“Unflappable”
Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 10:46-52

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From the Pulpit
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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 24, 2021, The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 25, dedicated to Aria June Coil and Elijah Dean Coil on their baptismal day, to Emily Wilson who was baptized into Christian faith on Thursday, October 21, to Donice Wooster and Barbara Nicholson, two amazing friends and women of faith who have inspired me for more than 30 years, to G. Dene Barnard who is now 89 years old and staying strong, to memories of George West and Helen Spears who lived and died as strong people of faith, to the 17 Christian Aid Ministries hostages in Haiti and to their families and their captures and always to the glory of God!

“Unflappable”

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 10:46-52

Unflappable means “having calmness or showing calmness in a crisis.” An unflappable person is cool, calm and collected. An unflappable person is Persistently calm, whether when facing difficulties or experiencing success; not easily upset or excited. I
love this definition which has not changed since 1954 (meaning the definition itself is “unflappable”): “Remaining composed and level-headed at all times; unswayed by adversity or excitement; impossible to fluster; not becoming frustrated or irritated easily.”

Moms and dads who awaken in the night to the screaming nightmares of their babies and children and calmly rock them back to sleep are unflappable. An Emergency Room Doctor or nurse who receives their 10th shooting victim in a row and remains calm is unflappable. For that matter, Dr Tony Fauci is unflappable. Coach Tom Allen, the head coach of Indian University, who in the pouring rain last watched his team fall behind 44-7 to our Buckeyes and the stadium empty out of Hoosier fans and yet, there he was, cheering and clapping for his players as they left the field was unflappable. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger who captained and landed US Airways Airbus A320, Flight 1549 on the Hudson River on January 15, 2009 was unflappable.

I pray, this day, that the 17 Amish and Mennonite Christian missionaries being held in Haiti remain faithful and unflappable in the face of hostility and possible death.

Unflappable people show us all how to remain calm under dire circumstances and tough times.

**Ted Lasso is Unflappable.** In the seven-time Emmy award winning Apple + TV series, American actor and writer, Jason Sudeikis plays Ted Lasso. Ted is an American college football coach who comes to England having led the Wichita State Shockers to a Division II NCAA Football championship. He is hired to coach “football” with AFC Richmond, an English
“football” team. And as you all know – Football and Soccer are very different in America and England – although they are both played on a field. Ted is a folksy Midwestern American who appears to be unsophisticated – but is much smarter than he appears. He loves to coach and cares more about people than wins.

Ted is hired to coach soccer almost as a cruel joke by Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham) the new owner of AFC Richmond who received the team in her ugly divorce settlement. She initially hires Ted with the purpose of intentionally ruining the team, as it was the only thing her ex-husband loved. But slowly she comes around due to Ted’s coaching and personality to care about the team and their players. Did I mention that Richmond is a horrible team with a long losing record?

None of this matters to Ted Lasso. When he is mocked and put down in his opening press conference, Ted says, “If that’s a joke, I love it. If not, I can’t wait to unpack that with you later.” At the same press conference Ted also says, “Taking on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse, isn’t it? If you’re comfortable while you’re doing it, you’re probably doing it wrong.” I’m not exactly sure what that means, but it’s a great line!

Although Ted literally knows nothing about soccer, he simply cares about his players, the owner and personnel of AFC Richmond, his coaches, all their loved ones and all the Richmond fans – no matter how they all treat him. He is kind and loving to everyone. As Ted says, “If you care about someone, and you got a little love in your heart, there ain’t nothing you can’t get through together.” Ted works hard every day to help the team. He never gives up. In his
words, “There’s two buttons I never like to hit: that’s panic and snooze.”

Ted Lasso is truly quotable. But, more importantly, Ted Lasso is Unflappable.

Writing about the unflappable Ted Lasso, Rabbi Jeffery Salkin wrote for the Religious News Service on October 12th:

Ted is clearly out of his depth in his new situation. His personal style — Midwestern, folksy, aw shucks — clashes with his new environment. This earns Ted the unseemly British nickname of “wanker.” (Look it up.) In one episode, Ted appears at a local school, and a kid calls out: “Wanker!”

Unfazed, Ted goes on to introduce the team captain, Roy Kent (Brett Goldstein), and the kids enthusiastically welcome him. The contrast to the reception for Ted is palpable.

If this upsets Ted, he does not show it. In that sense, he demonstrates what Jewish mysticism calls tzimtzum — “the ability to contract into oneself and to let others have power.”

Or, in the words of the Talmud:

Salkin goes on, Our Rabbis have taught: those who are persecuted and do not persecute in turn; those who listen to contemptuous insults and do not reply; those who act out of love and are glad of sufferings — concerning them, Scripture says: “They that love God are like the sun going forth in his strength.” (Judges 5:31)

In general, rabbis and pastors, coaches and leaders get a lot of criticism. Sometimes, that criticism actually morphs into something like abuse, often from well-meaning people who simply do not know how to better articulate their needs. In the midst of criticism,
it takes moral courage and inner clarity to swallow it — to say “this only seems to be about me, but something deeper is going on.” The challenge is always not to “hit back.” Ted Lasso models that for all of us.

You might say Ted Lasso and all the others I have mentioned learn this quality of character from the best – in their families and orbit of friends – but also from Holy Scripture which contains some of THE MOST unflappable people in history.

In our Hebrew Scripture reading today, Job comes to the end of his trials. He has remained (mostly) unflappable. He has suffered greatly and somehow endured through his faith in God. As he endures, God grants him greater fortunes than ever before. Unflappable Job ends up unbeatable in the eyes of God.

For more than a month of Sundays, the readings from letters to the Hebrews have lifted up Jesus Christ as our High Priest and Messiah. In Hebrews 7, he is called “holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.” Although he is not called “Unflappable,” he might as well be, because to be holy, blameless and undefiled sets him apart from everyone on earth and in heaven. That is definitely a leading quality for unflappability.

In Mark, the Unflappable Jesus encounters the Unflappable Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is blind from birth and begs by the roadside for his daily survival. Both men admire the other. Bartimaeus admires Jesus for he knows he is in the presence of the one man on earth who has the power to restore his sight. Jesus admires Bartimaeus’ persistent faith and trust. As Jesus restores the blind man’s sight, he acknowledges clearly that his faith has
made him well. Each sees the heart of the other and connects in a way that saves Bartimaeus and sets Jesus apart from magicians and other miracle workers.

Circling back to Ted Lasso, his mantra is “Believe.” He uses his driving belief in the goodness of people to make a difference. But the amazing quality which drives his unflappable approach to “goodness” in coaching and in life is Kindness.

In our times and in this nation, Kindness has too often lost out to Unkindness. All the unflappable ones in our lives and in these times need to remain so and the rest of us need to catch-up and learn from them and get on the Kindness Car on the train bound for Glory!

In this day filled with water – baptismal water and rain water – we will be wise to remember all those who model for us a way – every day – an unflappable approach to life. May we learn from them and become more like them. And as we go today, I offer this one last Ted Lasso thought as he talks to his team: “I promise you there is something worse out there than being sad, and that’s being alone and being sad. And there Ain’t no one in this room alone.”

Thanks be to God for the Unflappable Ones. Amen.