



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Sermon — Constrained and sustained and still we rise

Rachel Mackintosh © 10 March 2024

I have recently watched all three seasons of Ted Lasso.

I had been aware of the show for some time but had been put off by the moustache, and the fact that it seemed to be about sport. Though I admire physical grace, I really don't care about all the winning and losing and fighting over a ball.

I had been missing out. Ted Lasso is a gift.

It is a gift that slowly unwraps. When one of the characters, Danny Rojas, says, "Football is life", I like his joy but really don't connect. Football isn't *my* life.

Turns out though, that in Ted Lasso, football is a metaphor for life. Turns out that Ted Lasso himself really doesn't care about all the winning and losing either. He cares about community and people being their best selves. He's probably a Unitarian, though that doesn't get mentioned in the script.

The thing that struck me most about Ted Lasso, though, was that women were allowed to eat. Not only eat, but enjoy their food.

In the early times, maybe episode one or two, Ted Lasso brings Rebecca some fancy sweet biscuits.

I tense a bit. Waiting for the judgment, or for her to put them politely to one side. That's what women do with indulgent treats.

Through my mind pass images of women and food on screen. This isn't a scientific study, but what I see is either thin women nibbling salad or sipping soup, or fat women eating food with calories and misery.

Not Rebecca. Rebecca bites the biscuit, pauses, tastes the biscuit, pauses, closes her eyes and relishes the biscuit.

And that's it with judging the biscuit.

Oh the freedom! The relaxation. My tension evaporates.

And, lest we forget about the biscuit, Ted brings Rebecca a biscuit every morning through all three series. She continues to eat and enjoy. No eating disorder develops. Enjoying food is just normal.

Sometimes she eats salads too.

Football is a metaphor for life.

The thing with the biscuit is a metaphor for what constrains us and what sustains us.

In her enjoyment of food, Rebecca is unconstrained and she is sustained.

This past week — Friday 8 March, in fact — was International Working Women's Day. The day has its origins in the suffrage and labour movements of the early 20th century in North America and Europe. It was largely a communist celebration until the 1960s when second wave feminists took it up. This year's theme is "count us in" and is about valuing what women do - in particular it is about pay equity.

International Working Women's Day themes over the years have been about equal pay, equal economic opportunity, equal legal rights, [reproductive rights](#), subsidised child care, and the prevention of violence against women.

Can we tick any of those things off as universal achievements for women?

We have pockets here and there.

Equal pay? Still working on it — we are at an 8.6% pay gap in this country.

Reproductive rights? Currently going backwards fast in the land of the free and after some progress recently when abortion was taken out of the Crimes Act, I say let's not get comfortable here.

Subsidised childcare? Somewhat in this country, but it is still expensive to go to paid work.

The end of violence against women? New Zealand has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world.

And just to further constrain us from making progress on any of these fronts there's the co-option of International Working Women's Day by capital. You may have been enjoined to spend money this past week to celebrate International Women's Day — to celebrate being a woman. Consumerism is not really going to help with equal pay or violence and harassment and it is certainly not yet time to celebrate equal economic opportunity.

Working women are constrained both culturally and economically. Culture and economics are inextricably entwined.

For me, Rebecca in Ted Lasso relishing a biscuit is a sign of cultural power for women. Without the cultural constraint of body-policing, Rebecca is sustained and she can rise.

Rebecca's biscuit is a sign of cultural power and a metaphor for economic power.

Power is the ability to act. We all have it, but we do not all have it equally.

Women are constrained from exercising power by body policing, by violence and harassment, by economic deprivation.

I pause at this moment to bring into this story issues of class and collectivity. Rebecca is one person. It is tempting to see her as an individual, to see her power as individual power. To see the answers as middle-class answers; for a middle class woman to be sustained by food, and by her individual access to economic resources.

But let's continue with the lessons of community we find in Ted Lasso.

Women in Ted Lasso are friends. With each other.

Solidarity among women is not exactly a new concept.

Feminism has been around in waves at least since Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. You can find it in the early Irish Christian church and in many other cultures around the world.

Patriarchy, colonisation and capitalism have worked hard against gender equality, against collectivism and against solidarity. And so we find ourselves here. Fighting atomisation, inequality and violence.

There is something subversive about Ted Lasso.

It is fiction, after all: the place where the best truths can be told.

In Ted Lasso, men don't expect the women to be rivals. Men accept women supporting each other as if it is the most normal fictional thing in the world.

Through the prism of Ted Lasso, we can see that economic and cultural constraints are not individual problems. They are collective.

Women in Ted Lasso support each other. Men in Ted Lasso support each other and support women.

Collectively, we can create a new cultural and economic world, where we are constrained only by our obligations to each other, and where we are sustained physically, spiritually, culturally, and economically.

So, in the framework of International Working Women's Day, what is our current project?

One practical thing is right before us:

Care and support workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are currently campaigning for pay equity. For more than a year, unions and employers together have worked through a rigorous pay equity process. They have systematically proved and measured the undervaluation of care and support work relative to male-dominated work. Thousands of hours and many resources have been devoted to this analysis. Unions and employers are ready to make pay equity happen for 65,000 care and support workers. The government just needs to honour the pay equity process, value care and support work, and fund it.

And we, in this congregation, can write to the government to call for them to do so:

<https://our.actionstation.org.nz/petitions/open-letter-fund-pay-equity-for-care-and-support-workers-now>.

The project of creating a new cultural and economic world, shaped by beloved communities, has many parts. This is one of them. Let us rise.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion starter:

- What constrains you?
- What sustains you?
- How does this play out in community?