

October 8, 2023: Mark 10:46-52
Leadership Lessons from Ted Lasso-Listening
Rev. Kelley Becker

At a church I served as a youth minister, one of their traditions was to have worship outside one Sunday in the summertime. This service took place at Funks Grove, a heavily wooded spot about 5 miles outside of the city. The tradition started decades ago when the congregation was in their original building, which didn't have air conditioning. One Sunday each summer, the congregation would escape from the hot building to the shade of this beautiful, outdoor place. I am sure it was a fabulous idea in its day. But as time went on, a new building with air conditioning was built, and the worship style of the congregation changed becoming very tech-dependent.

The congregation continued to have an outdoor service each year. Still, instead of using the service as an opportunity to worship differently, the church staff was expected to haul extension cords, keyboards, microphones, and all the things out to Funks Grove.

To be clear, summer in central Illinois is hot and humid, much like here. So, in the middle of summer, we were leaving our air-conditioned building to worship in the heat while the worship service was as close to our "regular worship" experience as it could possibly be. It was dreadful. At the time, that church had two services every Sunday. On this day each year, the early service met at the church as usual. The staff participated in that service and quickly loaded the equipment up, and rushed it out to Funks Grove. By the time we were set up and worship started, our Director of Music had sweated through his dress shirt, my hair was a frizzy disaster and my dress pants were dirty, and our song leaders were stressed out because they didn't have the opportunity to warm up.

Our senior minister, though, was just fine. You see, he greeted people at the back of the sanctuary after the first service and then got in his car for a nice Sunday drive out to Funks Grove. He loved Outdoor Worship Sunday! After that service each year, we had a staff meeting in which we evaluated the service and made notes for the next year. I served that church for 10 years. Every single year the staff shared their frustration with having to race out there with equipment for a service that no longer served its original purpose. We no longer needed to escape the oppressive heat of the church building. In fact, every year, we went to the

oppressive heat. The mosquitos were awful. The trees blocked any breeze that would be blowing. Something always went wrong with the equipment. And every year, the senior minister said, "Well, I thought it went well, and several people commented after worship about how meaningful this tradition is, so we just need to deal with it." And by "we" he meant everyone except him.

By the end of my time at that church, I was finishing seminary and had noted how it felt to, year after year, not be heard. And I had seen that good leaders listen to the people they are leading. I think this gets twisted for so many leaders because they think if they listen to people, they are obligated to change their minds or agree with them, and, since they have no intention of doing those things, it's safer not to listen. Or, they don't want to listen because they don't want to hear what people really think. They don't want criticism, even if it's constructive and it's true; sometimes the truth hurts. From a practical perspective, listening to other people forces us to slow down, and we don't want to do that because our job is to "move things forward." But good leaders try not to leave people behind. No matter what or who we are leading or interacting with, listening is crucial.

In the story of Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus, Jesus was in a crowd of people, leaving Jericho and heading to Jerusalem. Think of this time in Jesus' ministry as "go time." The climax of the gospel story happens in Jerusalem. Jesus would finally show those Romans what was up in Jerusalem. There was no time to waste. His followers, especially the disciples, believed that the sooner they got there, the sooner they would be saved from the oppression of the Empire. This is Mark 10:46-52.

⁴⁶ They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher,^[h] let me see again." ⁵² Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

This story is both a miracle story and a call story. At the end of it, Bartimaeus physically sees, and he follows. In the final verse, Jesus named *faith* as the driving force behind Bartimaeus' behavior. The author uses the rest of the story to tell us what faith is. Bartimaeus's faith is not about reciting the correct confession or subscribing to certain doctrines. It is his unrelenting conviction that Jesus can and will rescue him from his need, and this is demonstrated from the beginning of the story. We understand his faith not only through what he says but especially from what he does. So, let's look for a minute at what he does.

First, he shows that he knows who Jesus is by calling him Son of David. By calling him that, he proclaims that Jesus, like King David, will save the people. The salvation they anticipated was not Jesus saving them from the angry sky God who threatens to remain separate from anyone who doesn't say and do the right things. No, the salvation they awaited was being physically saved from their present, very oppressive situation. For Bartimaeus, that meant saving him from the isolation of having a disability and the poverty that accompanies being unable to work and provide for himself.

Second, Bartimaeus persists even though the crowd tells him to be quiet. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Bartimaeus would not be silenced. He knew his life depended on him being heard.

Third, he expects that he will be transformed. We know this because, even before he gets to Jesus, he throws off his cloak. For a man who is blind, living on the streets begging, that cloak was his security. It shielded him from the sun and kept him warm at night. It was likely all he had.

And last, he asks Jesus for the right thing. "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus replies, "That I would see again." In those words, he declares that Jesus can bring the wholeness and deliverance the people seek. Bartimaeus' request is very different from the one given a few verses earlier when Jesus asked James and John what they wanted him to do for them. Their answer was, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." That had to have been a gut punch to Jesus who was trying to get people to understand that in a world reflecting God's ways, hierarchy isn't a thing. His own disciples didn't seem to be listening.

Bartimaeus asked Jesus for what he needed, and Jesus listened. For anyone who has ever been led by a leader who refused to listen to what they needed, this is the real miracle. Amid the noise of the crowd, the sssshhs of his followers, and his desire to get on with it and get to Jerusalem, Jesus stopped, he asked Bartimaeus what he needed, and he listened. He listened.

Throughout this series, we've used Coach Ted Lasso as an example of good leadership. We continue that today, looking at some scenes in which Coach Lasso showed up and modeled less talking and more listening.

I've mentioned before that when the Coach first arrived in the UK and began coaching soccer, he had no clue what soccer was all about, but he did know a lot about people, specifically leading people. Fans and team members alike made no secret of how they felt about his inexperience as a soccer coach. Ted, undeterred, showed up and did the things he knew how to do.

On his first day of interaction with the team, he set up a suggestion box in the locker room and encouraged the team to use it. He told them he was open to all suggestions and was willing to listen. As you can imagine, some of the suggestions were a little off color and most were not helpful at all. One of the suggestions, though, was to do something about the low water pressure in the showers. Apparently, this had been a problem for a long time, and it had never been addressed. In a surprise to everyone, a few days later, the team was showering with much more pressure-ful water pressure. This did not impact the team's win-loss record immediately, but it did increase morale by demonstrating that Ted listened and cared.

Coach Lasso often demonstrated his willingness to listen by taking a special interest in the locker room attendant Nate, whom he nicknamed "Nate the Great." In the series, we learn that Nate had been bullied in school and had worked his whole life to prove his worth to his father. Ted was always on the lookout for moments to build Nate's confidence, allowing him to contribute as a coach. He recognized that this support staff person knew much more about soccer than he did. There is one hilarious scene where Nate, one by one tells each player on the team what their problem is and then the season ends with Nate's promotion to assistant coach. Ted listened, and he validated.

Before Ted came along, the team pretty much used Nate as an emotional punching bag. They treated him like he was less than, showing no appreciation for all he did for them. They certainly did not see Nate as assistant coach material. In some ways, the team behaved like the crowd surrounding Jesus that day on his way out of Jericho. Bartimaeus had no value to them. He was just a blind man sitting by the road, a nobody until Jesus stopped and told them to call Bartimaeus to him. Both in Ted Lasso and the story of Bartimaeus, it was the way in which the leaders treated Bartimaeus and Nate that influenced how the followers and the team treated them. Leaders who listen, care, and validate demonstrate those qualities to the ones they lead, and that can be life-changing, for a whole organization and also for individuals.

People *are* watching how we treat people and listening to how we talk about people. Our neighbors watch how we treat each other and listen to how we talk about each other. We are called to reflect Jesus' ways and to reflect the Source of love in this world. I was at a board meeting Friday for a non-profit in Bartlesville. One of the staff members did a fabulous presentation that featured client survey results, which included some of the comments included on the surveys. Again and again, the clients said one of the ways this organization had served them well was by listening to and believing them. For many of these clients, the experience of being heard was new, and it changed their lives, and for some, it saved their lives.

I believe listening to each other, even to people with whom we disagree, is one way to live out our Disciples' identity of bringing wholeness to a fragmented world. Listening to people demonstrates their worth. Some beloveds have never been shown that in ways they have understood. And friends, those people are everywhere. They are here. They are worshiping at home. They served you in a restaurant. They made your coffee. They teach your children. They work in the desk next to you. They send letters to the editor that you disagree with. Listen to them.

I will end this morning with one more, perhaps the best example of Coach Lasso's gift for listening. In the premiere of season two, Ted's boss and friend, Rebecca, did not have available to her a woman with whom to have "girl talk," as she processed a dating dilemma. And Ted walked in. To say Rebecca was disappointed it was Ted and not her friend, Keely, is an understatement. Rebecca wanted some

advice bad enough she began to tell Ted what was happening. He repeatedly interrupted her with what he thought were witty questions. Realizing his wit wasn't welcomed at that moment, he says, "Rule No. 1: Even though it's called 'girl talk,' sometimes it needs to be more like, 'Girl, listen.'" Let us all take Ted's advice, "Listen." Amen.