

The Gospel According to Ted Lasso

October 24, 2021

The Gospel

One of my favorite hours of the week is our Tuesday Noon Bible Study here at Union. We're meeting via Zoom right now, but even still, whether virtually or in person, it's a great experience of processing the Sunday scriptures with people, helping folks to make intersections with the texts and figure out the difference that the lessons of the Bible can make in our real lives.

This last week was particularly fruitful. We found a good amount of energy, exploring physical vs. metaphorical blindness in our Gospel today. At first, we talked about how, whenever Jesus heals someone, we are supposed to understand that as both physical and symbolic – that's probably not a new concept for most of you.

Our conversation then veered into some folks suggesting that it's easier to know and admit our physical blindness than it is our spiritual blindness; easier to admit that I have trouble seeing – the fine print instructions or a street sign at night – than it is to admit that I can't see that I'm racist or homophobic or that the way that I'm treating my loved ones is not particularly loving. What I found to be pure gold is that, eventually, our conversation came full circle, and we talked about the fact that it's actually really hard to admit our physical limitations, too. We started to explore how "some people," have a hard time even admitting they need reading glasses or hearing aids, or that most people's families realize long before they do that they shouldn't be driving any longer.

I told the story of gathering with a group of older church folks once who had a robust discussion of the fact that they fall a lot more than they tell their adult children, because they know that their adult children will want them to move or use a cane or take some other preventative measures, and they're just not ready to admit that they need help. Psycho-spiritual blindness may be hard to spot, but admitting our physical blindnesses is often hard to admit as well.

That's why verse 51 in our Gospel today is so powerful. Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?"

And Bartimaeus replies, "Master I want to see!"

Jesus doesn't assume to know what Bartimaeus' core issues are, and Bartimaeus acknowledges that he has a need and would like it to be different. Part of what is so rich in this interaction is that the scriptures acknowledge that even faith won't change those aspects of our lives we don't admit need changing, or the positive spin on that: it is when we admit our need for healing and grace that the Divine is then able to get to work in our lives. Admission is the first step.

The Gospel According to Ted Lasso

If you haven't already watched it, I highly recommend the TV show "Ted Lasso," which can be found on Apple TV. Seriously, even if you don't have that service and it means paying for Apple TV for a month, it's worth it.

The premise is that the main character, Ted Lasso, is an American football coach who is hired to coach a British football team. (In case you don't know it, those are two completely different sports.) At first blush, the show just feels like a sticky sweet comedy about a folksy, optimistic American and the triumph of kindness over cruelty.

Those elements are there. But the show is so much deeper, so much more clever, so much more profound, that I found myself after almost every episode saying to my husband, "There's another sermon!" It doesn't hit you over the head, but it's not subtle.

Oh, and there's lots of swearing and adult content, so parents, I'd preview before deciding if it's right to watch as a family. But the swearing and pub culture are, in part, what takes the edge off of what could otherwise come off as too sweet. Just as salt enhances the flavor of caramel, so, too, the more acidic aspects of Ted Lasso keep the show from driving us into a diabetic coma.

But all of that is a vehicle for the true action of the story. At its core, Ted Lasso is about upending the toxicity of today's culture, upending the myth that winning at any cost will make us happy, that control of ourselves and our surroundings, will somehow keep us safe, that tamping down our emotions, stuffing them, is somehow superior and will lead to our desired outcomes and a healthy way of being.

Conclusion

When confronted with their blindnesses, time and again the characters on Ted Lasso respond the way Bartimaeus in our Gospel reading does today. Rather than taking the culturally ingrained route of digging in their heels and refusing to admit that they're in need, or they're wrong, or they need to change, they take the harder route of admitting, of being spiritually honest, and it bears fruit.

A recent op-ed piece on CNN about Ted Lasso describes the power of the show this way, "It isn't a happy-go-lucky dramatization of optimism, but about the work and necessity of building communities in which we draw strength from one another. The show's tension and success stem not from its oft-touted emphasis on kindness, but from its ability to embody something that in the past would have been called *caritas*. The Latin word *caritas* is most often translated as 'charity,' but a better meaning is 'love' – a certain kind of love that puts others first."

It is this *caritas*, this love of those around us, that is at the center of our pledge campaign this fall, "Love Our Neighbors. No Exceptions." It is this divinely-inspired *caritas* that motivated followers of Jesus "around the Mediterranean to build structures to support the poor, the sick and others." *Caritas* is why we're wearing masks today.

Like the Gospels, Ted Lasso draws us into a way of being that is honest about one's own needs and uses that honesty and integrity to build a new way of being. We see this not only when the characters grow and succeed through being emotionally honest instead of controlling and manipulative, it also comes across when we see hiding and lies hamstringing both the overt goal of winning as well as the opportunity to build trust within the community.

“All of these story lines are about the need for caritas, the work it takes to get there, and how easy it is to lose your way.”

In a little while, we're going to welcome a family into the household of this church, and in light of that, I can't resist lifting up one just one spoiler from the show. At one point, the team is in the locker room, devastated by a particularly important loss, and the coach says, “I want you to be grateful that you're going through this sad moment with all these other folks. Because I promise you, there is something worse out there than being sad, and that is being alone and being sad. Ain't nobody in this room alone.”

If the intersection between our Gospel and Ted Lasso and real life is the power of being honest and admitting our blind spots, our needs, the intersection between this being New Member Sunday and Ted Lasso is the power of community. We've all got blind spots, we're all going to be in places where we are sad, or even worse, and what's worse than being in those places is being in those places alone.

And so, may we recommit this week, not only to doing the hard work of breaking down the toxicity of might-makes-right and dishonestly hiding our blindnesses, but let's also recommit to being a community of caritas, a community of compassion and grace, so that we, too, can promise, “there is something worse out there than being sad, and that is being alone and being sad. Ain't nobody in this room alone.”

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Psalm 126, Mark 10:46-52
October 24, 2021