

September 24, 2023: Numbers 11:1-30, 12:1-9
Leadership Lessons from Ted Lasso-Humility
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This summer, I know Anna spent some sermon time talking about the winds of change, preparing for change, and what change brings. In fact, I realized this week as I was reading and thinking about this sermon, that, a little over a month ago, Anna used the same text I'm preaching about to talk about change. What I know about organizational change is that there are right ways and wrong ways to lead people through change, and whether the people impacted by the change embrace it, is greatly influenced by the leader. So, as we look at Numbers 11 and 12 this morning, we will look at it as a lesson in leadership.

In the next 5 years, just as it always has, the world will change...a lot. If we want to remain relevant as we share Love and compassion with our community, we have to change too and, as we do, I hope we will influence positive change in our community.

Too often when we think of leaders, we have a focus that is too narrow. We think of people like CEOs, military generals, school principals, and legislators. But the truth is, we are all leaders. John Quincy Adams once said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader." Think for a moment about who has caused you to dream big dreams, do hard things, and be who you were created to be. A teacher? A parent? A friend? An author? A partner? A coach?

Leaders help us take the right path and change directions when we meander off course. They see things in us we don't and encourage us to become the best versions of ourselves. Sometimes they even help us avert disaster and give us courage amid life's chaos.

The Ted Lasso character in the series is a coach. In the United States, he was a college football coach. The series begins with Coach Lasso moving to the UK to coach a football team...not American football, European football, also known as soccer. He takes the job, not because he knows a lot about soccer, but because it was offered at a time when, frankly, he needed to put some distance between himself and his wife. He was deeply in love with her and she, well, she wasn't sure anymore.

Coach Lasso was like a fish out of water from the word go. He has a bit of a southern accent that wouldn't seem odd here in Oklahoma, but it was very noticeable among the Brits. On his first day of work, as he met his new boss, Rebecca, he was offered hot tea.

Having never tried English tea, he sipped and said, "You know I always figured that tea was gonna taste like hot, brown water. And you know what? I was right." Beyond things like accents and tea, the big example of Ted being a fish out of water is that he, the soccer coach for AFC Richmond, a professional hockey team, didn't know anything about soccer. In his first press conference, he demonstrated that when he referred to the 4 quarters of the game instead of 2 halves. In addition, when he told the reporters the players will give them everything they have, whether they win or lose; they remind him that their football games can end in a tie as well.

How in the world can he possibly lead a team to a winning season when he doesn't even know the game's rules? Leadership is challenging under the best circumstances and, as is often the case, the beginning of Lasso's soccer coaching career would not qualify as "the best circumstances."

The same was true for Moses, leader of the Israelites, whose leadership had much more at stake than a soccer season. In the Exodus story, he successfully led the people from Egypt, liberating them from Pharaoh. After escaping, the Israelites came to a desert where food and water were scarce. You may remember the story. When faced with the prospect of starving to death, there was complaining, but rightly so. They were vulnerable and afraid. God heard their complaints and supplied the Israelites with manna and quail to eat and water to drink.

Today's text, in Numbers 11, is like the Exodus story in that we find the Israelites complaining again. But God had a very different reaction to their complaining. Here, their complaining had lost the air of vulnerability and was replaced by the sounds of rebellion. Beginning in verse 1:

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it, and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ² But the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. ³ So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of

the Lord burned against them. ⁴The camp followers with them had a strong craving, and the Israelites also wept again and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

How frustrating this must have been for Moses who had been carrying messages to and from the people to God since leaving Egypt. Moses had been given a huge responsibility as their leader and now, the people were acting pretty ungrateful, and God was mad and starting fires. Moses was overwhelmed. I think God's anger was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. It had been a lot...trying to convince Pharaoh to let the people go, enduring the plagues, leading the people out of Egypt, wandering in the wilderness along with the people, bringing the concerns of the people to God, and being a prophetic voice from God to the people. By all definitions, Moses was a hero. He was the leadery-est leader the people had ever known. And yet, it didn't seem to be enough to avert disaster.

So, what does this stellar leader do when it becomes too much? What do we do when we are in charge and things start to go sideways? Do we create another spreadsheet hoping it says something different? Do we try to shift the blame onto others? Do we yell and slam doors so everyone knows the situation has deteriorated? Moses didn't do any of that. He did what good leaders do. He admitted he couldn't do it all by himself. The burden had become too great so he said to God, "I can't carry this alone, these people, this responsibility, is all too heavy for me." Moses was so distressed that he told God he would rather die than continue on.

Moses would not have wanted us to call him a hero. He didn't ask to be put on a pedestal. Our society today encourages a sort of hero culture. And what Moses experienced is exactly what happens today when we are given, pushed onto, or take up our own pedestal. When we believe we have the responsibility to do alone what the community should be doing together, we will fail. We might be able to hold it together and look good for a while, but eventually, it will become too much. Speaker, writer, and mentor, Lorna Davis, who self-identifies as a failed hero, writes, "In a world as complex and interconnected as the one we live in, the idea that one person has the answer is ludicrous. It's not only ineffective, it's dangerous, because it leads us to believe that it's been solved by that hero, and

we have no role. We don't need heroes. We need radical interdependence which is just another way of saying we need each other."¹

As if God had read those words, God told Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you. ¹⁷ I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself...Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy of the elders of the people and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied."

Moses gathered the elders at the tent because that was the special, holy place where God's presence resided. The story goes on to tell us that two of the elders didn't go to the tent, they stayed in the camp yet they too prophesied. There they were, in the middle of the messiness of ordinary life, among the people, having the same kind of encounter with God as the ones in the tent.

Word of this spreads fast. Moses' assistant, Joshua, when he heard what was happening, begged Moses to tell them to stop. Surely the people would be confused if God could just show up anywhere. They could challenge authority and that can't be good, right? But Moses was unbothered. He was more interested in prioritizing the accessibility of God than his own authority and control. This is what Moses said to Joshua, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" You see, Moses wasn't in it for the power. He wished everyone could encounter God like that.

Moses was humble. He recognized he wasn't the only one who could experience God. He wasn't the only one God could equip to lead the people. In this story, he demonstrated one of the reasons God chose him for leadership in the first place. This storyline continues in chapter 12 when Miriam and Aaron talk smack about Moses where the reader is told that Moses "is more humble than anyone else." God brought Moses and the two of them to the tent and said,

¹ enfleshed, "Liturgy that Matters," May 31, 2020, paid subscription, accessed, 9/21/23.

When there are prophets among you,
I the Lord make myself known to them in visions;
I speak to them in dreams.
⁷ Not so with my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.
⁸ With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles,
and he beholds the form of the Lord.

In this story, God honors humility, not hero culture.

Just as Moses recognized his own limitations, Ted Lasso recognized his. This week, I tried to think of a boss, to offer for comparison, who was as unlike Ted Lasso as they could be. Do you remember Dabney Coleman's character, Mr. Hart, in the movie 9-5? That character, in so many ways, was the polar opposite of Ted Lasso. The women who worked for him, whom he treated like props and regularly sexually assaulted, did everything for him and he took all the credit and made all the money.

Ted Lasso was very different. In that initial press conference in which he had been corrected about quarters vs. halves, he unashamedly proclaims, "Heck, you could fill two internets with what I don't know about football." He doesn't have to be the smartest person in the room. He doesn't have to be the loudest or the center of attention. He understands that being a successful leader is about more than sportsball. "For me," he says, "...success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field."

Throughout the series, Ted's lack of knowledge of football surfaces again and again. He never pretends like he has it all figured out. He laughs at himself and depends on the people around him: Assistant Coach Beard, the players, and even Nate, the guy who launders the players' uniforms and brings them water on the field. We saw this in episode 7 of the first season when Ted invited Nate to give the team a pep talk before a game, a job usually reserved for the coach. Ted is cursed at and laughed at by players, fans, and the media and the remarkable thing is that it doesn't squash his spirit or change how he treats others. He tunes out the noise and stays focused on his job, which he believed was helping the players be the best versions of themselves.

With Ted Lasso's arrival, he brought a big change in culture to AFC Richmond and eventually, his ways endeared him to his players. They began to appreciate that they could speak their minds to the coach, their input was valued, and they could see that the changes happening, in the team and for them as individuals, were necessary.

People want to follow humble leaders. The concept of humility has an interesting place in our culture. We like to see it displayed by athletes in post-game interviews and entertainers when accepting awards. But in our day-to-day society, humility as a value runs neither consistently nor deeply. It clashes with the individualism that is the American personae. Think of politicians, movie stars, and other famous people who speak on and on about subjects they know little about. And we listen!

We Americans tend to think highly of ourselves. As a culture, we see ourselves as self-reliant and self-made. Unique in the world. But, I wonder, is anyone claiming to be self-made really self-made? Or did we receive a boost from the investments of others who laid the foundation for that success, the good fortune of where we were born, to whom we were born, or access to quality tax-payer funded K-12 education which, we are learning here in Oklahoma, is not guaranteed and something we all must protect.

And what about Christians? Our sacred text tells us to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, yet I think many people on the outside of Christianity would question whether we are taking that "walking humbly" instruction seriously. We have been telling the world for a long time that if they don't believe the right things, as defined by us, they will spend all eternity in an imaginary place we call hell. We talk about accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and savior as if we own the Jesus story. Many, many Christians worship the Bible, their rules, and their buildings, and ignore what Jesus said was humanity's true purpose in the world, "Love God and love one another."

You may have noticed the sign above the sanctuary door as you entered. There is a picture of the sign on the screen for you who are worshipping at home. A sign like that hangs in the AFC Richmond locker room. The sign symbolizes Coach Lasso's approach to life and his approach to coaching. We must first believe in ourselves

and our own equipped-ness and gifts. And we must believe in one another and our connectedness. He says, "Belief doesn't just happen 'cause you hang something up on a wall." To believe in yourself, to believe in one another, man, that's fundamental to being alive."

And I would add, also to believe in whatever it is you believe is greater than all of us...God, the Universe, Love...Human beings are incredible and unique and have the capacity for so much good, and we are so much more when we celebrate one another. What would the world be like if we took a cue from President Adams and inspired others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more? What would the world be like if, like Moses and like Ted Lasso, we cared less about holding on to power and more about people? How would the world, how would this church, change? I invite you to ponder that this week and to consider the ways in which you can lead with humility this week. Amen.