

*Show Some Love*

**Text:**  
John 15:1-17

**A sermon preached by**  
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## John 15:1-17

[Jesus said:] “I am the true vine, and [God] is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>[God] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit [is pruned] to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>[God] is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

<sup>9</sup>As [God] has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept [God’s] commandments and abide in [God’s] love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my [God]. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that [God] will give you whatever you ask in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.



When I was in Haiti for the first time in 1994, we visited a medical clinic in Cité Soleil – City of Sun – on the western edge of Port au Prince. Cité Soleil is the largest and most dangerous slum in the Western Hemisphere, 240,000 people squeezed into 8.5 square miles of barely standing shacks, canals of open sewage, piles of garbage where kids pick for food and things to sell. It is a place which Mother Theresa, who surely knew something about poverty and human struggles, called “the poorest place in the world.”

Cité Soleil is next to the airport and we were told that when it began to expand in the early 1970s, Haiti’s First Lady, Simone Ovide Duvalier, wife of the cruel dictator Papa Doc Duvalier, ordered the road to and from the airport be lined with a high, concrete wall so that travelers wouldn’t have be able to see the severe poverty and human degradation that was developing under her husband’s brutal regime. In and out of Haiti, visitors wouldn’t have to see the poorest neighborhood in the hemisphere – unless they sought it out of care and compassion and love.

“Love one another.” What could that possibly mean when Jesus said it? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t mean wall-off the poor and downtrodden so we don’t have to see them anymore.

I thought about that ride to Port au Prince’s airport this week as I watched the reports coming in from Baltimore. I thought about how many times I’ve been through Baltimore, through the Ft. McHenry Tunnel, past Camden Yards, down I95 headed for somewhere beyond Baltimore. I thought about the many times I’ve been in Baltimore – to see the Orioles play, to walk around Inner Harbor, to attend a conference or see a friend.

How many times I’ve been to Charm City yet it’s almost as if there is a wall blocking me from seeing the blight that is the plight of Sandtown where Freddie Gray was murdered by police and the system which perpetuates the oppression that keeps people down.

Maybe there's no concrete, physical fence like Duvalier but as a blinder around the slums of Cite Sloleil, but we build walls of protection just as high around those places where we don't want to see what we let happen in our cities around the country. We build walls of judgement and intolerance, walls of words like thug and hoodlum, walls of racism and privilege. We build walls that let us speed past the poverty and oppression and walls that separate out the "nice" places to visit from the "I could never live there" places where bad stuff happens.

We do it in Philadelphia too. One of the poorest Congressional districts in the US – North Philadelphia – is just a 15 minute drive from one of the wealthiest counties in the US – Montgomery County – and do they ever interact in a positive way? Rarely if ever does the Mainline meet the Badlands. How easy it is to drive the highways that bypass the neighborhoods that could blow up out of frustration and the constant barrage of tragic moments when you're living on minimum wage in a world where minimum wage is next to nothing.

A New York Times article this morning tells of what it calls a "litany of loss" in Sandtown.

A 2011 report on Sandtown and an adjacent area, Harlem Park, compared those neighborhoods' social indicators with those of Baltimore as a whole — not a high bar, since the city lags the state of Maryland and the nation on many counts. Still, Sandtown and Harlem Park had roughly double the city's rates of unemployment, poverty, homicides and shootings, as well as liquor and tobacco stores per capita. Lead paint violations were four times the city average, as was the percentage of vacant buildings. Sandtown and Harlem Park also had more residents in jails and prisons than any other neighborhood in the state, a recent study found, with an annual cost of \$17 million just to lock them up.

And Jesus said, “Keep down the oppressed because if they rise up you will be threatened and fear for your property, hold back the poor because they might be contagious and you’ll lose everything you’ve got, ignore the cries of the struggling people around you because – well, just because you can – lock up those who hang on the street corners, kill those who make eye contact with your police.”

Of course he didn’t say that. But what he did say was this:

As [God] has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept [God’s] commandments and abide in [God’s] love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

And remember the context in which Jesus lived and to whom he spoke these kinds of words. Jesus was a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew who lived among people trying to survive the oppression of one of history’s most brutal empires – Rome. Down and out, poverty and death all around, people scraping by on less than minimum wage, uprisings put down by beatings and crucifixion. You make eye contact with a Roman soldier and your death isn’t hidden in false reports and a blue wall of silence – retribution is direct and swift.

Jesus lived in a world which said shun the sick because God hates them. A world that said save your love for only those who love you back. A system that said to gain wealth you can step on the backs of those who have nothing. A society that said you are stuck in the class you were born into so don’t even try to climb out of the neighborhood.

Into that mix Jesus said ... “Love one another.”

This week as I watched the news reports and followed the information coming out of Baltimore I began to realize that in so many ways we live under that same brutal regime today. You and I, for the most part, don't have to worry about what happens in Philadelphia's Badlands or Baltimore's Sandtown because of our addresses and our advantages, the size of our paychecks and our bank accounts, our education and our connections, our skin tone and our privilege.

Jesus was using language contrary to the language of the empire. Jesus was telling people to do exactly the opposite of what the powers of his world was telling people to do. Jesus was creating a disturbance which should very well have led to the looting of the local drug store and burning of a police cruiser. “Love one another” flies in the face of “beat each other down so those with wealth and power can get better control.”

That latter message – beat one another down – was the message of the day in 1st Century Jerusalem. And it's the message of the day in America's decaying urban centers today. There is today no difference in the power play of those in power. The only difference is in context.

Last weekend, a few of us participated in a Poverty Simulation as part of a Mission ConneXion project to help us better understand some of the intricacies of living in poverty. My role that morning was to be the owner of the check cashing store that sold bus tokens and made payday loans. I was next to Pastor Tim Thomson-Hohl working Big Dave's Pawn Shop which bought items cheap making money on the backs of those who had none to give – plus he sold handguns to anyone with cash to buy.

Two days later I was watching a drug store in Baltimore get looted and set on fire – and the next place down the block was the check cashing store. It made me take notice in a new way. How easy it

would have been to buy a handgun from Big Dave's Pawn Shop to defend my check cashing store – pointing it in the faces of the marauding horde of thugs that were breaking down my door. Justice on those streets sometimes looked like an armored Humvee with “To Protect and To Serve” painted on the side chasing down a young guy who had just stolen a 12-pack of toilet paper from the CVS. How ironic is that picture?

As God has loved me so I have loved you. Now love one another as I have loved you.

The bail set for each of the 6 police officers charged with the death of Freddie Gray is about \$350,000 each – and I think they have each posted bail probably with the help of family and friends and the police union. The bail set for the young man who helped destroy a police car – a young man who turned himself in at the urging of his stepfather because it was the right thing to do – is set at \$500,000, a sum which he will probably never be able to pull together even with his friends and family. \$350,000 bail for the taking of a young man's life; \$500,000 for destroying property. What's wrong with this picture?

Love one another.

The Maryland State's Prosecutor announced on Friday that she would be seeking indictments against the 6 police officers. Shouldn't this word from Jesus – no, more than a “word”, this “commandment”! – be an indictment of all of us already? Love one another. Those are words in conflict with the surrounding of a city by police in combat gear ready to do anything but love one another.

The most positive pieces of this week was seeing how people of faith – Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others – were stepping into the gap and trying to bring a sense of empowerment and positivity toward change. I saw clergy on the streets, lay people marching in non-violence, children walking with adults, men calling for love,

women holding onto their teens. Yet the indictment of Jesus' words is clear to me. Love one another in this moment in history means it's time to get out there and make change happen. For us, "love one another" must mean that when the movement arrives in Philadelphia – and it will soon enough – you and I need to be on the front lines of resistance with not just signs that say "Love One Another" but with life examples that say "I Live a Life Different Than the Oppressor."

It's time for more Jesus followers to walk the streets – Jesus followers that look and sound like you and me – Jesus followers that really want to take to heart this love one another commandment.

Love one another. Use the words to challenge the system of oppression that holds us down. Use the words to make a difference and change the systems that oppresses.

Amen.