

**LOVE AT WORK**  
Randall Tremba  
May 10, 2015  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**John 15:9-17**

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

**1 John 5:1-6**

*For the love of God is this, that we obey God's commandments. And those commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith—and let me say this about that: "our faith," you can be sure, does not mean "our religion" as opposed to some other religion. It has more to do with faithfulness to the way of love as we are about to see.*

\* \* \*

The fires raging in Baltimore two weeks ago provoked my racist demon. *What's the matter with those people, a voice within me screamed? Are they stupid or what?*

I was raised by racist parents in a racist world and I've been working hard for 50 some years to conquer that world with love—the world in me and the world I'm in and that includes Baltimore, Ferguson, Brooklyn, Cleveland, LA, Charleston, SC and Martinsburg. In case you hadn't heard, two years ago in Martinsburg a mentally ill black man was shot dead with 23 bullets fired by five policemen while he was sprawled on the ground.

*But, of course, he deserved it, my racist demon informed me.*

My parents believed white people were superior to people of color. But to be fair my father also thought his German Lutheran family was superior to his Irish Catholic neighbors in their small western Pennsylvania borough.

My mother was born and raised in Haleyville, Alabama. My mother and father were not hateful. They were kind and generous people and would never ever say an ugly or unkind thing to a person of color and would gladly give the shirt off their backs if a person of color needed one.

But you don't have to be hateful to be a racist. We can let the system do the hateful work while we maintain a sweet demeanor.

It's hard to believe but the hateful system of slavery in this country was supported for 500 years by many churches, by many Christians, by many Christian theologians and preachers who believed it was "God's will" that black people serve white people as slaves. After all, it's in the Bible. And that makes it right. Or so they thought.

It's called the "curse of Ham" even though it should be called the "curse of Canaan." You can see it in Genesis chapter 9.

*When Noah awoke from his wine stupor and knew what his youngest son Ham had done to him, he said, "'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.'*

Noah, you may remember, was deemed the most righteous of human beings, the only one worth saving from The Flood. But after The Flood, Noah got drunk, punished his son Ham by cursing Ham's son Canaan. *He shall be a slave to his brothers.* And since Canaan's descendants migrated to Africa—or so it was fraudulently claimed by certain white European Bible scholars—that means Africans are meant by God to serve whites.

See how easy it is to interpret the Bible? Or should I say, see how hurtful and harmful it can be in certain hands?! Here's a simple rule from *The Charter of Compassion*: any reading of the Bible or other sacred texts that promotes hate is automatically wrong.

The "curse of Canaan" figures into a certain gospel episode in Matthew 15. According to that story, a Canaanite woman approached Jesus with a request to heal her daughter.

We hardly notice the ethnic reference. But in that time and place, just the mention of a Canaanite would make a Jewish person clutch her purse, cross the street or roll up the windows and lock the door. Canaanites were *the scary other*.

Keep in mind: Jesus was raised in a first century Jewish society. Which is to say, Jesus, like you and I and most people, was raised in a racist world.

And so Jesus refused the Canaanite woman's request and referred to her as a "thug," well actually, he referred to her as a "dog," thus reflecting the racism of his own people, his own tribe. But the Canaanite woman didn't back down. Nor should we in the face of racism even if it comes out of the mouth of Messiah.

The Canaanite woman challenged Jesus. She challenged him with the imaginative vision of his own ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the vision and promise of universal blessing. That promised blessing can be seen in Genesis 12 and immediately follows in the wake of Noah's curse. It's the deep promise that a way would be found to bless all families, tribes and peoples.

Imagine that? Could that kind of faith conquer the world of racism and tribalism and build a beloved community?

In the face of that woman's rebuke, Jesus relented. He granted her request and then exclaimed: *I have never seen such faith even in Israel*, meaning I suppose faithfulness to the vision that we are all one—a vision and conviction that we can build the city of God where justice, freedom, equality and peace prevail.

*Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith—our faithfulness, which includes persistence and perseverance. It's love at work.*

As it turns out, it's not "our faith" per se that conquers the world, it's faithfulness to the vision of a new community, the city of God. And let's not forget: it's faithfulness not success that matters in the long run. Faithfulness is love at work. And it takes a lot of love and work to cleanse filth, ignorance and fear from our hearts and society.

The day after the Baltimore fires and rioting I happened upon a Fox television news show. The host was berating a white Baltimore policeman and the entire Baltimore Police Department for condoning the violence. "Why did you condone it," he asked the policeman over and over implying weakness or collusion with the rioters?

And that made my blood boil.

Want to talk about who's really condoning violence in our nation? Did that Fox guy even know what real violence is? Did he have a clue?

Did he not know that the violence you see with a television camera is nothing compared to the violence you can't see—the quiet, insidious violence imbedded in social policies and practices that hold people in chronic poverty, deny them opportunity, crush spirits and burn dreams to ashes. What about that kind of violence, Mr. Fox Guy? For you see, by your perpetual silence you are condoning real and really destructive violence in our nation.

No, you won't see that kind of violence on TV but you will see it if you take the time to read statistics or watch the recent documentary by Joe Brewster and Perri Peltz, a

conversation with seven young men about growing up black. That too is love at work. Listening carefully to others and trying to understand hard truths is love at work.

It's instinctive for me, second nature, to judge and condemn those who riot. Maybe you're that way too.

But what might we feel if we walked a mile in their shoes, or lived a year in that neighborhood, or stood in the unemployment line for six hours every week, or saw our neighbor's husband, son and grandson hauled off to prison, or visited our own son in prison every weekend for ten years? If you lived that life for a while do you think you might become just a little frustrated?

Let the one who has never lost control of anger cast the first stone.

The killing of young black men and boys is all over the news these days. Yes, it's about race and racism. But it's more than that. It's more than race.

If you look deeper you might see that it's really about power and what the powerful in this society do to protect their status, property and privileges while disregarding the plight of the poor, the defenseless and voiceless of any and all races.

And before we condemn the police keep in mind how the powers that be use the police, how they put poorly paid law enforcement officers in dangerous situations, supply them with military paraphernalia, and then suggest with a wink and nod that they are at war with the public.

Policing is not war.

I don't know the answers. But I do know the gospel of love. And I know love is about being with those who suffer. And I know that the gospel is about letting love transform us even as it changes the world.

Whatever is born of God, which is to say, whatever is born of love conquers the world.

From the beginning Christian faith—quite simply—has been about transforming the tragic crucifixions of this world into something different—into something good, something beautiful, holy and wholesome. Into new life. Somehow!

These are tragic times. Now is not the time to stop. Now is the time to keep loving, to keep working, to keep building the community of the Beloved.