

# Loving God and Neighbor

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**Sermon Series: A  
Community With  
Vision**

**1 John 3:11-18**

***Why do  
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the press?***

**T**his past week I learned plenty of new things about Jesus. I found out Jesus may not have walked on water. I discovered Judas was Jesus' favorite disciple. I learned Jesus was married. Let me walk back through the week with you.

On Tuesday, I learned that Jesus may not have walked on water after all. Scientists announced that a cold snap occurred 2000 years ago that could have turned the Sea of Galilee into ice, as reported in this month's issue of the *Journal of Paleolimnology* (I'm waiting for my copy to arrive in the mail!). When Jesus appeared to his disciples walking on the water, he was actually walking on ice. (I'd say this whole story is treading on thin ice!)

On Thursday, I read a front page article about a study conducted on the obscure Gospel of Judas. National Geographic put this 2nd century Gnostic gospel research on display this week. In this apocryphal gospel, Judas is actually Jesus' favored disciple. He's the one disciple among the 12 who understands Jesus' message. Jesus reveals the deep mysteries of his kingdom exclusively to Judas. When Judas betrays Jesus, he is actually doing Jesus a favor, since Jesus' ultimate aim is to abandon his mortal flesh to enter God's kingdom.

On Saturday, I read a court ruling acquitting Dan Brown of stealing thematic elements from an earlier book about the Holy Grail. This legal verdict opens the way for a May release date of the movie version, *Da Vinci Code*, starring Tom Hanks and directed by Ron Howard. Brown's book is fictional, although he claims his research is factual. In the story line, a murder and clues within Da Vinci's paintings lead to the discovery of a religious mystery protected by a secret society of the Catholic Church that has been hidden for 2000 years. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are actually husband and wife and conceive a child. The Holy Grail, which traditionally has been identified as the silver chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper, is in reality the body of Mary, who bears Jesus' blood line.

How do you like them apples? Jesus doesn't really walk on water. Jesus and Judas are actually best friends. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are secretly married and are survived to this day by their bloodline.

Why do obscure religious stories receive top billing in the press? Despite the fact that the church is at the vanguard of recovery efforts in the Gulf Coast and leading the way toward famine relief in Africa, the press had decided this news doesn't qualify as interesting reading?

***The church cannot rely on a largely secular media to deliver our message.***

The purpose of this sermon is not to bash the media. There are plenty of devout people who faithfully serve God in the media. That said, the church cannot rely on a largely secular media to deliver our message. Our mission as a church is to declare unambiguously what we believe about God by what we say and the way we live our lives.

The central message of our faith is that God loves us extravagantly. I am grateful my Sunday School teachers taught me John 3:16. Whenever I see John 3:16 signs at sporting events, I know what it says. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Our Scripture lesson teaches that God loves us, we should love God and one another in return. Someone asked Jesus which command was the most important. He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40).

Let me bring you back to our church’s vision statement. We aspire to be a “Joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to *loving* and serving God and neighbor.”

Our Scripture lesson from 1 John states, “This is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another” (1 John 3:11). What is this message we heard from the beginning? Go back to the opening verse of

John’s epistle, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning this word of life” (1:1-2). Jesus’ gospel message of love is what we have heard from the beginning.

“Love one another” turns out to be a central theme in John’s epistle. In the 4th chapter we read, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is born of God and knows God.... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7,11).

This love is spelled out negatively by Cain in verses 12-15 and positively by Jesus Christ in verses 15-18. Cain’s hatred leads to murder (Genesis 4:1-25). Cain’s jealousy of Abel leads to hatred, and his hatred culminates in murder. While Cain’s hatred breeds murder, Jesus’ love confers life (3:14). John clarifies what he means by love in verse 16: “We know love by this; that he laid down his life for us.” The original Greek language puts the emphasis on the words “for us.” Jesus Christ lays down his life *for us!*

Lay down means to surrender or sacrifice self. It means to put aside one’s life, as one would put aside a garment. Jesus said in the passage read last Sunday, “The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Jesus gives up all rights and privileges to his own life. Paul writes in Philippians that Jesus does not count equality with God as

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something to be grasped; rather Jesus empties himself (2:7). Jesus empties himself of self. Literally, Jesus loves people to death.

Jesus taught his disciples, “I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:11, 15, 17-18). He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

On this Palm Sunday, we commemorate Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. Last Sunday, we examined a passage in which Jesus announces his intention to go to Jerusalem and lay down his life for people (Matthew 20:17-19). His mission, pure and simple, is to lay down his life.

James Denny illustrates this point in his book *The Death of Christ*: “If I was sitting on the end of a pier on a summer day and someone came along and jumped into the water and was drowned ‘to prove his love for me,’ I should find it quite unintelligible. I might be much in need of love but an act in no rational relation to any of my necessities could not prove it. But if I had fallen over a pier and were drowning, and someone sprang into the water and saved me from death, then I should say, ‘Greater love has no one than this. I should say it intelligently because there would be an intelligent relationship between the sacrifice which love made and the necessity from which it redeemed.’”

Jack Welch, the outspoken former CEO of GE was interviewed by Dan Rather of *60 Minutes*. At the end of the interview, Rather

asked Welch what was the toughest question he’d ever been asked. Welch replied, “Do you think you’ll go to heaven.” Rather understandably asked, “How did you answer that question?”

Welch said, “It’s a long answer, but if caring about people, if giving it your all, if being a great friend counts—despite the fact that I’ve been divorced a couple of times and no one’s proud of that. I haven’t done everything right all the time, but I think I’ve got a shot.”

I suspect plenty of people answer the question that way. They imagine heaven as a ledger system of virtues in one column and vices in another column. If the good outweighs the bad, heaven is our just reward. But according to the Scripture, there are innumerable vices on one side of the ledger, but on the other side, Christ more than compensates for our sins. Jesus Christ lays down his life for our sins. There exists a vital connection between the sacrifice which Christ made and our need to be redeemed.

“We know love by this; that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” As we love Christ, we begin to love in the same way Christ loves. We begin to move outside ourselves and make sacrifices for people. We shift from selfishness to selflessness. This isn’t easy; there are diabolical forces working to ensure that we remain full of ourselves.

We become like the things we love. I have a friend who loves running. She buys running shoes.

***When we love  
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She wears running apparel. She reads running magazines. Everyday, she talks about her exercise regiment.

I have another friend who loves birds. He travels the world over in search of exotic birds. He reads books about birds and listens to tapes to distinguish bird sounds. When he goes bird watching, he wears bird watching apparel.

My friends have become like the things they love. You might expect John to issue a call to martyrdom given all this talk about laying down our lives for one another. But what follows in verses 17-18 is not a call to martyrdom, but a summons to service. “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be on that person?” John’s question is obviously rhetorical, implying a negative response. If we neglect to help someone in need, the love of God cannot reside in us. Love issues forth in practical acts of service.

John concludes this section of this letter, “Dear children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth.” The subjunctive “let us” has imperative force. Talk is cheap, folks. What we need is action. We must love in deed and truth, not merely in word or speech. James asks, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith, but has no deeds. Can such faith save him? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (2:15-26).

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Lucy asks Schroeder, “Do you know what love is?” He stops playing the piano, stands and says, “Love is a noun which means ‘to be fond of, a strong affection for or attachment or devotion to a person or persons.’” With that, he sits down and resumes playing the piano. Lucy is bewildered and mumbles to herself, “On paper, he is great.”

Obviously, something is missing in Schroeder’s definition of love. Love is not only a noun, love is a verb—an action verb. We become like the things we love. When we love God, we become like what we love.

