

He arrives at his new job. First thing, he puts a sign above the office door. Worn yellow paper, been other places before, with a word scrawled in kid paint: Believe. It's like the show's theme. What does it really mean? Maybe you've also laughed and teared enough to know *Ted Lasso* is about far more than English pro soccer. What does Ted get others to believe? Not minds around some special strategy or style of play. Not work 120% hard knowing you'll win the game. As gruff cursing, aging star Roy tenderly reads bedtime stories to his niece and stands up for others persecuted. As young Nigerian Sam wrestles with loneliness and ethics. As bitter club owner Rebecca hires coach Ted and schemes against the team all to ruin her slimy ex-husband's one true love—the club—but gradually she softens, transforms through Ted's unceasing, unconditional care. As they all share loss, fault, forgiveness, courage ... far beyond locker room banter, I believe we see the Holy in what's so truly human. Friends, sports and comedy in sermons are risky as our personalities and tastes vary. Still, with a bit of fun this morning, let's try to hear good news as Paul coached the Romans.

What word feels near, in our hearts? That's what it means for us to believe. No mental gymnastics. No moral perfection. It's desire, inspiration, what we "give our heart to." Believe. Maybe a word is *gratitude*. Ted grins: "I feel like we fell out of the lucky tree and hit every branch on the way down, ended up in a pool of cash and Sour Patch Kids."

Or *forgiveness*, as Sam rues a mistake: “Sam, you know what the happiest animal on Earth is? It's a goldfish. You know why? It's got a 10-second memory. Be a goldfish, Sam!” Maybe for a gifted, caustic egocentric megastar it's *humility*. “Jamie,” coach Lasso purrs, “I think that you might be so sure that you're one in a million, that sometimes you forget that out there, you're just 1 of 11. And if you figure out some way to turn that 'me' into 'us'...the sky's the limit for you.” Believe.

Friends, here's the thing about “being a believer.” Beneath the surface of how we dress up life or fancy words of faith, we're all just humans with goodness and faults, frailties and possibilities. We try to live abundantly, ever more lovingly, longing for peace amid trouble. It's always been that way since homo sapiens discovered fire and a fire inside. All the stories, letters, poems we read as holy scripture began as people observing common life and trying to express emotion and scared inspiration they feel. Some people are more learned, practiced, esteemed for being experts in faith. But Jesus and Paul, like Coach Lasso ... they weren't going for professional perfection. They're just trying to offer hope and healing through human connections. You see, we're all tempted like Jesus—to gain power, to go life on our own, to guard status and privilege. Right now, we lament with lumpy throats, falling tears, broken hearts, rising fear and anger in an extreme where this selfish deal with the devil leads. Ukrainian homes, shops, city halls and concert halls reduced to rubble, as innocents continue to cower in subways and flee through nonstop explosions—millions of ordinary people like you and me going about daily life instantly made refugees.

Here's the word, the promise Paul wants us to believe. Here's good news he urges us to give our hearts to. Everyone who calls on God, who seeks the presence and power of Holy Love in their lives will be saved. Not that life will be perfect. Not that our world won't have problems. Not all hurts, illness, wrongs erased. Not that we can just escape into heavenly bliss. No. When we believe, we receive power to face all

that fear with love. We claim purpose of serving others more than self, pouring out ourselves in sacrifice. We know new life. Yes. When we confess Jesus is Lord, that is we give our lives to his way in our world more than anything else—grace, compassion, mercy, humility, solidarity—and we believe in resurrection, we will be saved. We will live fully with gratitude, joy, meaning, peace despite all evidence otherwise.

Friends, confessing in this way is no magic formula we recite, no spell said with just the right inflection and wand wave ... \*poof\*. Beneath the surface of how we look, however culture categorizes and biases, we embody the beauty of life abundant. Beyond limits we've known, we feel compelled, we envision and live into possibility. One believes with the heart and is justified, Paul explains—that is reoriented, and reordered by God's way in the world ... like words lined on paper, left or right justified. One confesses and so is saved, sharing life in the fullness of grace and peace as God wants for all people and creation starting now.

In *Ted Lasso* there's no clear connection with Christianity. Still, how Ted touches others fulfills Paul's appeal to early Christians in Rome. How can others live if they've not believed? How can they believe if they've not heard? unless someone shares good news? Through comic ignorance of soccer and Britain, we quickly see that Ted's seemingly incessant surface positivity arises from his own deep hurt and vulnerability. End of his marriage and panic attacks from his past stirs compassion and true hope—seeing life clearly. Facing it head on. Heart-fully believing in possibility beyond apparent end. Ted gets intimate over dinner with a reporter trying to humiliate him.

“I love coaching,” he confesses. “Now, I'm gonna say this again just so you didn't think it was a mistake the first time. For me, 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. And it ain't always easy. But neither is growing up without

someone believing in you.” For whom that we know, friends, might that be true? It’s clear when Jamie’s dad bursts into the locker room drunk, berating him as soft, because Jamie passed the ball rather than shoot himself. The team throws out his father as Jamie stands sobbing. His arch-nemesis Roy walks up to hold him in a long embrace. And so, the Bible says, Joseph embraces his brothers. And Jesus tells a parable of a prodigal. This is humanity. This is holy. This I believe.

Actors and writers confess to being baffled by *Ted Lasso*’s immense popularity. Maybe that alone is cause for hope. Amid so much dark, demeaning media, caustic politics, and chaos, uncertainty, anxiety through with Covid and now Ukraine, that so many people hear good news in a show who’s basic premise is kindness matters and caring can change the world—maybe that’s reason to believe! Season one ends with great disappointment. Always happy and eager Dani Rojas often exclaims, “Football is life!” He repeats it so much, it’s like the show’s writers asking: “do you get the point yet?” Joys, humor, admitting faults, growing together through honest grace, facing disappointment ... I wonder what life hangs heavy in our hearts today. Season one ends with the whole cast together as Ted proclaims a word, call it a sermon:

This is a sad moment right here. For all of us. And there ain't nothing I can say, standing in front of you right now, that can take that away. But please do me this favor, will you? Lift your heads up and look around ... Yeah? Look at everybody else in here. And be grateful that you're going through this sad moment with all these other folks. Because I promise you, there is something worse out there than being sad, and that is being alone and being sad. Ain't nobody in this room alone. [Now,] onward.

Friends, I confess I enjoy soccer. Yes, too much money, ego, cultural acclaim. Still, in real human life there seem to me few promises better than hearing Liverpool’s home stadium at capacity with ordinary vastly diverse people singing their hearts

out: You'll Never Walk Alone. Someday I'd like to be there and share the song. And in a way, every day, I am ... right here, with you. As we share news from a doctor's visit. As we remember family and friends still suffering in Cameroon. As we rejoice with a neighbor at CTV who got a job. As we stand in solidarity as the symphony plays the Ukrainian national anthem. That's what I look forward to celebrating in our annual meeting today. That's what all our meetings, service, and conversations of all kinds embody. In all we say and do together, friends, we confess Jesus is Lord, and we believe resurrection in Christ, new life in the power of Holy Love is possible for us, for every person, for all creation.

Feeding that promise and care, Ted Lasso bakes shortbread biscuits and brings Rebecca a box each morning. And for Christmas each year, all players who can't go home get invited to join one staff member's family dinner potluck. Usually, one or two come. In season two, they all arrive with favorite cultural dishes. I kinda wish we had shortbread. But Jesus has baked up for us gluten-free morsels all can share. And so, all who hunger come to this table with all our potluck personalities and possibilities. We come to give our hearts to Jesus' truth of Holy Love. We come to choose Jesus' way of grace and peace for all. As this Lenten journey to Easter begins, we come to share resurrection life as we serve our Lord, Jesus Christ. Dear friends, we come to believe!

Thanks be to God. Amen.