**“*The Gospel According to Ted Lasso*”**

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Romans 5:1-8

3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Father’s Day

June 18, 2023

Apple TV. How many of you subscribe to Apple TV? If you do subscribe, you probably did so originally so that you could watch *Ted Lasso.* If you don’t subscribe to Apple TV, you may have heard something about *Ted Lasso,* but you may not be aware of why so many people have passionately watched and rewatched every episode of the show over the course of its three seasons.

So, let me tell you a little about the show so that we are all on the same page.

The plot of the series orbits around Ted Lasso, played by Saturday Night Live alum [Jason Sudeikis](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0837177/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm). He’s an American college football coach from Kansas recruited to coach an English soccer team. Although he knows nothing about what the rest of the world calls *‘football,’* he nonetheless is an inspiring coach and student of the human condition. Humor ensues, as does meaningful relationship development and self-understanding.

As a cultural influence, owing to the titular character’s *“relentless optimism,”* Ted Lasso has been heralded as a *beacon of hope* during the darkest days of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The shows tagline is *“kindness makes a comeback,”* and Ted Lasso maintains that kindness even in the face of *backlash* from his crass and disrespectful players, fans who want nothing to do with an American football coach, and a boss whose cynicism and plotting are prominent storylines in the first season. As season one proceeded, it became clear that Ted Lasso is fighting an internal battle of his own – having left an unhappy marriage to pursue the coaching job in England even though it meant leaving behind a young son he dearly misses.

And, interestingly, most of the show is not on the sidelines--the series spends far more time delving into the depths of *relationships* related to Lasso’s coaching duties.

For example, several characters’ relationships with their fathers are highlighted at the beginning of Season 2 and Leslie Higgins, the communications director for the team, poignantly says, *“I love my father for who he is and forgive him for who he isn’t.”* That’s pretty good theology.

Another theme that attracts people and connects with the Gospel is the sense of *belonging* exhibited by Lasso and other characters.

It’s a *‘fish out of water’* show like the Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres, or Schitt’s Creek. On some level many of us feel like fish out of water, that we don’t belong. So there’s something [attractive] about Lasso’s attempts at creating a community of belonging.

*“Truth and trust”* are also themes that are at the center of the show and another Gospel lesson to be found in Ted Lasso. *Discernment* and a call to speak the truth in love, (often using humor to convey a message), are powerful vehicles for these concepts.

An example of this truth being spoken was the team’s stance against one of its major sponsors, the fictional Dubai Air, owned by an oil company responsible for, also fictionally, environmental destruction in Nigeria, the home country of team member Sam Obisanya. In an homage to similar sporting protests – notably football players who kneel during the national anthem or who wore black arm bands – Sam places black tape over the Dubai Air logo on his jersey and the rest of the team follows suit. In this instance, team management backs this decision and the potential loss of the sponsor.

This is moral and ethical action that’s willing to pay a price.

A final theme is *forgiveness,* and the seemingly unending ways Lasso finds to forgive those who have opposed, blocked, or schemed against him. There are powerful moments of human forgiveness throughout the story.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I want you to consider these themes—*hope, kindness, belonging, truth, trust, moral courage, and forgiveness—*in light of our scripture readings for today—and specifically, our text from Romans 5, where Paul speaks of relationships, as well—our relationship to God and neighbor, by using the phrase, *justification by grace*.

Though the language has been domesticated by familiarity, *justification by* grace is radical, it is extraordinary. *“God justifies the ungodly,”* Paul says. A few verses later: *“Christ died for the ungodly.”* Then: *“While we were yet sinners”* and *“enemies”* of God, *“Christ died for us.”*

You see, God’s love for us is *prior* to our worthiness. It need not be earned—indeed cannot be earned.

Justification by grace has been more important in some periods of Christian history (and among some Christian groups) than others. It became particularly important in the Protestant Reformation. Though the understanding of it by Luther and Calvin has been criticized by many modern scholars as a misunderstanding of Paul, there is insight in the radical Protestant understanding of grace.

First, let’s clear up some misunderstandings: Justification by grace [in opposition to justification by works of the law] is *not* about the inadequacy of the Jewish law or Judaism. When Paul indicts life under the law, he is not attacking the Torah in particular. On the contrary, he saw the Torah as *holy, just, and good.* The failure to recognize this has erroneously led Christians to think of Judaism as a religion of *law, works, and judgment* and Christianity as a religion of *grace, faith, and love.*

But the way of being that Paul indicts—life under the law—is as present in Christianity as it is in Judaism. So also, *grace* is as present within the Jewish tradition as it is within the Christian tradition.

Rather, Paul’s attack on *“the law”* subverts a more universal way of being, found not only within Christianity and Judaism, *but also within secular culture.* Life under the law is the life of *“measuring up”* in which our well-being depends upon how well we do. If we are religious, we see our standing before God as dependent upon the earnestness of our religious life. *Do we have enough faith? Are we good enough?* If we are not religious, life under the law means seeing our identity and self-esteem (whether in positive or negative terms) as dependent upon our measuring up to cultural standards of achievement or appearance or worth. Life under the law is, as one contemporary scholar puts it, living under the *“performance principle.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

So what, then, is justification by grace about? Very simply, it is about the basis of our relationship to God *in the present. It is a radically new way of seeing. It’s about reconciliation and liberation.* Justification is a gift of God, not a human accomplishment. It means that the Christian life is about becoming conscious *of* and entering more deeply *into* an already existing relationship with God as known in Jesus. It is not about meeting requirements for salvation *later* but about the newness of life *in the present.* And living by grace produces the same qualities as life *“in Christ”: freedom, joy, peace, and love.*

But it also has a radically egalitarian *social meaning.* In fact, it is the theological foundation of a new social reality; there are no privileged few, no elites, no favored ones. Grace means that we are all equal before God. This was the basis for Paul including Jews and Gentiles as equals within his communities. Indeed, even Paul’s emphasis in Romans that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* is a radically egalitarian notion.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Which brings us back to that accidental theologian, *Ted Lasso.* According to New York Times Opinion writer Margaret Renkl:

*A*[*word-of-mouth hit*](https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-tv-plus-ted-lasso-is-word-of-mouth-hit-2020-11)*in an atomized media landscape, with its manifold streaming platforms and its many hundreds of cable stations and its truly countless podcasts and YouTube channels, “Ted Lasso” eventually*[*reached No. 4 on the Nielsen streaming list*](https://deadline.com/2023/05/ted-lasso-nielsen-streaming-charts-april-the-diplomat-netflix-apple-tv-1235380279/)*for original programming. In its first two seasons, it won 11 Emmys, including two for Outstanding Comedy Series. It was never a perfect television show — sometimes indulging in half-baked subplots, sticking with tedious minor characters, drawing out major plotlines an episode too long — but it was always the program we needed at exactly the time we needed it.*

*Though we show no sign yet of recognizing how thoroughly we have allowed the media — traditional and social — to manipulate us and destroy our faith in our own countrymen, and though we have not yet begun to reject wholesale the partisans who inflame and exploit this divisiveness, Americans are finally becoming worried about the state of our body politic. In a FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos poll last year, respondents listed political polarization as a top concern,*[*behind only inflation and crime or gun violence*](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/3-in-10-americans-named-political-polarization-as-a-top-issue-facing-the-country/)*.*

*Little wonder, then, that we fell in love with a television series in which bad behavior is almost always motivated by some hidden, healable pain; one in which selfishness and vindictiveness rarely reflect the full sum of someone’s character, and forgiveness liberates forgiven and forgiver alike. Watching this show, it begins to seem like not so great a stretch to imagine that we too are capable of making allowances for one another, that we too are capable of learning to play as a team. “After you watch ‘Ted Lasso,’ you start to think like Ted Lasso,” [said Renkl’s husband while they were watching].*

*For three years, “Ted Lasso” became something like a national water cooler — a place where we could gather outside our departments and our hierarchies and our political bubbles to remember who we are. Or at least who we still desperately want to be. Understood. Forgiven. Connected.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

*Understood. Forgiven. Connected.* That’s Paul’s message to the church in Rome, as well. It’s a message—a way of being in the world—that we are called to model and share in our world today.

*Let us pray--*

1. # Gregg Bekke, *The Gospel According to Ted Lasso,* Presbyterian Foundation, October 15, 2021

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day,* Fortress, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus J, Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time,* Harper Collins, New York, 2001, pp. 254, 255, 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Margaret Renkl, *Why America Desperately Needed Ted Lasso,* The New York Times, June 5th, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)