

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
September 12, 2021
Regathering Sermon Series, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Last Friday, AppleTV+ released the newest episode of *Ted Lasso*, and we Allens were right there on the sofa together, eating our Ron’s Ice Cream and savoring every moment of the show like it was that last pinch of Jimmies at the edge of our waffle cone.ⁱ The fictitious story of an English Premier League soccer club that hires an American-football coach from Division II Wichita State (a suitable stand-in for “middle-of-nowhere”), the title character has not only never coached soccer, but arrives to the London borough of Richmond entirely ignorant of the game’s basic rules, jargon, and culture. Having become “internet-famous” because of his locker-room dance following the collegiate Shockers’ unlikely title, Coach Theodore “Ted” Lasso arrives:

to the soft (and sharp) snobbery of tradition-bound Brits, who tout their club’s nineteenth-century pedigree;

to the insatiable impatience of the club’s most rabid fans, who conveniently ignore Richmond’s decades as a mediocre also-ran;

to all the projections of the European prideful, who heap upon him all manner of their ‘merka assumptions;

and to no small number of conspirators eager to see him fail, who celebrate his missteps and even actively sabotage him.

Yet, in seemingly light and easy response, Lasso confronts this bitter new world with:

indefatigable optimism;

“Oh, gosh” wisdom;

humble forthrightness;

sincere vulnerability;

and *unrelenting* kindness.

Now, Coach Lasso’s strategy does not always soften the hardest hearts, much less win soccer games. No, the series’ first surprise is that it is not a win-at-all-costs underdog story – that dependable, shop-worn trope of sports-focused television and film. Instead, *Ted Lasso* explores the consequences, costs, and the **possibilities** of open-heartedness,ⁱⁱ asking: what if instead of spending all our time and energy on trying to win and on trying prove ourselves right, we instead endeavored *to love*?

Well, this morning we begin a three-week sermon series reflecting on the Apostle Paul’s hymn to love, our chosen invitation into our Program Year theme, into “The Life of the World to Come.” Corinth, located on the isthmus separating the Gulf of Corinth to its northwest, and the Saronic Gulf to its southeast, functioned as a hub of trade and commerce and trafficked in the exchange of ideas and religions. As a sign of the latter, a second-century Greek historian records the existence of a Corinthian pantheon – “a temple for all the gods” – like the one that still stands in Rome. Of the former, J. Paul Sampley writes of Corinth “sailors relishing life in [the] city and then moving along, contributing to Corinth’s [reputation] as a ‘[Las Vegas, of sorts]’” – a city of “wealth without culture,” with a monied, society crowd “lacking charm and grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul likely wrote “first” Corinthians around 50 CE, though that epistle references a “previous letter,” he wrote even earlier.^{iv} As described in chapter five of the first canonical text, that prior message urged church members “not to associate with ‘immoral people’” – importantly, not a warning about their *worldly* neighbors, those outside the church, “but those immoral people who have become part of [their] fellowship” – those who, though members of the congregation, grew like a malignancy, spreading poison, seeking division before union, and prioritizing their own ends before God’s hopes.^v

This admonition anticipates the persistent conflict Paul will address in these scriptural epistles. Indeed, “Not only does [the broader] Corinth [community] have a long-standing ethos [of division], but so does the Corinthian church’s [internal roil endure]. *First Clement*, a document written from the church in Rome a full generation after Paul’s time, notes that the Corinthian Christians continue to ‘engage in partisan strife,’ just as they had during Paul’s ministry there.”^{vi}

In response to these conflicts, Paul’s letter – indefatigably, unrelentingly – counsels a singular solution: *love*. Chapter 13 expounds that memorable turn of phrase from Chapter 8: “knowledge puffs up, love builds up,”^{vii} and this morning we focus on the first third of the treasured verse:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love,
I am *nothing*.

If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain *nothing*.^{viii}

In a crescendo of *Ted Lasso*'s first season, the coach plays a game of darts with the series' antagonist: the boorish, bullying, billionaire former owner of the club, a bulwark defending the way things are. Avoiding spoilers, Ted begins in a gracious and genuine tone:

“You know, Rupert,^{ix} guys have underestimated me my entire life. And, for years, I never understood why. It used to really bother me.

“But then one day, I was driving my little boy to school and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman[,] painted on the wall there. It said, ‘Be curious, not judgmental.’[... ‘Be curious, not judgmental.’] I like that.

So I get back in my car and I'm driving to work, and all of a sudden it hits me. All [those] fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them were curious. They thought they had everything all figured out. So they judged everything, and they judged everyone. And I realized that their underestimating me ... who I was [or who I was not] had nothing to do with [me – see, it was simply their missed opportunity].”^x

For Coach Lasso, to “be curious” is to ask questions – How are you? How can I help? ... “Have you ever played darts before?”^{xi} – to ask questions instead of assuming the infallibility of his own understandings and presumptions. Dealing with dogged and pernicious conflict, he responds with neither the commanding sword of compulsion nor the retreating parry of victimhood. Instead, he opens himself and others to the possibility of love, even at the expense of his own well-being ... over and over again, *the possibility of love*.

Confronting those who snobbily speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, he offers them unearned generosity, brings them home-baked cookies for goodness' sake.

Encountering those who have prophetic powers and possess all knowledge – just ask ‘em, and they'll tell you: they understand *all* mysteries – well, he learns their names and asks on their families.

Facing those self-righteous zealots who would choose self-immolation to the challenges of healthy personal growth, he just keeps showing up, bringing a smile, offering sometimes-awkward levity and an open invitation to friendship.

Now, dadgumit, don't worry or misunderstand: I'm clear that Coach Ted Lasso is not Jesus Christ, and his eponymous television program is not scripture – not in symbol, not in substance.

Even so, *Ted Lasso*'s clarion sounds into the angry reactivity of our age the way I imagine Paul's commission might have trumpeted into Corinth's crossroads conflicts. So, all of us with ears to hear, *listen*, for in the life of the world to come:

returning to our treasured building and to our pews without love is *nothing!*

No matter how inspiring the organ or angelic the voices,
no matter how clever the preaching or moving the prayers,
worship without love is a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.

righteousness without love is *nothing*!
learning without love is *nothing*!
service without love is *nothing*!
justice without love is *nothing*!

Friends as we begin this new Program Year – our God is working even now – *right now!* – to inaugurate a new, joy-filled life among us ...*can you feel it?* Partnering with that Holy Spirit, we at Trinity Church:

will seek the shared excitement of understanding, instead of the cheap satisfaction of meanness[, no matter how hard these indignant winds blow!^{xii}];

we at Trinity Church will share gracious, hopeful curiosity, instead of critical judgment;

with God’s Grace, and with God’s help, we will finally let loose our striving, will finally forego this world’s insatiable quest for winning and proving – be sure, it will never be enough – and, instead, will endeavor **love** for the life of the world to come.

Amen.

ⁱ Fair warning: the program contains a whole lot of profanity, innuendo, and generally “adult” situations. Even so, don’t be distracted by the vulgar window dressing: it does serve a purpose.

ⁱⁱ In an article for Politico entitled, “[The Strange Bipartisan Appeal of Ted Lasso](#),” Boston writer Joanna Weiss noted the “subtle but important shift” the Lasso character made in the six years between his introduction in parody commercials advertising NBC’s rights to broadcast Premier League games, and the creation of the series. Weiss writes: “Now, his naïve optimism represents, not self-centeredness, but openheartedness.” While I would press her claim of Lasso’s naïvete, I value very much the spirit she captures with the observation of his “openheartedness.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Sampley, J. Paul. “The First Letter to the Corinthians.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X*. Keck, et al, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002. pp. 773-790.

^{iv} 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, beginning, “I wrote to you in my letter ...” and concluding, “... Drive out the wicked person from among you.” Paul’s reference and argument here are challenging and could be read to further divide, rather than reconcile the conflicts present in the congregation.

^v Sampley, 776.

^{vi} Sampley, 775.

^{vii} 1 Corinthians 8:1.

^{viii} 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

^{ix} Of course, his name is “Rupert.”

^x “The Diamond Dogs.” *Ted Lasso*, written by Jason Sudeikis, Bill Lawrence, and Brendan Hunt, season 1, episode 8, AppleTV+, September 18, 2020.

^{xi} “Barbecue Sauce.”

^{xii} Lord, have mercy: it was so windy on the Square this morning!