Culture



Jason Sudeikis in "Ted Lasso," now streaming on Apple TV+ (Courtesy of AppleTV+)



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"Ted Lasso" showed up in our world at the perfect time. Ravaged as we were in August 2020 by a world pandemic, pervasive threats to democracy, painful racial reckonings and climate disaster, this sitcom had something of the Divine to show anyone really looking and listening. As the third season kicked off this week (March 15), it’s worth examining how this humble television show can help us learn a thing or two about who or what God is, and what our response might be in our bruised, blessed world.

Catholicism directs us to learn from the world of our senses and creative works — and "Ted Lasso" has much we can learn: true leadership, the importance of personhood, how to listen to children and the power of genuine forgiveness.

Leadership

If you Google "Ted Lasso" and leadership, you’ll see that entire MBAs appear to have been set up on the principles found in Ted's coaching: curiosity, non-judgment, helping others, self-belief, sincere apologies and the importance of taking a stand against forces that destroy people and our battered planet.

It's sobering to observe how different these messages are from the way too many yearning, broken people experience religion. The tagline from the second season of "Ted Lasso" was "Kindness makes a comeback." Religion could learn a thing or two. It should just be a given that people of faith are curious, nonjudgmental, seek and draw out the best in people, apologize when they are in the wrong and take principled stands against corporations that poison the planet. But, alas.

Personhood

Just about every mainstream church today is feeling attendance-challenged. When I read religious articles bemoaning all those empty pews, the authors routinely say some version of "we need more young people," or "we need more men," or "we need to do a better job of reaching out to BIPOC or LGBTQ+ populations." Here is a place where religious leaders really need to watch and learn from "Ted Lasso."

Coach Lasso may well want more marquee footballers or more supportive fans. But he never puts that desire in such vague, impersonal ways. Lasso calls each person by their name, comes to know each person's values and he engages from there. There's a wonderful scene in one episode in which Ted enters AFC Richmond's building and greets each person not only by their name, but with a question about something that matters to them. Being known by name and for who you really are is a gift. This is a truth that religious leaders must embrace: It feels good to be seen and called by our name. Churches don't need more people, they need Rick and Rosie and Alex and Maya and Darlene; they need to know what makes those individuals glow and wither and aspire and despair and get back up again when their spirit has been crushed. "Ted Lasso" can help with that.

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Listening to children

Jesus taught us to prioritize the little children. "Ted Lasso" can help us understand why.

We see this acutely in Roy Kent’s relationship with his niece Phoebe. Scenes between little Phoebe and her Uncle Roy are among my favorite in the entire series, and I almost always need a few Kleenexes in the seven or eight times I view each one. One key story arc in the first season is Roy Kent having to navigate the slowing down of his legendary soccer skills as he ages. He tells his girlfriend Keeley that he likes being the "Great Roy Kent," and isn’t ready to be "some loser has-been called Roy" if he were to retire.

Keeley asks Phoebe to tell Uncle Roy who he is. I love that her succinct, heartfelt description of his essence is followed by a stadium of AFC Richmond fans cheering Roy Kent as he hobbles off the field after his final heroic play. Richmond loses that game, and the Great Roy Kent accepts retirement from the sport he loves, but little Phoebe leads the way in perceiving that Roy Kent is not just about what he does, but who he is: the gruff uncle who will play the Princess to her Dragon after an ice

cream, and who she will be delighted to accompany to his podiatrist’s because she loves him. He is not what he does on the soccer pitch. He matters, period. That's a gift that Phoebe gives both him and me.



Brett Goldstein as Roy Kent, Brendan Hunt as Coach Beard, and Jason Sudeikis as the titular character in "Ted Lasso" (Courtesy of Apple TV+)

Forgiveness

The final lesson religion (and I) should take from "Ted Lasso": the muscularity of genuine forgiveness. Rebecca's long silent walk in her Christian Louboutin stilettos to Ted's office to confess her scheme was a viewers' favorite among the scenes of the entire show. True forgiveness is life-changing, it's transformative; it's not about

being a doormat. It's a muscular, active act, not for the faint of heart.

A number of elements from the Rebecca-Ted forgiveness scene illustrate this. First, that long walk. We do not like silence, as a species, and our constant engagement with devices suggests we especially do not like the silence in our own heads and hearts. We may be apprehensive of what we'll hear there, and so we crowd out the sounds of our own solitude. Rebecca takes the long walk from her office in the executive level to Ted's office at the bottom of the building by herself, facing and replaying what she has put Ted and the team through in her quest for revenge on her awful ex-husband Rupert. Asking forgiveness doesn’t start by thinking of what the other person can give you, but of taking a realistic interior look at your own complicity and guilt. That is one of the most risky, courageous things a person can do. The second most risky, courageous thing a person can do is to fully and unconditionally offer the forgiveness asked of them, as we saw Ted do in response. Rebecca's icy (wounded) British reserve is shattered by Ted's forgiveness.

Having experienced the cleansing fire hose of forgiveness once, Rebecca understands there are more fractured relationships she has to mend, and she goes about doing it. Once she has started to repair her relationship with her assistant Higgins, she starts calling him by his first name, Leslie.

Her scars do not go away. She still tears up when she sees her ex and his new young wife and baby; later, we see that the scars of her childhood still linger in her adult relationship with her mother. But her own experiences of being forgiven animate many of her subsequent interactions with the team, and even her ex-husband. Rebecca and Ted's forgiveness cycle is a vibrant illumination of one of Pope Francis' contentions in *Fratelli Tutti*: " 'Goodness is never weak but rather, shows its strength by refusing to take revenge' [referencing his own earlier words]. … Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering. They break the vicious circle; they halt the advance of the forces of destruction."

Entire courses and seminars are being built around the wisdom of "Ted Lasso." Read the books, take the workshops, but never lose the joy and the pathos of your own encounters in this fictional world. Religion will be better off for it.

Related: The anonymous Christianity of 'Ted Lasso'

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