



John 3:16 has been a rallying cry for us Christians, not just behind goal posts at a football game or home plate for baseball, but also in Sunday schools and Bible studies, not to mention refrigerator magnets and billboards. It has served as a precious verse we cling to during our most difficult times. The words have been a soothing Gospel, a source of the Greatest News possible. However, John 3:16 can also be manipulated as a rallying cry against those who are not quite on the same page with the whole Jesus as Messiah thing. It can be used as a base of mistrust and even intimidation against those we believe are...*too* different from us.

Unfortunately, it was a week ago yesterday that a certain group of people went online in hopes of instilling such intimidation and fear. Although this certain group of people do not represent a significant portion of our nation's population, they receive more than their due attention, to say the least. They remain under the impression that their race and religion and historic background are far superior in comparison to others, including that of the Jewish people throughout the world. So, this nonsense-noise-making, desperate-for-glory collection of individuals went to their respective social media sites in hopes of garnering support for a "Day of Hate" against those who would be going to synagogues last Saturday. They were not necessarily advocating for any level of physical violence, but just to distribute literature of their narrow-minded perspective on humanity. And even though they did not accomplish the level of impact they were hoping for, far too many of our neighbors were frightened for their safety, including around Cleveland.

And yet, on that same day that was meant to inspire hate, somehow, somehow, tremendous hope and beauty wonderfully managed to emerge. So, I want to tell you about another group of people who deserves more attention than the nonsense noise-making, desperate-for-glory others. They are the people who call Temple Emanu-El home on the Upper East Side of New York City. Back in the 1840's, when Manhattan was becoming a home to waves of immigrants from Europe, it was also there in the second-floor room of a loft building, that 33 Jewish people started something that would significantly impact the neighborhood and beyond for generations. Over a couple decades later, they built what was the largest synagogue in America. Eventually, as the Big Apple grew, so did their community of faith, leading them to consolidate with another congregation. And in 1927, they ended up constructing what was the largest synagogue in the world. To this day, with over 175 years of history, including as the first reformed Jewish congregation with the further inclusion of women and musical instruments among other things, Temple Emanu-El still stands at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 65th Street in New York City.

I bring this wonderful group of people up, because when they heard about a plan for a “Day of Hate” against them and other synagogues around this country, they decided to do something different than hide to be better-safe-than-sorry. Instead, they responded with a “Day of Resolve.” They not only still met for worship. They did it in front of their main entrance on the street. The Rabbi Joshua Davidson said, “We will not be intimidated or cowed by those in this country who seek to do us and other minority communities harm.”

And although they may not exactly be on the same page with John 3:16 and other things in Scripture, Christians insisted on uniting with them in their “Day of Resolve.” Presbyterians and Episcopalians, among others, insisted on joining them in the hope and the beauty that were brought to life on the streets of New York. Because, lest we forget, John 3:17 has a bit of Gospel Great News too: that this Messiah did not come to condemn any part of the world. This Messiah did not come for intimidation or fear or hate of any kind, but to unleash a love and grace and flat-out basic compassion for humanity that far too many of us continue to struggle with accepting should be the ultimate billboard erected in the depths of our hearts.

And although Temple Emanu-El prides itself as a community of faith who welcomes all, just like many Christian congregations, this wonderful group of people still serves complete strangers even if they have no plans on becoming Jewish themselves. They serve free meals for lunch on Sundays. They make prom dresses for local high school seniors who cannot afford them otherwise. They put hygiene packs together for the homeless. They too must be under the impression that God has no interest whatsoever in condemning anyone in this world, but to instill hope, instead.

It just so happens the Jewish people are not so different from our basic humanity, no matter how many Christians still tend to believe otherwise. In fact, during their worship for their “Day of Resolve” out on the street, their cantor and choir led the congregation and visitors in raising their voices with “This Land is Your Land” and “America the Beautiful,” in the hope that this country might be “a land for all its people.” Again, Rabbi Davidson said, “That its cities will be un-dimmed by tears and all of us will be able to live together in peace and harmony.” It just so happens the Jewish people are not so different from us, no matter how many Christians still tend to believe otherwise. Because the Gospel insists not on intimidation or fear or hate of any kind, but of that peace and harmony and compassion in all circumstances of our humanity that God for some reason, still thoroughly loves. And for that Greatest News for us all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

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