

February 23: Disordered Eating (Philippians 3:1-14) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our yearlong series, where we’re exploring passages from all parts of our Bible related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Our desire is that as we walk this path and listen for God’s voice together, we might continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

This month, we’ve entered a miniseries focused on social media and its effects on our souls. Some of our topics are about how social media itself affects us, while others, like today’s topic of disordered, are issues that might be triggered or exacerbated by social media. So no matter how much time you personally spend in cyberspace, you’re invited to listen with an openness to how God is speaking to you and calling you to respond.

Before we begin, please take a deep breath with me and join me in prayer.

God of grace, your love for us is so wide and free, and nothing we do can make us any more or less worthy of that love. As we come to you this morning and listen, may we hear your voice of acceptance and affirmation, and have the courage to believe and live into it. In your name, amen.

I want to tell three related stories today. The first is a more general story of people who struggle with disordered eating. The second is the very specific story of the apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Philippians that we read from today. As far as we know, Paul never had an eating disorder, but he did wrestle with what I believe is at the heart of disordered eating: a quest to achieve and maintain self-worth, acceptance, control, and security.

And part of the reason I believe that is because of the third, very personal story I’ll tell this morning: the story of my own journey with anorexia, which began in college. It’s not a story that I easily share, because it makes me feel deeply vulnerable to revisit those struggles and reveal them, to show you this picture of myself at the age of 20, when it was *not* well with my soul or my body. But I also want to confront the powerful shame that both drives people into disordered eating and keeps them trapped there. Shame thrives on silence, and secrecy, and judgment; and as we bring our own vulnerable stories into the light, the shame surrounding them begins to lose its power. So here we go.

As always in this series, I'll begin with some definitions. Disordered eating refers to eating behaviors shaped by distorted ideas towards food, weight, shape, outcome, or appearance. That's a pretty squishy definition, isn't it? There's no hard and fast rule that can distinguish disordered eating from healthy eating, which makes it really difficult to identify and confront, especially since the same behavior could be either disordered or normal. For example, ordering a salad without dressing because you hate the taste of dressing is normal. But ordering a salad without dressing even though you really like dressing, but you're scared that the extra calories would derail your diet or go straight to your thighs, is disordered. Enjoying a large ice cream sundae because you're hungry for it and it tastes delicious is normal; eating a large ice cream sundae because you're sad and lonely and this is what makes you feel better is disordered.

Disordered eating is heavily shaped by our culture and environment and the messages and images we're exposed to, and a large number of us have probably engaged in it at one time or another. Some people, however, start down the path of disordered eating and can't stop: the behaviors and distorted beliefs behind them take over their life, impairing their health and their ability to function and live fully. That's when disordered eating becomes an eating disorder, a recognized mental illness with specific diagnostic criteria. The three most common eating disorders are anorexia, characterized by severe food restriction and an intense fear of gaining weight; binge eating disorder, which involves episodes of uncontrolled eating followed by feelings of shame, guilt, and distress; and bulimia, which is characterized by binge eating followed by purging behaviors, like vomiting or laxative abuse or excessive exercise. Eating disorders are complex and dangerous, and have the second highest death rate of any mental illness, surpassed only by drug addiction. And although eating disorders affect people of all genders and ages, most begin between the ages of 10-20, and target females at a much higher rate than males.

I began the disordered eating that led to anorexia in my sophomore year of college. My roommate was struggling with serious depression and suicidality, and despite my desperate efforts to support and protect her, nothing I did helped – she just kept on getting worse until she admitted herself to an inpatient program towards the end of the year. I wanted so badly to do the right thing and be the perfect roommate and friend and Christian, and it felt like I was failing her and failing God and failing myself. So I grasped for control and personal perfection in every way I could. I rigidly planned my days so every moment was full of good things – exercise and prayer and classes and studying

and service – giving myself just 15 minutes a day to do nothing. When the season of Lent started, I took the opportunity to go all-in with self-deprivation in order to draw closer to God and be a more devoted follower of Jesus. Not only did I decide to fast one full day a week, I gave up sweets of all kinds, a restriction that expanded to restricting any food that wasn't clearly healthy for me. And since there are so many foods labeled “unhealthy” in some way, that pretty much left me with just crunchy vegetables to eat.

And the deprivation felt good – it soothed and quieted a part of me that felt out of control, and as I grew thinner and bonier, that felt good, too – like an external sign that I was safe and on the right path. When Lent came to an end, I decided to continue my new regime, at least until the rest of my family, who were still living in Kenya, returned to the United States. When that day came, I told myself, I could relax. I'd be safe with them to process some of what happened, let them take care of me, and allow some grace into my life – but until then, I needed to be vigilant and rigidly controlled. I started counting every calorie I ingested and weighing myself multiple times a day to make sure that there was external proof of my self-discipline.

By the time my parents finally stepped off the plane in late June, I had lost over 20% of my body weight, and they were appalled. I assured them that I'd be able to regain some weight, but by that point, I had lost control. The possibility of adding back calories to my day was terrifying. I was afraid that if I started eating “normally” again, I'd be unable to stop, I'd gain weight uncontrollably, and everything in my life might spiral out of control. Food was both fascinating and menacing, and I thought about it all the time. I was trapped and miserable, but afraid of what freedom might look like and require of me.

There are many different triggers that push people into disordered eating behaviors – especially with the rise of social media and the way that certain platforms glorify thinness and diet culture and direct young users to pro-eating disorder content – but at the core of all of them is the promise that by changing how we eat and exercise, we can change something about ourselves so that we are better, or more perfect, or more acceptable, or more in control, or happier, or safer. And it's a trap, because even if the immediate goal of disordered eating is reached – dropping ten pounds, or maintaining strict discipline over a specific time period, or fitting into a desired clothing size, or achieving a thigh gap – it will never be enough. There will always be a new bar set, a fresh standard to pursue, while those core desires for self-worth and safety and acceptance can never be reached by anything we do or achieve.

One of the things that helped me take my first steps towards recovery was my deep desire to do a six-month internship in Côte d'Ivoire during my senior year; I knew my college would never allow me to go if I were severely underweight. So I reached out for help, which included individual therapy and a weekly group counseling session with other students. Some of the women in my group suffered from anorexia, some from bulimia, and others from binge eating, and we had all different body types – you couldn't guess, from the outside, that we had disordered eating in common. But as we began to talk, I found that there was a thread that tied us all together – we all tried to be good and acceptable and as perfect as possible, we were all high achievers, and none of us ever reached the standards we set for ourselves. We all held deep shame, we all struggled to believe in our own self-worth apart from what we could do, and our eating disorders were all wrapped up with that shame and striving and our intense hunger for worth, acceptance, and validation.

Our passage today comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church, written from a jail cell, where Paul was imprisoned because of his work spreading the good news of Jesus. And although most of Philippians is full of love and affection and joy, as Paul begins this passage, he is angry: "Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh," he writes in 3:2. He's referring to a group of Jews who taught that Gentile Christians couldn't truly be acceptable to God unless they followed the entirety of the Old Testament law and tradition, including the command to be circumcised, a physical mark that signified inclusion in God's covenant family. Paul is hopping mad because he recognizes that trying to gain acceptance and inclusion through meeting any kind of specific standards is a trap, a trap that he used to be captive to and doesn't want anybody else to fall into.

"Look at me," he says. "I not only reached, but exceeded every single standard there was to hit. Everything that these people say will bring you worth and acceptance – I've been there, done that – circumcised on the 8th day, Hebrew of Hebrews, faultless in following the law. And I can tell you – it's all garbage. It's stinking animal dung. It didn't get me any closer to God, or to where or who I wanted to be – and it won't work for you, either."

I believe that what Paul is so worked up about here – the trap of entering into a system of external standards and boxes to check and ways to judge and validate yourself and others – is similar to the false promises that lead many people into disordered eating: that if you just follow a particular diet or system or 30-day-

challenge or drink “nature’s Ozempic” or achieve a particular standard of size or appearance or fitness, you and your life will change. And Paul is angry because he knows this is a dangerous lie. He *has* found real freedom and confidence and power and acceptance and joy and peace; and it comes from knowing Jesus and being known by him and “found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Phil. 3:10).

Paul’s self-worth, his sense of rightness, came from who God said he was, which had nothing to do with his external status or achievements. And he realizes he’s still becoming – he hasn’t arrived at perfection, and that’s okay, because Jesus’ life-giving, life-transforming power is at work in him, and he’ll get to where he is meant to be. Paul is passionate in his wording because he doesn’t want the Philippians to fall captive to anything that might pull them away from knowing the life and freedom and grace that found him.

Here’s the experience that was key to my own healing from anorexia, where I finally knew what I think Paul is talking about here, a sense of self-worth and inner rightness that didn’t come from what I was able to do or achieve:

I did gain enough weight and stability to go to Côte d’Ivoire for 6 months, where I lived with a Sénoufo family in a remote, rural area, and shadowed an Ivorian public health team in their work. And for the first time I could remember, I was almost completely incompetent. I came to Côte d’Ivoire wanting to help and serve people and make a difference, but there was very little I could do that was useful. I couldn’t speak Sénoufo (the local language) at all, and I couldn’t speak French (the national language) with great fluency. I couldn’t do much to actually assist the public health team, and every time I tried to help my host mom with housework (like pounding rice), she and her kids would laugh at me good-naturedly because I was so bad at it. I couldn’t even choose my food – I had to eat the scary, palm-oil-soaked dishes I was served. All those things about me that I put confidence in – like Paul, I had lost them all, and I had nothing to offer my hosts but my unadorned self.

And – wonder of wonders – people liked me! They genuinely wanted me with them and enjoyed my company and accepted me. After a couple of months, the public health team gave me the Sénoufo name *Tamaganyo* – “The Friendship is Good.” And I knew that they couldn’t possibly like and accept me because of anything I was doing for them or offering to them. I had to accept that they liked me simply because of who I was, and who they were. And for the first

time in my life, I began to believe that maybe God liked me, too, not because of anything I did, but because of who I am and who God is. All those things I was hungry for – acceptance and safety and validation – they were right there, free, held out by Jesus and affirmed by God’s people in northern Côte d’Ivoire. I just had to let go of my own attempts at control, accept the gifts, and live like somebody who is loved and chosen and sent.

I cannot begin to describe how life-changing this was for me, and how it changed my relationship with God and with myself and others. Not that I was suddenly cured of all my disordered eating issues and efforts to prove myself worthy by my actions – the road to full recovery is long – but it was a huge turning point, which I still need to return to again and again and again.

I’m still learning to walk in freedom, accepting that my worth is not based on what I do or achieve. Although I don’t struggle with anorexia now, I know that I’ll always be vulnerable, especially in a culture so obsessed with weight and thinness, and there are a few things I do to protect myself. I don’t own a scale, and the only time I know my weight is when I’m at the doctor’s office. I try not to comment on my own body and size, or anybody else’s. I don’t restrict foods for Lent or fast – not because it’s a bad thing, but because it’s a trigger for *me*. I don’t count calories or label foods “bad” or “good”, and I’ve worked hard to figure out and let myself enjoy what I actually like and what my body is hungry for, rather than being swayed by what I feel I should or should not be eating. And I try to accept grace and affirmation when it’s offered to me, rather than wondering whether I deserve it.

Rates of eating disorders are on the rise, particularly among very young people – the rate of children under 12 being admitted to the hospital for eating disorders rose 119% in less than a decade.¹ It’s likely that the prevalence of social media has something to do with that, and even though we can’t change what’s online, we can push back against the narrative that pins worth and merit to what we eat, how we look, how much we weigh, and what we achieve. We can model something different in our own lives. And never discount the power of reaching out to simply love and like and include somebody, just because of who they are, and not because of anything they can do or contribute. It made a huge difference in my own life.

¹ <https://www.eatingrecoverycenter.com/resources/eating-disorder-statistics>

If you do know somebody who might have an eating disorder, don't try to fix it yourself. It doesn't work to tell somebody that they need to eat more, or to put pressure on them at a meal – I can tell you from personal experience that it just adds to their distress. Eating disorders are incredibly complex, and need professional intervention, the sooner the better.

When I look at that picture of myself now, of the 20-year-old Heather, and I see the sadness and pain in her eyes, I feel so much compassion for her, and I want to hug her and assure her that she's so loved and liked and full of worth, just as she is, and that she's going to be okay. There's so much joy and life in store for her. And if you have a loved one with an eating disorder, or you are struggling yourself with disordered eating or trying to meet certain standards so you can feel okay, I want you to know that healing is possible, and there is always hope. Please bring your struggles into the light. Because you are all so deeply loved and full of worth, just as you are. Amen.