

About this time of the year, because of Valentine’s Day, there’s an epidemic of TV commercials for jewelry stores.

There’s one in particular; I’m sure you know it – the tag line is “He went to Jared’s!” He’s given his valentine a ring, a necklace - You’ve got proof positive in your hands that he really loves you – he went to Jared’s!

I wonder what it would be like if we adapted that commercial for us as Christians – to follow you around during the week, to see what you give to other people, and would they say about you: He went to Jesus!

I mean, people know about other aspects of our life – she went to the beauty shop, he went to the game, they went to the beach, but do they know by the way you act, by what you give them – that you have gone to Jesus?

John had ‘gone to Jesus’, and he writes in this letter how out of the heart of Jesus came the evidence of his love for all kinds of people, and his refusal to give up on any of us.

John is grateful for that love and for that refusal. He writes, “As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us.”

By the way you love other people – that’s what John is telling us – love is the work of the Christian faith; the product of the Christian faith.

“For this is the original message: We should love one another...let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love.”

There’s a story of a teacher, a rather stout lady, who would punish her unruly students by slapping them on the hand with a ruler. The big boys in her class would just kind of laugh it off when she did it to them.

One day, one of the big boys did something and stuck his hand out for the customary slap on the hand. But she surprised him; she went over and picked that boy up and started hugging him, hugged him tight!

The class started laughing, and she hugged him even more and said, “I’m gonna love you into doing good!”

That, I believe, is the force of the work of Jesus, the love that was in the life of Jesus, to love us into doing good.

The more we love, the deeper we move into life with Christ. I picture three degrees of this love, to move deeper by degree into life with Jesus, to keep his commands.

We start at the first degree, the great commandment: “Love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus told a story about this first degree of love in the story of the Good Samaritan – Leviticus 19 - a fundamental love that includes the alien, the stranger, the enemy.

Do you remember the great musical, “South Pacific”? In one scene, Lt. John Cable, from an old family in Philadelphia, has fallen in love with a Polynesian girl.

But he knows his family back home would not accept her because she wasn’t ‘their kind of people.’

He sings a song, “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught,” and says this hate of others is not “born in you! It happens after you’re born...you’ve got to be carefully taught!”

In this teaching about the first degree of love, loving others as we love ourselves, Jesus shows

us, on one side of the road, how people are taught to hate others, the ugliness of it all.

But Jesus would have us learn this first degree of love by doing it, as he says at the end of the Good Samaritan story: Go and do.

The first degree of love – Love God, love others as you love yourself.

But if you want to go deeper into your life with Jesus, you would move into the second degree of love: “love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus loved us more than he loved himself – as John writes: “This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us.”

This second degree of love is sacrificial love – as he gave his life for us, we ought to live sacrificially for others.

Dorothy, a little 6-year old girl was sick, near death, and her only chance of survival was a blood transfusion from someone who had had the disease but conquered it.

That someone happened to be her brother, just a couple of years older. The family and doctor told him the situation and the doctor asked him, “Sammy, would you like to give your blood for Dorothy to be able to live?”

The boy’s lip quivered, he hesitated a moment, then smiled and said, “Sure, ‘I’ll give my blood for my sister.”

Soon, the two children were wheeled into the operating room. Dorothy, pale and thin; Sammy, a picture of health. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Sammy grinned.

As his blood siphoned into Dorothy’s veins, one could almost see new life come into her tired body. The ordeal was almost over when Sammy’s little voice broke the silence, “Doctor, when do I start to die?”

It was only then that the doctor realized what that earlier moment of hesitation was all about.

Sammy actually thought that in giving his blood to his sister, he was giving up his own life! And in that brief moment, he had made his decision!

That’s the life story of Jesus. That’s what it is to love someone else the way Jesus loves you – to lay down your life that others may have life.

What sacrifices are willing to make? Where are your hands and hearts, your lives involved so that others may live?

But we move deeper still into the Christian life, the third degree of love – living in God’s reality, John says, “For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.”

The third degree of love is what I consider unashamed love.

The first church I served was in a small community in Arkansas, and the church housed a school for special-needs children – from developmentally delayed children to children with severe physical disabilities.

There was a meeting one night, parents along with some of the children, and one of the children who suffered unexpected seizures started into a seizure.

I had never really seen anything like it. But what I will never forget is the father of that young boy – picking up his son and carrying him to the back of the room, holding him close to his chest, strong yet gentle grasp, rocking him, whispering to him, doing all he could as the boy endured that seizure.

One thing I noticed most of all was there was no hint of embarrassment or frustration or ‘wish I could be someplace else’ kind of look in that father’s face.

I tell you this story because it has stuck with me for all these years, and I remember in those few days after it happened, I felt God speak to me and in so many words say, “That’s just the way I love you through your own imperfections.

When you fall away, I'm going to pick you up and hold you close through all your pain because I'm not embarrassed, not ashamed to have the world know I love you and you are my child."

I've come to know that it is in the time of my greatest frustrations and my greatest failures, after my most terrible mistakes and seemingly unforgivable things I've done – God draws me near and holds me close and I know that God knows more about me than I know about myself.

And still loves me!

Peter Hungerford, when he was Director of the Natchez Children's Home, shared a story about a problem teenager who was back in his office for the 'umpteenth' time, but Peter said he told that young man, "There is nothing you can do to act your way out of here!"

God loves us with an unashamed love – this third degree of love that remembers being forgiven generously and freely by someone we had wronged, that remembers being comforted and cared for when, bruised and battered, we crept home, that knows what it means to be loved when we know we are unlovable.

Three degrees of love – to what degree are you willing to go so the world will know of your love affair with Jesus Christ?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.