

September 22nd: True Selfcare

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. We will identify certain stories, songs, and wisdom from the Bible that can teach us more about these needs, conditions, and experiences, and help us connect with God and with each other. This first month, we will be introducing some foundational themes that will guide us through the rest of the year, so that we can enter into these conversations with a similar mindset, and a common vocabulary. Then we’ll launch into more specific meditations, focused on experiences such as loneliness, family dysfunction, anxiety, addiction, and more. We won’t be able to cover everything, but we hope that what we do share will raise awareness, build relationships, and connect you with resources in our larger community.

If that sounds good to you, I’m so glad you joined us today. Before we dig a little deeper, would you pray with me?

Gracious God, we spend so much of our life being busy and distracted, so we quiet our hearts now to listen for your voice. We linger in the stillness of the sacred place, hoping that you will come to us and bring us the peace we are longing for. May we sense your loving hands upon us this day, and may we sense your spirit moving in and through us during this time of meditation. Amen.

Today we're talking about a concept that you might have heard about before: the concept of self-care. Like last week's topic of holistic spirituality, that might sound like a "new age" or woo-woo idea, but I promise you that self care is seen as absolutely essential to God, and the Bible is full of examples of people just like you and me who have learned about God's desire for human beings to take good care of our full selves—body, mind, and spirit.

Over the past few years, self care has become a little bit of a cliché—a catchy way to talk about bubble baths or treating yourself to the little items and snacks that help you make it through another day. But I think it's much deeper than that, and so I hope this time together this morning gives you some inspiration for how you can apply this idea of true self care to your own life and routine.

But first, before we get to any theology, let's talk about where the modern idea of self-care comes from—because it might have more of a history that we might expect.

Back in the 1960s and 70s, self-care was a term solely used by medical professionals—it referred to the actions that a patient could take to manage the long term symptoms and effects of illnesses and conditions. After a person completed treatment in a hospital or clinic setting, they could be given instructions to provide certain aspects of their own care—instructions which included eating healthy foods and engaging in regular exercise. This was seen as a way for individuals to participate in their ongoing health and wellbeing in ways that complemented the work done by doctors and nurses.

However, this understanding of self care shifted in the early 1970s, due to an important event held by the Black Panther Party—the Black Community Survival Conference in Oakland California. At this conference, the Black Panthers provided food and health screenings, as well as information about local resources. In particular, the clinics put on by the Black Panthers focused on diseases like sickle cell anemia, which disproportionately affects the black community. As part of the larger Civil Rights Movement, activists and

politicians called for marginalized individuals of all races to engage in self-care as a form of empowerment that could be used to sustain these justice efforts. In fact, several leaders within the movement were known to participate in practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness as a way to protect their well being in the midst of ongoing conflict.

But how did we get to where we are today? What changed between these original intentions and what we see in our media today about self care?

Well, I think it's fair to say that selfcare as a concept and as a practice have been co-opted by certain demographics and certain industries—leading to a very different definition of what it means to care for ourselves and our souls. So I'm going to briefly touch on what I think are a few misconceptions that we might have heard or might believe about self care.

Myth number one: self care is selfish.

Who's heard this before? Who's ever felt guilty for taking a moment to care for themselves? I bet there's quite a few of us who have internalized the message that any effort to prioritize ourselves over others is sinful or inherently bad—there seems to be all kinds of voices out there that encourage us to put ourselves last, or tell us that we're not worthy of that kind of time or attention. Maybe we wouldn't admit that we see self care as selfish, but our actions tell a different story, because we're constantly neglecting our own needs in favor of everyone else's, or we've put off doing the things that would bring us joy or allow us to rest.

But the big question is, what does God have to say about self-care?

Well, multiple things! This idea of nurturing our souls and allowing ourselves to rest has been part of our spiritual story since the beginning—because God modeled it for us at the dawn of creation! In Genesis chapter 1, we hear that after God has spent six days doing the hard work of creating the universe, God decides that the seventh day will be dedicated to rest. God rested, on purpose.

And then, God tells human beings that this pattern is something that we should seek to emulate, because if it's good for God, it's good for humans who have been created in God's image. This concept of one day set aside each week for enjoyment and relaxation is part of the Ten Commandments given to Moses after the Israelites have fled from captivity in Egypt—it's given as a command, but really it's intended as a gift for God's people who have long toiled under injustice and oppression. Sabbath is a gift to people who are worn out and weary.

So I think it's clear that God doesn't see self care as selfish. Self care is necessary to the work of being creative, living beings. Self care is a gift that we give ourselves, because God first modeled it, and then invited us into it.

Myth number two: Self care is all about buying things.

This is a big one right now, especially in our current culture. Consumerism has turned self care into something that must be purchased. Everyone seems to be shilling a new way to relax or a new product to buy to bring us that peace we crave or a new item that will make us happy. Advertisements are telling us that the solution to our problems is this special eye cream, or the high tech running shoes, or the latest gadget. Social media is selling you trendy clothes, or the exciting vacations that your friends are taking, or the gigantic TV that your cousin bought for the big game. We look at others and compare ourselves, wishing we could purchase the expensive skincare, or the upgraded car, or the luxury bathtub with all the accessories.

I'm not saying that all of those things are bad on their own, or that it's bad to want them—I'll be the first to admit that I buy things for my own self care—but buying something isn't required. When we equate buying something with self care, we can justify all kinds of purchases. And we can believe that if we're not buying something, we're not really taking care of ourselves. Again, we ask, what does God have to say? What does our faith tell us about self care?

Well, that brings us to our passage from Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom from our Old Testament. Ecclesiastes sometimes gets a reputation for having a pessimistic perspective, or engaging in nihilism, but I see things differently. At its core, the book of Ecclesiastes is all about acknowledging our limits as human beings. Although we are made in God's image and likeness, this text reminds us that we are not eternal like God is, and our existence is finite.

Verse 5 openly discusses the reality of death, saying: "For the living know that they will die but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten." I'm sure we've all had moments where we've had to confront our mortality, but have we really thought about what that means for the lives that we have left? Have we considered that we might need to make some changes to how we are living right now, because our time is limited?

This is the advice that our biblical author gives us: "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do... Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days."

This might sound like an excuse to say "YOLO—you only live once" and cash in your 401(k) to buy a boat, but even though I'm not licensed to give financial advice, I'm going to say that it's probably a bad idea.

It is true that we only live once, but rather than our finite lives robbing us of meaning, I think that makes every moment here on earth that much more important and special. Time is something we cannot buy. More hours or days or years on this earth is the only thing in our lives that we cannot purchase. All the money or toys or luxuries in the world will not add a single second to the length of our existence.

And so I think the author of Ecclesiastes is actually reminding us that self care helps us reclaim our time. Self care prioritizes using some of our limited

human time to rest, time to play, time to enjoy, time to free ourselves from the demands of our culture. Self care reclaims our time to reflect on our humanness, giving us time to pray, time to think, and time to sit in silence.

I think all of us know that life can feel both alarmingly short and frustratingly long. When I worked at a summer camp, the staff would always say to each other, "the days are long but the weeks are short." I still find that to be true all these years later. And I'm sure that at some point, you've felt the same way.

My friends, self care helps us to treasure the time that we have, and to make it meaningful in ways that make sense to us.

And finally, myth number three: Self care is the cure for everything.

Self care is of course very important, but I think the way it's sold to us today, we might believe that it will solve all of our problems. But the reality is, sometimes we get into situations or develop mental health conditions that we cannot simply "self care" our way out of.

Self care alone isn't going to cure clinical depression. Self care alone isn't going to reverse PTSD. Self care alone isn't going to heal us from addiction. It's not magic. It's not a replacement for medicine if we are suffering from a medical condition.

But self care is a way that we can maintain a certain level of spiritual health, even in difficult circumstances. Self care sustains our souls in all seasons of our life. It sustains the hard work we do of raising children, taking care of our families, any kind of physical, mental or emotional labor. Self care sustains our ability to respond to life's challenges with perseverance.

So as you reflect on these myths of self care, I invite you to think about a self care practice that would sustain you.

It might be a dedicated day off, with time to read in your favorite chair, or a regular meal shared with friends, or a plan to get a massage to ease some of

the pain in your back. Maybe bubble baths are actually your thing, or that new fishing rod will enhance your hobby time, or you need to purchase a journal to pour your thoughts into, just be intentional about it. Your self care can look as unique as you are, but whatever it is you decide, I hope you will prioritize in the weeks and months ahead. I hope you will choose something that will add value to your routine, so that you can be the person that God created you to be.

I have a friend who reminds us each day, "Do something for you today." So I'm going to channel her, with just a slight revision, and tell all of you: do something for your soul today. Do something for your soul today.

Amen.