

Are You Still Watching?

**Using Pop Culture to Tune In,
Find God, and Get Renewed
for Another Season**

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Chapter Three

Barbeque Sauce: Ted Lasso, Jesus, and the Hermeneutic of Curiosity

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The Prince's Head pub is the central gathering place in town, away from the field, locker room, and front office, where everyone—fans, coaches, owners, and onlookers alike—celebrate, lament, and discuss their beloved football club, AFC Richmond. It's noticeably tense inside. Coach Ted Lasso, the American football coach recently hired to lead AFC Richmond, has challenged Rupert, the club's former owner, to a game of darts. The wager is large; if Rupert wins, he sets the starting lineup for AFC Richmond in the last two games of the season, effectively shutting out Coach Lasso from the job he was called to do. The scoreboard says "Rupert" on one side and "Wanker" on the other, a clear sign of the crowd's allegiance. The game is close as they enter the final throw. Coach Lasso needs to throw a seemingly impossible round to win. With his friends, fans, and even betrayer huddled close to watch what happens, he pauses and reflects:

You know, Rupert, guys have underestimated me my entire life. And for years, I never understood why. It used to really bother me. But then one day, I was driving my little boy to school, and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman, and it was painted on the wall there. It said, "Be curious, not judgmental." I like that.

Ted throws his first dart right on target as the crowd cheers.

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 were curious. You know, they thought they had everything all figured out. So, they judged everything, and they judged everyone. And I realized that they're underestimating me...who I was had nothing to do with it. 'Cause if they were curious, they would've asked questions. You know? Questions like, "Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?"

Ted throws his second dart which lands squarely on target.

To which I would've answered, "Yes, sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father, from age ten till I was sixteen, when he passed away"...Barbecue sauce.³⁴

Ted throws the final dart, and it is a bullseye...

A man travels far from home to expand on his gifts and what he feels called to do in this world: coach, teach, help, and lead. To some, it may look like authoritative work; getting to say who is in and who is out is often the work of the one in charge, the one casting the vision for what comes next. But this man has always been more of a team player. All we (his fans and followers) can do now is have faith that if we follow his lead, he will lead us to victory.

He is a stranger in a strange land, and he does not have an insider's perspective on customs, foods, languages, and ways

of being. Our confidence in him is not guaranteed but earned. Yet there is an air of trust that is building above the low hum of dissent from the wider community. We know who he is right from the beginning when we were given his resume. Every part of the story in which we fear the worst for him—and therefore, for us—he shows up with vision and hope. He is consistent. He has known from the beginning that this was about the journey, not the destination; all he needs now is to know that we aren't *just* fans but participants, each called to do our part to the best of our abilities for communal success. Our individual job descriptions may vary, but at the heart of it all, his leadership requires us to put in the hard work of being present with each other and helping the team succeed in every season. Even in seasons of certainty, where the win or the loss seems inevitable, he reminds us to be curious, not judgmental. And so Jesus asks:

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And [the disciples] said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Mt. 16:13–16, NRSV)

We are all born into traditions. Some traditions are celebrated and shared, while others we help end for a myriad of reasons. But nonetheless, all traditions inform our future generations. In church, it is not uncommon to hear stories about the place where family and faith traditions merge. Sayings like “I was raised in this church” tell us something about both the family and the faith community. I, however, was neither born into a faith tradition nor raised in the church. I was born into the tradition of team sports and have been a faithful follower ever since.

In August of 2020, when Apple TV+ released *Ted Lasso*, everyone tuned in to see how Coach Lasso would navigate his new world. Twitter exploded with quotes and memes, Halloween

costumes of the cast were inevitable and unavoidable, and suddenly people who had never been interested in sports found themselves actively participating in a soccer fan base with opinions on players, coaches, and a winning strategy. While these conversations were happening everywhere, Coach Lasso's leadership posture of curiosity seemed to especially resonate with people in faith communities. In a tradition that has relied heavily on certainty through statements of faith, doctrines, and creeds, Coach Lasso's operating ethic—summed up in Season 1 Episode 8 as, "Be curious, not judgmental,"³⁵ which I have named as the hermeneutic of curiosity—seemed to resonate deeply with people as a way to posture themselves toward growth in their faith development, communal care, and hospitality.

As we tuned into each episode, suddenly we as people of faith were not seeing a soccer team fight against relegation but rather a congregation struggling to keep up with the changing times. We could all name the Jamies in our community—the young people we prayed for who have abundant gifts to share and strengthen our community, but whose passions, clothes, language, and focus challenge the institution. So we hold them back until they learn to pass the ball better and become more like us; but often, they just find another team. Or the Rebeccas—strong women we have been told to fear or to silence because they don't fit into the role the church has defined for them. And the church is ripe with Roys—established members with recognized ways of doing things who are often hesitant to affirm anything new, but who have the earned authority to effect big change within the community.

Each *Ted Lasso* episode turned our altars into grassy fields and our congregants into a team full of players. We felt each win—a new gift, a new member, a new ministry—and yet relegation still looms in the not-too-distant future. So we turn to our coach, hoping there is a solution. Maybe a trick play will bring about immediate success. And while Coach loves a good set piece, he knows a fast and quick goal won't actually address a team's

brokenness. We are certain we have all the tools we need. We have all the right players, we practice, we even put money into the field; none of the *things* for success are missing. But that is why we have Coach, a person whose vision is communal and whose authority is shared with the team captain and kit man alike. Coach appreciates but isn't invested in the short game. He has a plan, but it's a strategy that takes intention and commitment. We are playing to win the season, not just the game. So we need to keep asking, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt. 16:15) And maybe more importantly, who do we say that we are? That is the coach's long game. And there is one proven and effective strategy...

Curiosity.

Curiosity is how we move forward. That's how we heal a broken team. That is how we win.³⁶

Certainty in Christ may be the destination, the big W of salvation some people want, but curiosity is the journey Jesus requires of us. The journey he not only models for us but accompanies us on. Jesus knows that curiosity is the real name of the game. Winning was never about the number of goals in the net or people in the pews, but how we work together as a team and how we treat the players on the other teams too. Or as Coach Lasso says:

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.³⁷

Coach Lasso's hermeneutic of curiosity helps us remember that there is always more than what we know. His curiosity models for the church a way we, too, can show our belief in another's abilities and support the ways God is at work in their life. The

hermeneutic of curiosity opens up a team roster for gifts we didn't know we needed, and it helps a church community find God in new ways, by naming the gifts in someone that have traditionally gone unnamed or unseen.

For example, what might a church gain in their relationship with God if they asked a Jamie in their community to teach Bible Study? What if the unique way "Jamie" exists in this world is an interpretive lens for the text that their community hasn't experienced before? What would you discover if you asked the Rebeccas, who have untapped leadership gifts in abundance, what God is calling them to in the life of the church and what might it look like for the community to support that ministry? And what might happen if we ask the Roys to rest for a moment, so that another player like Sam or Dani, with a full tank of energy, might help the team in a new way? How might that rest renew the Roys for the games and season ahead? How might being curious about individuals shift the team dynamic in ways that renew rather than relegate? Ted Lasso's hermeneutic of curiosity is not only a strategy to address issues of cohesion on a rumbling team, but also a spiritual practice for the Church to celebrate the gifts within us and prepare for the kin-dom among us (Mt. 4:17).

Luckily, the Church has the right coach for the job—Jesus.

It feels a bit odd to say, but Jesus and Coach Lasso have similar coaching styles. Rarely in the canon do either one of them lead in such a way that usurps communal authority. In fact, rarely do either of them give an answer without telling a story that makes you have even more questions, and that is not by accident. It is because curiosity empowers people to lead by example, divesting power from any one person into every single person. Sure, Coach Lasso will make top-down decisions like setting the lineup for a game, but when Nate has an idea for a play, Ted is curious about its design and efficacy and then asks Nate to lead with his own gifts. In the same way, Jesus will say directly, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39), but he

also teaches others through his own curiosity how to lead for themselves. Jesus never tells the disciples how to talk about him, but rather asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:13,15) so that the disciples, the members of his team, gain the skills necessary to lead with their own gifts but also learn to be open to the gifts of others. Neither Jesus nor Coach Lasso see the success or failure of the team as their responsibility alone; rather, they understand that much like faith, success looks a whole lot more like trust than a trophy. And that is because they both know that curiosity is foundational to relationships, and relationships aren’t about what is gained; they are about what is shared.

Of course, you can be curious and not be a team player. You can be curious for selfish gain—say, by appropriating traditions and cultures under the guise of curiosity. But that won’t build relational trust, and the hermeneutic of curiosity is built on relationships. That is why, like any good team strategy, the hermeneutic of curiosity needs practice.

Neither Coach Lasso nor Jesus is curious about just one thing or at just one time. The hermeneutic of curiosity is a leadership model and a practice in every part of their lives. We are called to practice, not just to learn but to grow and improve. Parables aren’t just stories, they are the call to practice because parables teach us that people rarely get it right the first time. So we need to mess up and keep trying. We need to be curious as to why it didn’t work, who are we missing, and how we might fix it. And practice, like faith, is both personal and communal.

When you practice as an individual player, you can fine tune your own gifts and skills, and the growth will eventually come. But when you are on a team and in relationship with others, then growth becomes exponential because you don’t just learn from your own successes and mistakes; you get to learn from others. Curiosity is a holy commitment to relationship, but it

doesn't mean that it isn't also vulnerable and uncomfortable at times. Being curious shows your own space of interest and vision for growth, but it can also show your growing spaces; and that can be a truly humbling experience, especially in today's society that equates perfection with competency. Yet sharing the fullness of ourselves gets easier the more you do it and the more you see others share as well. Jesus and Coach Lasso know this, which is why their leadership is often shown through personal examples. They both lead with curiosity in themselves and others by sharing not only their strengths but also their growing edges.

Take Jesus and the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15:21–28. This story offers us a great insight as to how curiosity, when held tenderly in conversation with certainty, helps others to grow in their own faith for the sake of communal health. Jesus is certain in his mission, yet when curiosity enters the conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, we get growth from every person. A hermeneutic of curiosity in life and faith helps everyone grow, from Jesus to us and from coach to player. Much like how the Gospels share in part the vulnerable stories of Jesus's life, *Ted Lasso* also shares some of the tender growing moments of Coach Lasso's life.

Coach Lasso's mental health is an ongoing theme in the show; he shares his experiences with panic attacks and therapy, inviting others on the team to vulnerably name their own experiences and needs. Through this learning, he becomes curious as to how a professional mental health doctor might be beneficial to the health of his staff and players as well as the overall success of his team. In Season 2, Episode 1, Coach Lasso brings on Dr. Sharon Fieldstone (albeit reluctantly, but this curious life of faith is not always easy!), and this new team member makes all the difference. Both Jesus and Coach Lasso share their stories as an invitation for curiosity in another's life, not because they are certain of their results but because they know being curious

about unknown gifts, communities, and people is the best way to build your team and build the kin-dom.

There will always be places where God is at work that are unknown to us, but if we want to build the kin-dom, if we want to resurrect rather than relegate, then we need to be curious with ourselves, with each other, and maybe even especially with God. The hermeneutic of curiosity within *Ted Lasso* teaches the Church that certainty may feel comfortable, but it won't make you the best team that you can be. If Jesus is our coach, then we are Jesus's team, called to learn and grow together with a vision for communal care through genuine curiosity and authentic answers. We can show up, put on our uniforms, and even know every aspect of the game, but until we ask what position everyone plays or what injuries our players have, then we won't know the best way for the team to come together. Let's face it: it is going to be a challenge to score a goal if your whole team only plays defense. But as *Ted Lasso* shows us, if you are curious only about the ways a person can help the team win and not about the wholeness of the player, you will always do more harm than good.

When he is new to the team, as someone who believes in earning trust and not asserting authority, Coach Lasso doesn't just ask about player positions, but who the players are at their core. There is a difference between Coach Lasso talking to the players about their game play and Sam sharing with Coach Lasso about his father. In the same way, there is a difference between the questions, "Who am I?" and, "Who do you say that I am?" Both give us information about the other, but neither tells the whole story of what you and God are doing together. When you are curious, genuinely curious, you also listen. And holy listening will always lead to more questions. Holy listening paves the way forward with curiosity rather than certainty.

The Church and our local congregations are still very much in the game, though many of us fear relegation. We have called up

new players, and we are helping established players see what is yet to come; but somewhere along the line, in the planning of the next game and the anticipation of the next season, we have forgotten to be curious about what is happening now. We concern ourselves with the certainties of communal life, like Sam's youth and the imminence of Roy's retirement, and we forget to be curious about what these two professional footballers might teach each other—Sam, a Black, young, Nigerian-born player and Roy, a white, older, British-born player. Our certainties about one other keep us from being curious about why the team trusts Keely so quickly. We skip the questions around Colin's loves outside of soccer, and we miss asking Coach Lasso and Dr. Sharon why they took these jobs in the first place. What we do is only a part of who we are, but there is so much more to each of us and all of us if we are curious. We have postured ourselves to think that what we do for the Church is who we are to the God, rather than the other way around. But curiosity can help us fix that error.

Our universal humanness that encompasses the unique spark of God that resides within each of us calls us all to the crucial work of our team: the Church. But not every story is ours to know just because we ask. Authentic sharing and relationships take time and trust. So continue to remain curious and receive the gift of holy stories about God and God's people. Remember that the hermeneutic of curiosity pairs best with holy listening. We all have the necessary gifts to build God's kin-dom and avoid relegation faithfully and successfully, but only if we can lead with curiosity and covenant with each other. Then we might ask the questions no one thought to ask and receive an answer from God that no one ever expected. And even when you're building the kin-dom through the hermeneutic of curiosity and your team is playing well—meaning they are present and curious to the gifts of one another—there will always be some things about God and each other that will always remain a mystery. Yet if we turn to the playbook of our Coach, we know that trust takes time. So

be patient, and when the time is right and the Spirit moves, try starting by asking what God is calling you to do this season. Or, if you're really wanting to go deep, ask, "What does barbecue sauce have to do with darts, Ted?" Then wait for the bullseye.

We may never know about the depth of Coach Lasso's relationship to barbecue sauce, but we will remain curious—curious with God, with the church, and with each other—for Richmond...for the kin-dom.

Reflection Questions:

- What are the hermeneutical ethics you live by?
- Are you still curious about Jesus?
- What is something surprising about you?
- What is a spiritual gift you are great at but not passionate about?
- What part of the Church would you like to learn more about?
- What scares you about the Church?
- What is something that is not historically called “church” but feels like it?
- How do you feel about team sports?