

6 Easter May 22, 2022

BELIEVE

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Despite having wealth and privilege, the world had not been kind to Rebecca Welton. As a child, she witnessed her father's frequent infidelity to her mother, which made her angry and sad and she grew to resent her father. Later in life, she divorced her husband of 12 years because she discovered he had been having quite a few extra marital affairs. All this pain hurt Rebecca deeply, so much so that she devised and enacted a plan of revenge to hurt her ex-husband by hurting the only thing she believed he truly loved: his European soccer team, which she acquired in the divorce.

As the new owner of the team, Rebecca fired the head coach and replaced him with a man named Ted Lasso, an American from Kansas who was head coach of a college American football team. Rebecca didn't choose Ted because of his winning record or philosophy. She chose him because of a video clip she saw of him dancing with his team after they won a championship game and thought he looked like an idiot. Someone so inept he would lead her ex-husband's beloved soccer team to lose so terribly it would break his heart and he would feel the pain she was feeling. Ted moved from Kansas to England, and Rebecca seemed blissfully unaware that her plan was going to hurt Ted, the other coaches, employees, and soccer players. All she cared about was hurting the man who had hurt her, to give to him as he and the world had given to her.

Fans of the Apple TV television series *Ted Lasso* recognize the plot of this popular and award-winning show. For those who have yet to watch it, or have judged it as fluff entertainment, this series is much deeper than it looks. The main character finds himself in a situation where he has been set up to fail, and despite being sabotaged every step away, he still manages to live into his belief that love, kindness, care for each other, support and true teamwork are not just what happens on a sports field; they are the way to live even in the face of the worst the world can throw at you. Despite the odds, despite being constantly underestimated, Ted still manages to change his part of the world for the better by loving and believing.

Ted lives his belief in a myriad of ways. One is greeting Rebecca every morning with a small pink box of freshly baked homemade cookies, called biscuits now that he is in England. He calls this morning ritual "Biscuits with the Boss". At

first Rebecca rejects the cookies, and Ted's attempts to get to know her better. He accepted her refusal by persevering, bringing her biscuits every morning. Eventually Rebecca starts observing the way Ted treats people and manages his players. He isn't focused on wins, losses, or ties. Instead, he is dedicated to helping his players become the best versions of themselves on and off the field, or pitch as it is called in European soccer. His belief is that people who care for each other will work together better, and this will lead to true success.

As the series progresses, we see how Ted's belief starts to change everyone around him, including Rebecca who was inspired to show kindness to a young woman by offering her a job, which leads to an empowering, beautiful friendship between the two women. Rebecca even shows Ted compassion in an episode that reveals he is also struggling with loss due to his own divorce. No one is perfect in the world of *Ted Lasso*, but there is something stronger than the many fears, insecurities, and hurts all the characters in the series have that makes it loved and reflects what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Because this is a series that is about healing and growth, not soccer.

I won't spoil the show too much by telling you Rebecca changes so much she eventually repents by confessing her plan to Ted. After listening to her confess how she's suffered after realizing she was hurting good people because of her desire for revenge, Ted simply, without any drama, tells Rebecca he forgives her. Divorce is hard, he says, no matter what side you are on. Then he says something that sums up his belief and what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel: "I believe if you care about someone and you have a little love in your heart, you can get through anything together."

This happens to be what I believe, too. Not because a TV character said it. But because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus I believe a little love can change the world for the better through healing, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. "I do not give as the world gives," Jesus said in today's Gospel. The world may have so much that is beautiful and good; trees and flowers, birds and butterflies, oceans, lakes, rivers and streams, delicious fruits and vegetables, chocolate, pets, baseball, books, people we love, TV series and movies. But the world also has so much inequality, divisions and suffering that leads people to lash out and hurt others sometimes this can spoil what is good. One example, social media algorithms are designed to be negative because that is what gets more attention than positive images or messages and this is harming the mental

and emotional wellbeing of people all around the world contributing to an increase of hatred, racism, misogyny, paranoia, fear, and violence.

When Jesus responded to the question of how his followers will know him when they are in the world by saying he does not give as the world gives, this is what he meant. Jesus was not diminishing the good things of the world. He was acknowledging the disparities, the evil, the harm, the ways people just don't care that are pervasive in the world. These harmful disparities and evil are so common, so accepted, too often they are called "normal".

Which is why you might hear people like me say we have no desire to "return to normal", as we believe the pandemic has revealed how those disparities and lack of care for each other, especially the vulnerable among us, harms all of us. We were and still are hopeful there would be more changes to our world that would make room for us all and we would create something better than what passed for normal before the pandemic. Because this is the kind of change Jesus was talking about in the Gospel.

The portion of John's Gospel we heard today is part of Jesus' long goodbye speech to his disciples after the Last Supper and before his arrest, trail, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. In John's Gospel, this speech is both Jesus' attempt to prepare his disciples for what is about to happen and a message to those who follow Jesus after his resurrection. How even when we can't see Jesus, he is still with us, through our belief in him and how we live that belief by caring for each other. This is what it means to keep his word. Doing so will not only help us recognize Jesus, our choices and actions can reveal a love the world does not understand, a love the world fears, yet despite all odds is a love with that can and does bring healing, hope, and new life as an antidote to the pain, violence, and inequality the world mistakes for normal.

We also have this portion of John's Gospel this morning in anticipation of the feast of Jesus' ascension into heaven which the church celebrates on Thursday. This feast day is not so much about the mystery of how Jesus was lifted into heaven as it is about how the church is not intended to be a group of sad people looking back with admiration for Jesus. As his followers we have more than the memory of the historical Jesus. We have the risen Christ who appears to us in the very world he came to redeem, the world we all live in. It isn't always easy to recognize Jesus, which is why we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, who helps us recognize Jesus even in secular things like TV series and inspires us to live the love of God in the world. We don't have to give as the world gives. We don't

have be cynical and mean, even when we are hurt or feel like we are right and everyone else is wrong. We can choose another way. The way of the love of Christ.

A way that for *Ted Lasso* looked like homemade biscuits in a pink box, kindness, and forgiveness. For those of us who don't live in a TV show, we can make the choice to love in the face of all that is harmful, even though it is not an easy choice. It is not easy to be different in a world that values conformity. It is not easy to be kind in the world when cynicism is popular. It is not easy to be generous in the world where greed is considered to be good. It is not easy to make sacrifices and care for each other in a world where getting what we want is believed to be more important than another's wellbeing. It is not easy to forgive when we have been hurt or when we have failed to live into our own expectations or those of others in the world that values punishment, manipulation, and revenge. It is not easy to give the love of Christ to a world that does not appear to want it nor appreciates it.

But just because it isn't easy doesn't mean it isn't the choice Jesus and the Holy Spirit wants us to make. Because I believe, like Ted Lasso, a little love can change the world and make it more like heaven here on earth. As Jesus also says in today's Gospel, "I have told you all this so when it does occur, you may BELIEVE."