

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill
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1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

THE SOURCE

Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore on April 12, a Sunday morning one week after Easter. He died of a severe spinal injury on the following Sunday, April 19. Here we are two Sundays after that, talking about him and Baltimore. There were multiple tragedies in Freddie Gray's life before his tragic death. ¹ And frankly, since he was poor and a person of color, there was a time not too long ago when we might not have even heard about his death. There are so many people whose tragic, violent fatalities, depending on where they lived and died, hardly have gotten mentioned in news coverage. But the emergence of videoing phones and a growing awareness of the prevalence of violent encounters between police and particularly young men of color, has changed what the news media covers. There is now a growing sentiment that some police departments have been violating the rights of certain individuals and at times have killed young men for no good reason. That being said, let me add that the challenges facing police departments are huge in today's world and their jobs are extraordinarily difficult to do well. But it is extremely important that they do those jobs well and that they not be treated as being above the law.

The issues that led to the rioting in Baltimore go well beyond the relations between poor minority communities and the police. What led to the tensions includes the departure of so many manufacturing jobs, poor support for education in communities and families, frequent lead poisoning in the poorest households, dysfunctional families that have broken under many stressors, the prevalence of drugs to temporarily distract from the pain of despair, urban blight with abandoned housing and closed businesses, few community resources, and hopes that went up in smoke long before cars and buildings did in the rioting.

You may wish the preacher would stick more with the ethereal, more philosophical aspects of the faith, feeling like the good news of the gospel should have little to do with the bad news in the world. But that's the whole point. The good news of the gospel is good because it applies where things are bad, even deadly, and it offers reason for hope.

The Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood in Baltimore is a community that has gotten separated from hope and many possibilities. Those who live there had heard promises in the past, they had seen violence ongoing, and they felt like it was never going to change. I still wish individuals had not resorted to arson and destruction, but it is interesting and sad that there was a whole lot more media and community attention once that happened. In response and analysis, there was a whole lot of vilifying going on, of one group or another, further separating people from one another. But our scripture passages talk about connection that can overcome separation. We hear of how God's love necessarily leads to love for sisters and brothers, even those we have not yet met, even those whose experience

or views are different from our own. We hear of a connectedness for those of us who are Christians with our Lord Jesus, who is our source of love and purpose and fruitfulness.

All of this reminded me of the story you may have heard of a girl named Helen. She was not poor, but she was cut off from being connected to others by an illness that took her vision and hearing away from her when she was just a year and a half old. Her perceptions of the world around her were quite limited, as were her abilities to express herself. When she was six years old, her parents brought a young woman named Anne into the household to try to teach Helen. Anne, who had some visual impairment herself, looked for ways to connect with her student. She had brought the girl a doll as a present and began to try to communicate with her by spelling d-o-l-l using sign language pressed into Helen's hand. The young girl didn't understand what was being communicated. When Anne tried to teach her the word for 'mug' Helen became so frustrated that she broke it. Everyday Anne worked with the girl, but in the early weeks, there were no signs that the efforts would be fruitful. Both of them were frustrated with the other. Finally, Helen realized that the motions that Anne was making in the palm of her hand were symbols for the names of the object being introduced. While running cool water over one hand, Anne spelled w-a-t-e-r into Helen's other hand. The connection finally had occurred, not just with the concept of sign language letters and objects, but in terms of the relational connection with Helen recognizing and opening herself to Anne's deep love. In response, young Helen was ready to nearly exhaust her teacher by demanding the names of all the other familiar objects in her world. Those connections led to many others as Helen became able to perceive and engage her world in lots of new ways. Many of us know of this story through a movie or play version entitled "The Miracle Worker," which tells the early part of the story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, based on Helen's autobiography. ²

There is a gap of perception and understanding between middle class America and the poorer communities in our land. We may not have much of a common language and to a great extent, not much love has been expressed. Both sides have shown some impairment in understanding each other. In such situations, it takes an intense commitment, even a strong love that repeatedly spells out a desired connection, for that connection and common understanding to begin to take place.

Jesus spells it out for us into our hearts when he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me (and my love) you can do nothing." He spells it out for us into our hands when he demonstrates his self-giving love. We may look at the economics and sociology of the decline of certain urban neighborhoods, realizing that many of the problems seem so multi-layered as to be intractable, and we may wonder, "What's the use of doing anything!" But we have someone named Jesus who wants us to be connected to him as branches are to a vine, where the branches show forth the life and fruitfulness that the vine enables. We may look at the pervasiveness of bad news all around and find ourselves ready to give up as we retreat into our little enclaves, but I've seen vines that grow and wind their ways hither and yon, growing all over the place, even where we would think that things would be utterly barren, and the branches show forth fruit in some very surprising places. We often think of God's incarnation having to do only with the birth of Jesus. But the love of Jesus is demonstrated to be much more than just an idea when it is lived out, when it is incarnated not only in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, but in our own lives as well. His love is the miracle

worker, when it enables connections to form where none existed before, transforming us even as we seek to allow that love to branch out through us.

The need for connection is great, not only on Sundays, but seven days a week, not only in neighborhoods like Sandtown-Winchester, but for those of us who profess that Jesus is the vine as we long to be his branches. The true miracle worker has spelled out his readiness with more than enough love to establish fruitful connections. The opportunity awaits, as does our Lord, for us to be among those to show what the incarnate love of God can be and do.

¹ From multiple news reports

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller