

October 15, 2023: Luke 15:15-32
Leadership Lessons from Ted Lasso-Patience
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“Perfect is boring,” Coach Lasso’s assistant coach, Coach Beard, declares in the series finale. Perhaps if we had to pick a subtitle for the show, this quote would be in the running. The collection of characters we find in Ted Lasso, much like the collection of characters we find in real life, demonstrates the complexity of human beings. We are greedy and generous. We forgive, and we hold grudges. We are anxious and excited. Often, we are all over the map. Sometimes, though, we get stuck in just one place, and the harder we try to get unstuck, the deeper we sink. And when that happens, there are times when we are tempted to just stop trying and to let shame and disappointment rob us of hope for the future.

My experience has taught me that hope very often comes in the form of second chances. In the end, there isn’t a single one of us who will get through life without the need of a second chance. This week I’ve been wondering what it would be like to live as if we believed that. What would it be like to navigate our relationships knowing that, at some point, we will all find ourselves stuck in a place far from where we belong and require a second chance (I say second chance, other preachers might use the word grace.)? How would our relationships be different if we expected that we would need to exercise patience with literally everyone in our lives? Sometimes I think we operate in exactly the opposite way. We are just surprised and annoyed when people don’t act right.

We all get stuck. Stuck in unhealthy patterns. Stuck in our mistakes. Stuck in the past. Just stuck. And sometimes we can unstick ourselves, but very often, we require the help of other people, help in the form of grace...aka patience and second chances. If it was any other way, life would be boring. Because it is true, perfect is boring.

Today’s text is my favorite parable. It is one of three parables in Luke 15 which are told in response to the grumbling of some Pharisees and scribes. We want to always be sure, as we interpret our biblical texts, that we don’t read them in ways that perpetuate anti-Semitism, especially now when we know anti-Semitism is especially prevalent. So let me say a few words about this Jewish leaders who the author of Luke says were grumbling.

The way this author and the other gospel writers talk about Pharisees and scribes leaves the reader with the impression that Pharisees and scribes were just straight up bad people. They weren't. I mean...like any other group, I'm sure some of them were. But some of them weren't. Their job as keepers of Jewish law was to ensure laws were followed and their tradition was protected. What Jesus's followers believed about Jesus being the fulfillment of prophecy (being the Messiah) was not in keeping with their tradition, so to protect Judaism, they expelled the people who believed that. So, as the gospels were being written, the communities for which they were written were being cast out and isolated, and they blamed the keepers of the law. These writings were impacted by what was going on when they were written, more than a generation after Jesus was killed. It is anti-Semitic to point to Jewish leaders and declare them bad. It isn't hard to see how dangerous that is.

Which brings me to some questions I've been asked about what's going on right now in Israel, I am going to detour slightly. The stated goal of Hamas is to exterminate the Jewish people. This objective has nothing to do with Israel as a nation, it is about hatred and fear. In this regard, Hamas is no different than the Nazis in Germany. The dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians (and this is overly simplistic), is about land, but what is happening now is not about that. Hamas does not represent the Palestinians. Hamas is oppressing the Palestinians at the same time they are behaving aggressively toward Israel. It is important to know that if we were to ask average Israelites and Palestinians, they would tell us they long for peace. For a very long time, this dispute has been much more about the people in power trying to keep their power than it has been about what is best for the people...on both sides. But again, what Hamas is doing now is not even about that. It is about hatred, and it is terrorism. Anti-Semitism is as dangerous now as it has ever been, so attention to good biblical interpretation matters.

Okay, back to our story...some Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about Jesus hanging out and eating with tax collectors and sinners, so Jesus told three stories. One about a lost sheep, one about a lost coin, and the other about a lost son. This is the story of the lost son:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son

gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father^[d] said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Because they are people, all the characters in this story are complex. This family is a bit of a mess, probably because the women are absent from the story. Let's start with the youngest son. He insists that his father give him his share of the inheritance before his death. According to Jewish scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, it wasn't uncommon or shameful or negative for fathers to do so. What may have been unusual was for the son to ask his father to do so. Anyway, the son does ask, and the father complies. My guess is that the father assumed his son would use his inheritance to build his own life and wealth. The story tells us that didn't happen. Instead, the son partied it away and ended up in the worst possible place for a good Jewish man...working with pigs. We don't why he initially left. Did something or someone drive him away from home or was he stuck in his own greed and selfishness? Human beings are complicated...it could be a little of both. Either way, let's leave him there for a minute.

The older son doesn't enter the story until near the end. He wasn't present to send his brother off. He wasn't standing with his dad, watching for his return. Presumably, he wasn't there because he was working. He hadn't taken his money and left. He was doing the "right thing." The older son might very well be the voice of wisdom in the story or he might have been so stuck on being right that he missed the whole point of family and belonging. Human beings are complicated...it could be a little of both. We will leave him there for a minute too.

Now we come to the father. Right or wrong, he gave the youngest son what he asked for. The characters, their motives, their feelings, and their experiences all collide at the end of the story, and it is complicated, and there is enough blame to go around. The youngest son returns broke, and instead of being turned away or treated as if he isn't family, he is extravagantly welcomed by the father. At this point, the father either has very poor boundaries or is an example of extravagant love and welcome.

Let's see where y'all land. How many of you think the father in the story is an example of someone with really poor boundaries? How many of you think he is an example of extravagant love? Does your response change when I point out that the party is already in progress when the older son stumbles on it? The father didn't bother to go tell him his brother had returned. He wasn't actually invited to come to the party until he found the party, "Oh, yeah, we meant to invite you. You didn't get the invitation? That's weird. We sent it."

So now, is the father an example of extravagant love and welcome? Maybe. But he's complicated too. Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you the hurt child who squandered your gifts and wandered far from where you belong? Have you hurt other people along the way? Are you the child who prides yourself on doing the right thing and wonders why people don't act right? Does your judgment of others keep others or yourself from true belonging? Are you the father who loves deeply, but because of blurred boundaries and messed up priorities, the ones you love don't always feel loved or feel like they belong? Or are you, like I suspect most of us are, a mess of all of them?

And where is God in this story? Because over the years, we have usually placed God in the Father's spot, haven't we? "Like the Father, God watches and waits for us and always welcomes us home when we return." Right?

What if God isn't any of these characters? What if God is God, and is patiently loving us as we are, no matter which character or which side of that character we are? Maybe, if Jesus did tell a story like this, he was trying to say that God gets us and holds us in complex and competing realities - Pharisees and sinners and tax collectors and scribes. Sons and daughter, fathers and mothers, friends, and neighbors. We are not perfect. We don't have it all figured out, but the love of God holds us as we try to figure it out. We will argue. We will distance ourselves from each other. We will hurt people. We will say we are sorry - sometimes mean it and sometimes not. And, hopefully we will experience joy and celebrate together too.

The truth is, we cannot get to real justice, real love, real healing, real family, or real belonging, unless we are willing to be honest about the complexity of our struggles, our pain, and our possibilities. Jesus, sitting at [the] table with "sinners" and in tension with his colleagues in faith, tells a story of a very complicated life together. One that isn't finished. One that calls us to examine ourselves...Some of us need better boundaries. Some of us need to fight to be heard. Some of us need to have our hearts transformed toward the common good and away from selfishness. Some of us harm ourselves most, while others lash out at others.¹

¹ https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2021/03/March31-mfgmqb.pdf, enfleshed, Liturgy that Matters, Luke 15:1-3, 11-32, March 31, 2019, accessed 10/12/23.

We are all different, but God calls all of us family. We belong to each other, whether we run away or disagree, even when we are stuck, and as we get unstuck, we are all connected.

The characters in the Ted Lasso series are complicated too. With the benefit of hindsight, since the series has ended, we can see that each was stuck in their own way. For most of his life, Ted was stuck in the grief of his father's death. He ran from it and suppressed it for many years. He was able to get himself unstuck as he helped the people around him do the same.

When unable to see past what seemed impossible, Ted proclaimed, "You say impossible, but all I hear is *I'm possible*." It was through patience and second chances that Ted showed Rebecca that the scars of her ex-husband's abuse did not have to create new scars in herself and others. Her ownership of the team began as a way to destroy her ex-husband, but it ended up being the way to belonging. She found her way home.

It was through patience and second chances that Ted showed Nate that he didn't have to stay stuck in his own shame and feelings of inadequacy. One of the central plot points in season 3 was Nate's estrangement from the team and how Ted did not reciprocate his grudge, but Assistant Coach Beard did.

Ted took Coach Beard aside to talk to him about this, he said to him, "I hope that either all of us, or none of us, are judged by the actions of our weakest moments, but rather the strength we show when and if we're ever given a second chance." This talk between the coaches causes Beard to make a stark revelation about his own life, thereby thawing things out between him and Nate and setting the stage for special moment in the series finale.

Being a human being is messy. Being in relationship with other human beings is complicated and generally messy. Perhaps what we can learn from the story of the father and his two sons and from our friend Ted Lasso and his friends, is that none of us will get it right all the time. We are all at the mercy of each other when it comes to second chances, so maybe we can make this journey we are on together a little lighter and a little less fraught if we are patient with one another and with ourselves. Some of us struggle more with patience with ourselves than with other people. We play tapes in our heads of all the mistakes we've made in the past. And it hinders our future. It hinders our relationships.

With each new day, we are given another chance to try again and some days will go really well, and some will not. So I will end with my absolute favorite thing Ted Lasso ever said. Sam, one of the players on the team, was beating himself up for getting beaten in practice and losing his cool.

Ted called him over and said, "Sam, you know what the happiest animal on Earth is? It's a goldfish. Y'know why? It's got a 10-second memory. Be a goldfish."

Be patient with yourself and others. Give second chances when you can. Be a goldfish. Amen.