a prophet, not just another one as in *The Da Vinci Code*, but true God and man, as the Nicene Creed confesses. The fact of the matter is, as C.S. Lewis famously said: You can't make Jesus out to be a teacher or a leader. Either Jesus was who he said he was, or he was crazy. There is no alternative of another sort.

And then there's the matter of the development of the New Testament over several hundred years, and the excluding of apocryphal books and gnostic gospels like the "Gospel of Judas," the "Gospel of Mary," etc. There were about eighty such gnostic gospels floating around in those early centuries. There are apocryphal Book of Acts, apocryphal books of Revelation, and apocryphal letters of Paul. Scholars have known all about that for a long time. There is nothing new in the "Gospel of Judas." It's all old stuff.

The New Testament canon, as it developed over many years, came by a process of asking: **Where is the truth of the Gospel?** When you read the "Gospel of Mary" and the "Gospel of Judas," you find they are entirely different stuff. They quickly get boring because they are gnostic, which means they go like this: What you need is that secret knowledge, which is hidden in you because matter is evil and spirit is good. This hidden spark of divinity in you needs to be educated, enlightened.

**In Gnostic gospels and letters, the cross is put on the side.**

The battle to root out Gnosticism was the most serious battle the church ever faced, and it almost lost.

**The second big thing** is conspiracy theories. People love a conspiracy, and in fact, Dan Brown even has a line in *The Da Vinci Code* which says: "Everybody loves a conspiracy."

Daniel Henninger, of the *Wall Street Journal*, writes this about *The Da Vinci Code*:

"Here's my theory of *The Da Vinci Code*: Dan Brown was sitting one night in the monthly meeting of his local secret society, listening to a lecture on the sixty-fifth gospel, and he got to thinking: 'I wonder if there is any limit to what people will believe these days about a conspiracy?' Let's say I wrote a book that said Jesus was married to Mary

Magdalene, who was pregnant at the crucifixion, and she is the holy grail. Jesus wanted her to run the church as a global sex society. Peter held her out of the job. Her daughter is the beginning of the Merovingian Dynasty of France. Jesus' family is still alive. There were eighty gospels. Da Vinci knew all about this. The Mona Lisa is the painting of himself in drag. His secret was kept alive by future members of the brotherhood, the secret society. Dan Brown said softly to himself: 'Would anybody buy into a plot so preposterous?' Then he started writing."

Everybody loves a conspiracy, and that's really dangerous because when they don't know history, they don't have any way of sorting it out.

**This leads to the third point.** Throughout *The Da Vinci Code* there is an attack on Catholics, but it is also an attack on Christianity. Specifically in one place it's an attack on monotheism. Monotheism, believing in one God, is said to be the source of all kinds of oppression and patriarchy. Finally, the book is against all authority.

**And that leads to the fourth and final point** which is the most important. Basic to this book is a line which comes in a comment by the hero, Langdon, to the heroine Sophie, where he says: "What is important is what **you** believe about it." This is why we have this phenomenon of 80 million copies and massive, worldwide publicity. It's the question of what truth is about.

Have you heard the word "truthiness"? "Truthiness" means something which sounds true, but may not be, or may be something we want to be true, so we say it is. It's soothing and selfish. Everything depends on what **you** believe about it. It's also the attitude that we're superior to all who have gone before us, so we know better; we've figured it all out.

"Truthiness" is why people talk about ancient Gnosticism being alive and well today, not exactly as it was in second and Third Centuries, but in the cult of the self and the cultivation of the self. That raises the question of what truth is about, and the answer given is: Truth is whatever **you** believe about it. This is why *The Da Vinci Code* has had such importance.

There are some basic things to be said here. The first has to do with philosophy. The whole approach of relativism (deconstructionism) is over. That kind of philosophy has come to a dead end, not because a new one has come in its place, but because it doesn't go anywhere. For example, when someone says: "I think Shakespeare was a poor writer and he doesn't do anything," that tells us nothing about Shakespeare but a lot about the person who said it. But it doesn't say anything about Shakespeare's importance and his place. Of course, relativistic thinking is still around because there are still professors at colleges and universities who have tenure and who will be around for a long time. But in the bigger picture, that way of thinking is over.

The second thing is what G.K. Chesterton said: "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything." Most of all what people end up believing is a wrong view of natural science and psychology, which is the "religion" among us and goes like this: I believe in my truth, my experience, forgetting what Luther often emphasized from Paul, 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

When you and I say: I feel, I know, and my experience is what I hang on to, that's really wrong and dangerous. What is it that we hang on to? Here we have in the Gospel text for today this striking place in John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." That is to say: "It doesn't depend on whether I have an experience. People have all kinds of experiences. People have mountain top experiences and devastating experiences. I can be in the depth of depression and despair and clinically mentally confused. It doesn't matter because it doesn't depend on me; it depends on him. Thank God. Otherwise we'd be in trouble.

We have then this very great message that the truth of the Gospel is **that which he does**, and it doesn't depend on us, and therefore we can proclaim our certainty and freedom and live as his children in comfort and hope. Amen