

Rabbi Gibson's Sermon for Kol Nidre 5767
"The Beloved Community"
October 2, 2006

You and I share a place in the community of believers. We believe in the best possible outcome, week after week after week. We believe in the power of rituals, whether it is refusing to answer our phone during our most prayerful moments or wearing special garb for sacred occasions.

We affirm our belief in sacred time, uninterrupted by petty thoughts, which might infect the purity of our spirit and intention. We believe in effort, reward and punishment as well as the ever-present opportunity to atone for errors. We believe in ultimate redemption.

As a community of believers we are at our strongest when we build upon the power of each other's faith. We appeal to heroes from long ago. We know their stories and tell them to our children. We believe that the future can be a reflection of a glorious past. As it says in our prayers, we believe in power and majesty.

We believe that even when things are going terribly that we still have a chance to succeed in the end. We believe that our success is earned and shared together. Our failures affect us all deeply and our successes lift us up. There are those who doubt, but, by and large, our community of believers participate in our faith with an incredible passion and devotion.

We are members of the community of believers called "Steelers Nation."

I learned of this unique community when I first arrived here in Pittsburgh in 1988. We had shared a very special Rosh Hashana together and there was a lot of mutual appreciation in the air. I invited the entire congregation to join me for a dessert reception on the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

We ordered pastries for 200. It was only 200 because I figured that some might have other plans for a sunny, Sunday afternoon. But, Jewish mother that I am, I wanted to make sure that there was enough for everyone; no one would go hungry on my watch.

Eight people came. Each was extremely polite and engaging. Each one took a pastry. Each one shook my hand courteously and said how much they had enjoyed Rosh Hashanah services. Each one said to my with a wry smile, "Rabbi, I'm sorry that there are not more people here. It is a Steeler Sunday, though. Maybe we can do this again next year on a different date."

You don't have to do much of anything to be a part of Steeler Nation. You don't have to paint your face black and gold, but you can. You don't have to know the words of the Steelers song, but you can. You don't have to stand up with all of your friends in the stands at a

December game, without your shirt on, after having consumed several quarts of alcohol and show off profound messages written across your middles, but you can. You don't have to commiserate or celebrate over beer, going over every key third down play, but you can.

You don't even have to own, much less wave a Terrible Towel. You don't have to go to the games, you don't even have to watch them. To be a member of the Steelers Nation, all you have to do is be happy when the team wins and be a little bit sad when they don't.

For many years we have constructed a similar model of community for Temple Sinai. We called it "The Family of Families." It emphasized being more than doing, belonging more than participating.

The "Family of Families" saw us as a community made up of many different circles: Families with young children to empty-nesters, interfaith couples to senior members - you get the idea. We were connected simply by belonging to our congregational "family." We didn't have to know each other - heck, Steeler Nation has tens of thousands of people who don't even know each other's names!

The circles were to intersect at times and seasons in our lives. We would come together for each other at times of need. And we would find joy being together for the rituals of faith which truly bind us together - Shabbat, Holidays, even daily prayer.

The foundation was that everyone was included. No one expected a large donation to get a seat on the Board of Trustees. Just as each person in a family is special because they are family, anyone who wanted to be a part of Temple Sinai was special.

But after 18 years, a lifetime for any synagogue, "Family of Families" has begun to feel like a cliché. The slogan has not helped us reach more than 20% of our community with our message and our programs.

That 20% visit the chronically sick and the elderly. A smaller number come to pray on Shabbat. An even smaller number come to learn Adult Torah.

Maybe we should not aspire to be only a family of families. After all, just last week at Rosh Hashanah, we explored the depth of just how dysfunctional the families of even our heroes can be. Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac - you get the idea!

There is another reason the family model falls short: You don't have to do anything to be a member of a family. You just have to be born. Yes, most of us take our family responsibilities seriously. But you don't have to. You don't even have to show up at the family reunion to be a member of the family.

At the synagogue of Temple Sinai we require no active commitment to God, Torah or Israel, only the payment or promise of dues. Money is no bar to membership here, but it is sometimes the only evidence of it. Money, however, is the beginning, not the end of our life together as Jews. Our faith asks for you, not just your check.

Some doubt the value of belonging here. They wonder if this community is worth their hard earned dollars. I find this hurtful and sad. It minimizes our values. It makes small my own commitment to you, which includes virtually every hour of every day, whatever your need, in joy, illness or death.

I believe that we are more than a discount store of Judaism, where people come to get the best deal. We are not the sum of our services. We are the value of our values.

On Yom Kippur, we pray about our failings together as a community. Today we all believe that we have a stake in the other. As a community we regret our arrogance and narrow-mindedness. As a community we ache over our failure to act when needed. It is almost too tragic that today, we begin to act like a community, but tomorrow we go back to business as usual.

Not this year. Starting here and now, I would like for us to aspire to a higher model of community. Neither Steeler Nation nor Family of Families, it is a core theological concept of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is called "The Beloved Community."

For Dr. King, the Beloved Community represented the joining of faith to action. We are beloved when we care for all because each of us is worth caring for, each beloved by God.

We are beloved when we work to better the world around us because we believe that those are the ideals that our God stands for, what our Torah teaches us to do.

Our God loves us enough to forgive our flaws that we list on Yom Kippur. How can we not love back? How not be-loved? The Beloved Community is filled with those who go the extra mile, give the extra donation, who personify the grace and kindness we attribute to God.

Unlike the Family of Families model, the Beloved Community asks about you personally. Where are you spiritually? How are you physically? What is going on with *your* God search and *your* Torah learning and tikkun olam work? What do you need and what do you have to offer of your blessings of hand, heart and mind?

In the Beloved Community, we are all loved by God and called by Torah. Hearing is not enough. Response is required of all of us.

On Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre night, I propose we make a pledge, a vow we take seriously. I propose we pledge to become a beloved community, the Beloved Community of Temple Sinai.

How? As always, through reinforcing our ties to God, Torah and Israel. Please take out the insert from your program.

We pledge to seek a more mature understanding of God. On the sheet you will find many different ways that you might explore your spirituality, from serious personal meditation to our healing service to being part of our choir or our Friday night band, called "White Sabbath."

The pledge is not about finding God. It is about searching together. God is more complex than we can ever name or describe. Any God I could show you simply would not be worthy of the title.

When I was a teenager in youth group in Minneapolis, we used to take a bowl and pour cornstarch into it and then cover it with water. After five minutes, we would try to pick up the mixture. When you pick it up at first, it cakes and is solid in your fingers. Then, it seems to melt into liquid and drip through your fingers. Every time we think we have God in our hands, God melts away. God is beyond description, yet describing is all we can do. And at the end of the evening, somebody has to clean up the cornstarch.

That is where God is, in the eyes of those who help clean up the messes of the world. The Beloved Community, like Judaism, does not offer a God that gives perfect peace. God is found in the dynamic tension that moves, inspires and motivates us to care for a world that desperately needs our faithful attention. The Beloved Community of Kol Nidre searches for God.

The Beloved Community takes Torah seriously, not literally. You know, that adult Torah, the one that is harder than Hemingway, more challenging than Chaucer, more gripping than Grisham, more calamitous than Kellerman, more daring The DaVinci Code.

The Torah of the Beloved Community give us the imperfect family, the negative role model, the example of what not to do.

Like Jacob, who showers so much affection on one son, Joseph, heedless of the jealousy he creates. His brothers consider it an act of mercy to sell him into slavery instead of killing him outright. After spurning his other children, he complains when they don't do what he wants. He could have written a book, How Not To Be A Dad. Yet he becomes beloved through his sorrow.

Like Rabbi Akiba, illiterate until age 40, he sits in kindergarten to learn his letters, then becomes the undisputed master of his generation. His method? He says to learn "letter by letter, word by word, verse by verse, chapter by chapter and book by book."

His reward? The Romans slaughter him on the torture bed while he calls forth the Shema. They kill his body, but his spirit lives on to inspire millions of Jews to this very day, as we will read about in the Afternoon Service. He is beloved to us through both his life and death and teaching.

Like Yael, the Kenite, who lures the enemy general Sisera into her tent with the promise of warm milk and a soft bed. She then whacks a tent pin through his head while he sleeps so he will no longer threaten our people led by Deborah, our greatest woman judge.

Children's tales? I think not.

The Torah of the Beloved Community is adult and so are its contemporary concerns: Can the billionaire who saves the synagogue from bankruptcy be honored with an aliyah to the Torah if he has committed white-collar crime? Does keeping kosher make us more or less environmentally aware?

Are women required to tell the men in their lives if they are pregnant and plan to have an abortion? Is it all right to use embryonic stem cells for medical research? Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis all have different answers. You might be shocked at who says what!

Can you yell at your teenagers in public or does that provoke them into disrespecting you, which is against the Ten Commandments? To pay for your parents' elder care, do you have to empty your bank account - or theirs?

For Temple Sinai to become a Beloved Community, we must engage in learning what our faith teaches. Torah guides us, it cannot bind us against our will.

How then, might we become a Beloved Community? Our prophet Isaiah, whose teaching we read tomorrow, shows us the way:

“banish...the menacing hand, and evil speech, and...offer your compassion to the hungry...refrain from trampling Shabbat...call it a delight [and] honored.” Faith, Action and Compassion. That is how we become beloved.

We become beloved when we open our hands in friendship as well as our doors without judgment. We are beloved when we become the warm and welcoming community we proclaim ourselves to be. We do not only accept whole vessels; broken ones are welcome. PS - We are all broken vessels.

We become beloved when the banners which proclaim our values move us to make them real. We are not beloved when genocide rages in Sudan, when Israelis cower in fear, when there is no peace for anyone in the land of our fathers and mothers. We are not beloved when our neighbors cannot pay for their medicines or to see doctors at all,

except in emergency rooms. We are not beloved when the fabric of the environment is being shredded.

We become beloved when we connect and care for each of our community as well as those beyond. Torah teaches that the loss of one is the loss of an entire world; the salvation of one saves an entire world.

We become beloved when we give both our money and our time to make this community sacred. Your money supports more lights and gardens and offices. We become beloved when we value our value more than the sum of our services.

We become beloved when we choose to be beloved. What choice will you make this Kol Nidre night? Take out your sheet and pledge your commitment to our beloved Community through your presence, not your presents. Or take it home and talk about it with your family and send it back to us. Temple Sinai is blessed with more than 865 families, more than 1,500 souls. It is my hope that we receive more than 500 of these sheets back from you; your Kol Nidre pledge that promises to fulfill you and Temple Sinai together.

There are four areas from which to choose: God/Spirituality, Adult Torah/Study, Tikkun Olam and our Caring Connection. Choose what you will do, how you will give, through what means you will help make us a Beloved Community.

In the Beloved Community, we take responsibility for our mistakes and try to put them right. For all of my mistakes, for any and all hurt I have caused you this year, I am truly sorry. In the Beloved Community, we don't hold grudges and we don't stint on forgiveness when it is asked of us.

Dr. MLK proclaimed 50 years ago this winter, "The end is reconciliation. The end of redemption. The end is the teaching of the Beloved Community."

This is not our destiny. It is our choice. Our decision. Our pledge.

The Torah says, "I set before you this day life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life if you and your children would live."

I pray with all of my heart that we choose today to become a k'hillah ahuvah, a beloved congregation. More than fans, more than an "occasional" family.

In Hebrew numbers, the word "ahuvah," beloved, adds up to 19. This is our 19th Kol Nidre, our 19th year together. This year, may we be beloved to each other. Beloved. Be-loved. Be loved. This is my prayer. My hope. My dream for us all. Be loved.