

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN
The Disciple Jesus Loved
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When I saw we were using another Adam Hamilton Bible Study this Lenten Season, I had to do some thinking. Adam Hamilton has built the largest Methodist enterprise in these United States, himself a book-selling machine. Fun fact: St. Andrew's lead pastor-elect, Bruce Emmert, is Adam Hamilton's District Superintendent. What insight might I have to the Gospel of John that wouldn't be redundant to the Adam Hamilton study? Well, maybe one thing....

Leonardo DaVinci's "The Last Supper" is said to freeze frame John chapter 13, verse 21, Jesus having declared, "Verily I say unto you, one of you will betray me."

Who's who among the apostles is found in DaVinci's notebook. The twelve guys are arranged in groups of three. Per the web site: [Quora](#), the first trio, to Jesus' far right: "Bartholomew, James the Less and Andrew are all surprised." Depending on how things go with the new pastor, I may be remembered as Bruce the Less, which would be okay. The lesser James had a place at the table and, really, who could ask for anything more?

Group two: "Judas Iscariot is taken back, Peter takes a knife and looks stormy, while the boyish John, youngest of the apostles, simply swoons." FYI—and this is relevant: The idea that John was the youngest of the apostles seems to have no Biblical foundation.

Group 3, to Jesus' immediate left: "Thomas is upset, James is shocked, Philip wants an explanation." Finally: "Jude Thaddeus and Matthew turn to Simon the Zealot for answers."

Interesting to think, then and now, I guess, that in unsettled times, people seem to naturally turn to zealots, who do have a way of presenting themselves as having all the answers. Note DaVinci put this zealot at the far end of the table. Whether it's the far left or far right depends on your perspective.

Anyway, such is the conventional interpretation of DaVinci's masterpiece. Little did I know, until I read Dan Brown's book that old Leonardo was in fact communicating in code; his tableau actually intended to reveal the secret of the Holy Grail.

Said grail is traditionally identified as the cup/chalice Jesus passed among the apostles at what's remembered as the Last Supper, saying, "Drink from this, all of you, this the blood of my covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin." Legend has it that the same cup was later taken to Golgotha, the place of the crucifixion. A sword having pierced Jesus' side, his blood was gathered in the Holy Grail.

The Knights of King Arthur, Medieval Crusaders, more recently Monty Python and Indiana Jones, all undertook quests to find that Grail.

According to Dan Brown, DaVinci's painting contains a secret: The Grail guys were looking in the wrong place; indeed, for the wrong object. Look at the painting. Do you see a chalice on the table? 'Taint one in front of Jesus, that's for sure.

Pause for some Bible Study: If DaVinci is indeed capturing the moment in John 13:21, there wouldn't have necessarily been a cup in the picture in the first place. Whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus sharing the bread and cup, thereby instituting the Lord's Supper, John's account makes only passing mention to the meal. In John's telling, the sacramental portion of the evening comes after supper, as Jesus washes the apostles' feet, telling them that as he has washed their feet, so should they wash the feet of others.

Having something of a personal aversion to the human foot, chiding folks for wearing sandals to staff meeting (I really have no interest in seeing people's toes), I am personally happy to be of a tradition that passes the bread and cup and dispenses with foot washings. But that's just me.

It's only after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and returned to the table that he makes the declaration, "One of you will betray me." Jesus does then take a morsel of bread, and "dip it"—into a cup of wine, I suppose. But said morsel is offered to only one of the apostles, that being Judas, Jesus thereby communicating "I know what you're up to, dude."

None of this deters Dan Brown from his conspiracy theory. Our hero, Harvard Professor of Religious Symbology Robert Langdon, has been framed for murder in the Louvre, pursued not only by French law enforcement, but a murderous albino priest, agent of the shadowy Priory of Sion.

Langdon is aided in his escape by the lovely Sophie Neveu. I had a whole section here about the significance of the New Sophia's name, but it took me far afield, without adding to the primary focus of our discussion. So we move on...

Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu make their way to the palatial residence of Sir Leigh Tibbing, considered THE expert in all things related to the Holy Grail. Tibbing scoffs at the notion the Holy Grail is a cup. It is, he explains, the feminine principle in the Godhead. That was news to me. I did an internet search and found the following on Witch.com:

The Holy Grail is the divine mother's womb, filled to the brim with life force, with eternal love, and with the sangreal (sacred blood).... This indicates that the compassion and wisdom of 'Christ Consciousness' is rooted in devotion to the sacred feminine.

If they didn't teach you that in Sunday School, Sophie Neveu is right there with you...

VIDEO: “The DaVinci Code

SN: Wait, please. You’re saying the Holy Grail is a person? A Woman?

LT: And it turns out, she makes an appearance. Right there.

SN: They were men.

LT: Are they? What about the figure at the right hand of our Lord, seated in the place of honor. Flowing red hair, folded feminine hands, hint of a bosom.

It’s called scotoma

The mind sees what it chooses to see

SN: Who is she?

LT: My dear, that’s Mary Magdalene.

SN: The prostitute?

LT: She was no such thing. Smearred by the church in 591 Anno Domino. Magdalene was Jesus’ wife.

I have imaged the apostle John sitting in the multiplex movie theatre, maybe with his brother James (the greater, not the less), munching on some popcorn with a diet coke, coming to this part of the film, leaning over to James, whispering: “Are they saying I looked like a woman?”

This is the fourth installment in a four-year Lenten preaching project through the gospel accounts of the life and times of Jesus. Some speculated, when I first announced this, back in 2015, I might be intending to coordinate the series with retirement, and while I wasn’t necessarily locked into that, it did enter my thinking. We’d do Matthew in 2015, Mark in ’16, Luke in ’17, culminating with John’s Gospel in 2018, which would take me to 44 years in public ministry.

Home run king Hank Aaron wore #44; I ran the mile in high school, a mile being four times around a 440 yard track. I didn’t always win, but I always finished. Coach said it mattered less whether we won or lost, so much as that we threw up at the end, as that was a sign of maximum effort. 44 years sounded about right.

I wanted to spend my last St. Andrew's Christmas Eve in the Gospel According John. As said at the time, I've been long fascinated by the source material of the Christmas story. Mark, who's gospel was surely the first written, starts with Jesus baptized in the Jordan River, circa age 30, making no mention whatsoever of his infancy. The beloved images of Christmas are found in Matthew and Luke: Matthew telling the story through Joseph and the Wise Men; Luke via Mary and the Shepherds.

Not that John was necessarily down on shepherds and angels, but maybe he figured Matthew and Luke had already done that. Right out of the gate, verse one, chapter one, John goes metaphysical,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

And so we sang with Joan Osborne:

*What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home
Like a Holy Rolling Stone.*

This, too: Working with John in the Lenten Season of 2018 would give me all the excuse I needed to spend my final Easter in public ministry with perhaps my all-time favorite personal musical project, originally presented on Easter Sunday 2009, "All You Need Is Love."

There are 21 chapters in John's gospel. Half the book, chapters 12-21, is devoted to the period from Palm Sunday, through the crucifixion and resurrection. "All You Need Is Love" is John's Holy Week narrative set to the songs of the Beatles, revised lyrics by my own self, featuring a terrific team of vocalists and the rocking and rollinest church band in Christendom. Is this not the Gospel of John in a nutshell: God loves you, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!

So from the standpoint of long range planning, The Gospel of John in 2018 looked ideal for my purpose. However, in the course of working with the other gospel guys—Mark in 15, Matthew in 16, Luke last year, I began to get a little... uneasy.

I'd Googled a whole lot of Gospel quartet images and was surprised to find that DaVinci's rather effeminate picture of John was by no means a one-off. From stained glass to Renaissance Art, John kept showing up as what Hans and Franz would call a "girlie man."

Being a curious guy, I Googled the question, "Why Did The Apostle John Look Like A Girl?" Can't say I expected to find anything. Just asking seemed heretical. But, in fact, the very same is addressed on John's primo-Wikipedia page.

In Medieval works of painting, sculpture and literature, St. John is often presented in an androgynous or feminized manner. For instance, John's feminine features are argued to have helped make him more relatable to women.

Please understand, I'm not making any judgments here--just reporting...

Likewise, Sara McNamer argues that because of his status as an androgynous saint, John could function as an image of a 'third or mixed gender,' and a crucial figure with whom to identify for male believers who sought to cultivate an attitude of affective piety, a highly emotional style of devotion that, in late-medieval culture, was thought to be poorly compatible with masculinity.

Real men don't pray....

Full disclosure: I grew up in small towns where it was assumed the Preacher's Boy must be a sissy. Let's smack him and see if he turns the other cheek! And let's face it, to this day, a lot of folks don't see what I'm doing as a manly undertaking.

When I started out in ministry, I was serving rural congregations that were big into carry-in fellowship suppers. They always insisted I go first, which was polite, I guess, but then came the children, then the men got their food and went off by themselves, and the women got their food and went off by themselves, leaving me largely to myself.

One could almost get the idea the pup preacher was seen as a "third or mixed gender." Which is to say, I likely bring something of a personal agenda to this discussion, even if I'm not entirely sure how to identify it. Back to Wikipedia...

After the middle-ages, feminized portraits of St. John continued to be made, a case in point is an etching by Jacques Bellange...

Goodness gracious...

Let's make something perfectly clear. In one of my 2017 Christmas sermons, I looked at pictures of Jesus, noting that the Bible makes no mention whatsoever of his physicality, other than an ancient prophecy the Messiah wouldn't be much to look at. Given his ethnicity, we can be fairly certain Jesus didn't have blue eyes and blonde hair, but beyond that is mere speculation.

Likewise, there's no mention in the Bible remotely suggesting what John or any of the apostles looked like. Goodness, as Mark tells it, Jesus nicknamed John and his brother James "Sons of Thunder." CAN I GET A THUNDER SOUND EFFECT? How did a Son of Thunder evolve into a lingerie model?

Digging around, some of this seems to have been extrapolated from John's own testimony. /// Turn to John Chapter 19, starting at verse 26. Jesus having been arrested, condemned and crucified, the varsity apostles have abandoned him, the one exception being John (that's him to the right, I think), self-described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

A short digression. One of the things I'm hearing about Bruce Emmert is that he's skilled at working with staff—something no one, least of all myself, has ever suggested is a strength of Bruce the First. My model: Hire the best people we can, turn them loose to do their job, and hope they don't turn on me.

I have found it oddly comforting to read that Jesus himself had some staffing issues, our friend John and his brother James being part of the group dysfunction.

As Mark tells it, on the eve of the grand entry into Jerusalem, the brothers come to Jesus, asking one little favor. What's that? "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left when you come into your glory."

In Matthew's telling, the approach was made, not by the brothers themselves, but by their mother. I bet the other guys had fun with that: Mama's boys... Whatever. Jesus said such was not his to grant.

Of course, word got out to the other ten, who went into a collective snit. In Luke's telling, concern for rank was hardly exclusive to James and John. Jesus called a team meeting and told them to cut it out. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." What part of "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" don't you understand?

I just finished a wonderful book by Michael Korda on the commencement of World War II, “**Alone: Britain, Churchill and Dunkirk: Defeat Into Victory.**” (Side note: Is not the Jesus story itself all about defeat into victory?) Korda writes of angry exchange between Churchill and Russian Dictator Joseph Stalin, Stalin saying, “History will be the judge of this,” to which Churchill, a prolific historian, responded, “History will judge me kindly, for I intend to write it.”

Likewise, when John wrote his history of the life and times of Jesus, this was a recurrent theme: Jesus really did like me best. No less than six times in his gospel account, does John refer to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” including this passage, beneath the cross of Jesus, chapter 19, starting at verse 25:

Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clophas, and Mary Magdalene

Pause here: Leah Tibbing was right about this: Mary Magdalene should not be confused with a prostitute. Granted, there are a lot of Marys in the New Testament and it’s hard to keep them straight, but we’re talking two different women who, for whatever reason, seem to have gotten fused in later church tradition. Perhaps I should add, there’s no Biblical foundation for the idea Magdalene was Jesus’ wife. Back to the book:

/// When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour on the disciple took her into his own home.

I suspect John would be astonished to think the passage just read would license future generations to put him in women’s clothing. Talking it over with Nancy at the dinner table, she said it was likely assumed that because John was sensitive and caring, he must not a manly man.

Among the recurrent news headlines of the day: Men behaving badly. As a self-avowed practicing heterosexual male, I've followed the #MeToo movement with considerable interest. There's no part of me that begins to understand the behaviors of a Harvey Weinstein or Louis C.K. Exposing yourself? Really? I certainly shed no tears for Matt Lauer and other serial predators. Hey, young intern, come into my office, I want to show you something.

Among the #MeToo stories that made a particular impression: Salma Hayek's account of trying to get "Frida" made in the face of relentless pressure for sexual favors.

For that matter, I saw some of you hash tagging MeToo on Facebook and regretted the harm done by my gender.

I'm not going to stand up here and suggest I understand. As a guy, I doubt I can. Read somewhere, "Men are afraid women will make fun of them. Women are afraid men will kill them."

That said, it's a tad alarming to see men thrown to the curb for what would seem to be far less egregious offenses. If we're moving toward a future where a man can't compliment a woman on her new haircut, or say, "you look nice today," it really is good that I'm retiring.

If the language of the MeToo movement, particularly as regards power in the workplace, is new to you, it's certainly familiar to Methodist clergy. There's a touch of irony here. When I was in seminary, 40-plus years ago, I got high marks for scholarship, with demerits for intimacy or lack thereof. We were supposed to reach out and touch someone and I was downgraded for being a poor hugger.

Then maybe thirty years ago, with an epidemic of Methodist clergy getting excited for inappropriate behavior, the church did a 180: STOP TOUCHING! For decades now, Methodist clergy have been mandated to attend boundary training seminars, heavy on sexual ethics. The working definition of sexual harassment: Anything perceived as sexual harassment IS sexual harassment. Which is kind of a chilling thought to persons of my demographic, but there it is.

I should add, in cases of complaint, the Methodist church affords clergy "due process," something notably lacking in the current cultural climate.

Anyway, when those Access Hollywood tapes were released, then-candidate Trump heard talking very crudely about women (Pause to note, such might have gained more traction for Candidate Clinton if she was not herself married to a famous womanizer, Hillary having publically discredited Bill's accusers), I was listening to well-known radio personality explaining that what was heard on those tapes was just locker room talk, common to male interaction. I hope not. I've been in plenty of locker rooms and don't recall guys talking that way in high school.

The man on the radio went on to say that not only is this kind of talk common among men, chicks in fact like it! They may say they want a sensitive man, but what they really want is something else entirely. As one famously inept when it comes to understanding women, I can't entirely discount the possibility.

I recall Joanie Sommers' lament about her guy, a nice guy named Johnny—maybe too nice. She tells Johnny they are through, just to see what he would do. This is only a test. He stood there and hung his head, made her wish that she was dead. And it gets worse.....

Every time you dance with me
 You let Freddy cut in constantly
 When he'd ask, you never speak
 Must you always be so meek

Johnny get angry, Johnny get mad
 Give me the biggest lecture I've ever had
 I want a brave man, I want a cave man
 O Johnny won't you show me that you care really care for me.

As is my want with any discussion of gender issues, I asked Nancy to look at this part of the sermon. She said she always thought that song was silly, taking particular umbrage at the part about wanting to be lectured--not that I would ever be so foolish as to try to lecture her. (Gals, I would add that guys don't like to be "lectured" any more than you do.) That said, Nancy acknowledged she'd lose patience with a man who let another "cut in constantly." I believe these were her words exactly: "The meek may inherit the earth, but they aren't likely to get many girlfriends."

A couple of weeks ago, my bride and I shared a sermon for Valentine's Weekend, using material from the Jon Gray book, "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus." In the first wave of #MeToo, I saw a spate of articles suggesting we need to set about raising "sweet boys," have them playing with dolls, etc. One could almost get the idea some want to depopulate Mars entirely.

I say this with Nancy having read it in advance. While my bride deeply appreciates thoughtfulness and will not tolerate crude behavior, she'd be the first to admit there's just so much "sweetness" should could abide from the man to whom she's married. She's got plenty of girlfriends. What Nancy needs and wants from me is to be the best Martian I can be.

The part of Mars I come from, there's no higher expression of manhood than respect for women. Guys, if you've behaving badly, it's no joke. Stop it.

And I will say this to the gals: If you are blessed with a nice guy, don't take him for granted. Trying to be a decent man in a culture that seems to reward the crude, the loud, the boastful, is harder than it looks. Show him that you care, really care for him.

Back to the disciple Jesus loved. Sing with me, would you...

Jesus loves me this I know
 For the Bible tells me so
 Little ones to him belong
 They are weak but he is strong

Yes, Jesus loves me
 Yes, Jesus loves me
 Yes, Jesus loves me
 The Bible tells me so

Googling the internet, one finds a second set of Apostle John portraitures. When he is not being shown as a soft young man, he is depicted as a stern old man. Among the favorite themes is John on Patmos. A couple of years ago, we spent a season with the Book of Revelation, written by John in exile, him looking from his island prison across the Aegean Straits to the mainland of Asia Minor.

Tradition has it he was the only apostle to reach old age, the others having been killed off in various martyrdoms. He is generally credited with five books of the New Testament: first the gospel bearing his name; last Revelation; in between three pastoral letters. The first of the trio of epistles has been particularly influential. You may be familiar with this passage, 1 John 4, starting at verse 7:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love is revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

We love because he first loved us.

I read somewhere that God loves each of us as an only child. I can hear John speaking through the ages, even to you and me: "Of course, I was the disciple Jesus loved. Aren't you?"

BRD