

October 1, 2023: Luke 19:1-10
Leadership Lessons from Ted Lasso-Curiosity
World Communion Sunday
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From the March 6, 1916 edition of the Washington Post:

On the fifth floor of the apartment house at 203 West 130th street lives Miss Mable Godfrey. When she came to the house about seven months ago she brought Blackie, a cat of several years' experience of life.

The cat seldom left the apartment. He was a hearth cat, not a fence cat, and did not dearly love to sing. In other respects he was normal and hence curious.

Last Tuesday afternoon when Miss Godfrey was out Blackie skipped into the grate fireplace in a rear room. He had done this many times before. But he had not climbed up the flue to the chimney. This he did Tuesday. Blackie there remained, perched on the top of the screen separating the apartment flue from the main chimney, crying for assistance. Miss Godfrey, returning, tried to induce her pet to come down. If you are experienced in felinity (fee-lin-ity, you know that Blackie didn't come down.

On Wednesday the cat, curiosity unsatisfied, tried to climb higher—and fell to the first floor. His cries could still be heard by Miss Godfrey; who, to effect Blackie's rescue, communicated with the following departments:

1. Police department.
2. Fire department.
3. Health department.
4. Building department.
5. Washington Heights court.

Among them they lowered a rope to Blackie. But it availed neither the cat nor them anything.

Thursday morning, just before noon, a plumber opened the rear wall back of the chimney. Blackie was taken out. His fall had injured his back. Ten minutes later Blackie died.

The headline of this story, you may have guessed: Curiosity Killed the Cat.

This proverb is the primary message I heard about curiosity as a young person. It was used to warn of the dangers of unnecessary investigation, especially when the adult I was questioning didn't want to answer my questions. Curiosity killed the cat implies that being curious is dangerous. The original form of the proverb, now rarely used, was "Care killed the cat". In this instance, "care" was defined as "worry." So, which is it? Curiosity or caring that is dangerous? I'm going to say, generally, neither.

Most often, rather than being curious, we rush right to assumptions and judgment. When we encounter people and situations we don't understand or that make us uncomfortable, instead of asking questions and trying to learn from each other, we make a quick assessment based on appearances, ignorance, and sometimes fear. And because of our lack of curiosity, we end up missing many opportunities.

In the Gospel of Luke, the familiar story of Zacchaeus gives us a window into what Jesus thought about curiosity. This is Luke 19:1-10.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Because of his job, Zacchaeus had relationships with others that meant their suffering was his gain. Tax collectors made money because they collected more from the people than the government required. He was the head tax collector, so

he received money from the tax collectors under him. It was a sketchy system. Essentially, he took advantage of people who had less than he did. Perhaps he felt justified the whole time. Maybe he was simply a rule follower, "I can't help it. This is how the system works. I have to feed my family too." Maybe he felt he was more deserving than those from whom he had stolen. Perhaps he had been through a lot in his young life and felt he earned the right to take what he could. Whatever ways he justified his actions, his encounter with Jesus changed him. Something within him shifted too much to continue with business as usual.

If you've spent any time in Sunday School as a child, this story is familiar to you. Children love this story. Imagine...an important man in his important clothes...too short to see over the crowd...children can relate to that. So, he climbs up a tree to see what's happening. This is the part that kids really love because, honestly, they aren't used to adults showing curiosity. They are used to adults just knowing all the things or pretending they know all the things. Here is this character who is almost childlike in his curiosity about Jesus. Not only was he curious, but Jesus noticed his curiosity and didn't laugh at him or ignore him, he affirmed him. Out of all the people in the crowd, Jesus chose to go to Zacchaeus' house.

The character of Coach Ted Lasso in the series also embraced curiosity. I mentioned last week at the communion table that Ted baked biscuits every day for his boss, Rebecca. He continued to do this even after he found out that the only reason she hired him was that she hoped his inexperience would ruin the team. You see, she acquired the soccer team in her divorce settlement, and she wanted to destroy it because it was the only thing her ex-husband, Rupert, truly loved. She wanted to punish him by having to watch the team fail.

Eventually, she had no choice but to admit that to Ted. She also decided she didn't want the team to fail after all. Then she and Ted became friends (and he continued making her biscuits every day). One evening Rebecca and Ted were together in a bar, and Rupert happened to be there too. Ted and Rupert ended up playing a game of darts for a significant wager. If Rupert won, he got to choose the starting line-up for the last two games of Richmond's season. If Ted won, Rupert wasn't allowed to go anywhere near Rebecca's box seats at the games. The dart match commenced, each taking their turn and the match came down to Ted's final turn, and it didn't look good for him. As he takes that final turn, he shares the following leadership lesson:

“Guys have underestimated me my entire life and for years I never understood why – it used to really bother me. Then one day I was driving my little boy to school, and I saw a quote by Walt Whitman, it was painted on the wall there and it said, ‘Be curious, not judgmental.’ I like that.” (Ted threw a dart.)

“So, I get back in my car and I’m driving to work and all of a sudden it hits me – all them fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. You know, 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 had nothing to do with it. Because if they were curious, they would’ve asked questions. Questions like, ‘Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?’” (Ted threw another dart.) “To which I would have answered, ‘Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from age ten until I was 16 when he passed away...’” (Ted threw a double bullseye to win the game.)

Be curious, not judgmental.

Curiosity forces us to admit there are things we don’t know. Rupert didn’t know anything about Ted, so he assumed their dart game would result in an easy win. We do that sometimes, don’t we? We assume we know about people just by how they look, what they wear, or what they do for a living. We assume we know all about people based on what we see on the outside. Jesus’ followers in Jericho probably assumed Zacchaeus was the last person to be curious about Jesus. He was a rich man. Why would he want to know about this peasant man walking from town to town with a message that frankly, didn’t seem like it would be good news for a guy like him. But he was curious, curious enough to climb a tree to see Jesus. I imagine a tax collector climbing a tree wasn’t something people, including Jesus, saw every day. So, when Jesus looked up and saw him there, it got his attention and maybe piqued his curiosity. What happened next, though, is the craziest part of the story. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. And Zacchaeus welcomed him.

You know, Jesus would probably have been more comfortable staying with else. Going to Zacchaeus’ house, he risked the judgment of others. People might have assumed he sold out to the Empire when they found out he was hanging out with Zacchaeus. The text even tells us people were grumbling. It would have been

easier not to go there. But Jesus knew something good leaders know. Curiosity helps us connect with others, including difficult people or people who make us uncomfortable. Zacchaeus showed him that he was interested and willing to listen.

Sometimes when we deal with tough people and difficult situations, we shut down. We get defensive or we keep our distance from them. Jesus didn't do that and neither did Ted Lasso. In fact, throughout the series, he does the exact opposite when he encounters difficult people. Instead of shutting down, he opens up. He walks into tough situations instead of avoiding them and is curious about how to bridge the differences between him and challenging people. He tries to find a connection.

I already mentioned Rebecca, who was determined not to like Ted, yet instead of letting her door slam in his face, he kept pushing day after day to win her over with the biscuits. He cheerfully brought the biscuits every morning. Eventually, he wore her down.

There is another difficult character in the show, Jamie. Jamie was one of the players on the team, very talented...very big ego. Time after time, Jamie was disrespectful to Ted, and instead of getting defensive, Ted tried to figure out how to get through to him, what to do to connect with him. It took a very long time, but eventually, Jamie seemed ready to hear what Ted had to say. And with that, began to change.

Obviously, not every tax collector was open to hearing Jesus' message. There was something about Zacchaeus' life that had him searching. That made him curious; that made him want to see and hear this person and his message. Zacchaeus, despite living so contrary to the message of Jesus, welcomed him into his home. Suddenly connection and transformation become possible. I imagine nobody was more surprised by all of this than Zacchaeus' wife, who now had an unexpected house guest who seemed to be the cause of her husband's willingness to give their money away. Zacchaeus' curiosity opened him up to change.

Coach Lasso knew that for the team to change, the individuals had to change. The same is true for us. If we want the world to be different, we must be different. We must be curious and not judgmental. We must be willing to engage with people

like Zacchaeus, people who have profited from harmful systems, maybe even profited off the pain of people we care about. When we see an opportunity, a little glimpse of openness, that's when we need to get curious and start talking to people. That's when there is the potential for connection and understanding that bring about new possibilities – within ourselves, between us, and within them.

That's the message of the communion table. We gather there, knowing it's a place of over-the-top welcome and we don't get to decide who is invited because everyone is invited. While there, we encounter the story of Jesus again, the story that was good news to people who needed some good news. Today, on a World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the good news of welcome and inclusion that is for everyone. Amen.