

## Jesus and Self-Care

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, August 2, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

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Many of you are familiar with the children's author and illustrator, Shel Silverstein. One of his more famous books is *The Giving Tree*. It is the tale of a tree and the boy she loved. The boy would come and play in her leaves and climb her trunk and swing on her branches and eat her apples. I use the she/her pronouns for the tree because Silverstein uses them in the book.

The story says that the boy loved the tree and the tree loved the boy. And then the boy grew and his priorities changed. As a teen, he wanted money to be able to buy things, so the tree gave him her apples that he could sell to get money.

The boy became a man, and when he returned to the tree, he asked the tree to give him a home. So the tree gave up her branches so that he could build a home.

When the boy became middle-aged, he wanted to get away from it all. To do that, he needed a boat. So the tree suggested that he cut down her trunk and make a boat. The middle-aged man did this and he sailed away.

When the boy returned, he was an old man, and the tree said that she had nothing to give him for all she is now is a stump. But a stump, she tells the old man, is a good place to sit down and rest. And the old man does. And the tree – the stump, really – is happy.

My two problems with the book are interrelated. I have a problem with that the tree finds her fulfillment in taking care of the needs of the boy and ignoring her own needs. And I have a problem that the tree is gendered female. There is a sexism in this story, a message that people who are gendered female will find their purpose in ignoring their own needs and in responding to the needs of others.

This past week, I was introduced to a version of the book that has an alternate ending.<sup>1</sup> The author, Topher Payne, renamed the book, *The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries*. In his version, when the boy returns as a man seeking the wood to build a house for his young family, the tree sets a boundary. "Look, I was fine with giving you the apples to help you get on your feet. They'll grow back next season anyway. But no, I'm not giving you a house.

"You know, I've seen boys like you pull this nonsense with other trees in the forest. First it's the apples, then the branches, then the trunk, and before you know it that mighty beautiful tree is just a sad little stump.

"Well, look here, Boy, I love you like family, but *I am not going down like that.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Topher Payne, "The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries," *Topher Fixed It*, <https://www.topherpayne.com/> (accessed 29 July 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Payne's version goes on, with the boy learning empathy, and looking out for the best interests of the tree, and learning how to bake wonderful apple pies. Together, they grow. And eventually the boy brings his children and their children to come and play with the tree.

"And as each generation played in her strong old branches," Payne's version goes, "the tree often thought back to that fateful day when the boy had asked her for a house. In truth, she would have gladly given him her branches to build one. She would have given him her trunk to build a boat. She loved him that much.

"But then she would have had nothing left. Not for herself, nor for anyone else."<sup>3</sup>

In Payne's version of the story, the tree takes care of herself.

Two months ago, when I was picking themes for my sermons this summer, the thing that caught my attention about today's gospel lesson was the first verse. Don't get me wrong. I love the stories of the feedings of the multitude. They are so important to our faith, that there are six versions of the story spread out in all four gospels.

And yet, it was the first sentence of this story, the set up for the story that caught my attention this time around. "When Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to deserted place by himself."<sup>4</sup> The "this," as Val mentioned in their introduction to the reading, is the execution of John the Baptist. When Jesus heard about the execution of John, he decided he needed a little alone time. So he got into a boat to go off to be by himself for a while. Jesus needed a little alone time; he recognized he needed a little alone time; and he sought out a little alone time.

This verse got me thinking about and reading about the whole topic of "self-care." So I've done research and reading, and here is the most important thing I learned: self-care is not selfish. As one writer put it, "Self-care is stewardship of the only gift we bring into this world."<sup>5</sup>

Think about that for a moment. We may have accumulated stuff and we may have accumulated wealth over the course of our lifetimes, but the only true gift that we have, the only gift that is purely ours, is the gift of ourselves. How we care for ourselves is an act of stewardship. We can be good stewards of this gift or we can be poor stewards of this gift. "Self-care is stewardship of the only gift we bring into this world."

There are many things I could say on the topic of self-care. There are many articles and ideas that are lying on the sermon cutting room floor this week. Today, I want to focus on the complexity of self-care. Though she's not a psychologist, I found what Deanna Zandt wrote about the complexity of self-care to be enlightening.<sup>6</sup> She differentiates four different aspects of self-care.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 14:13 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Powell, "Self-Care is NOT Selfish," *Frank Powell: Restoring Culture Through Christ*, <https://frankpowell.me/self-care-not-selfish> (accessed 28 July 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Deanna Zandt, "The Unspoken Complexity of 'Self-Care'," *Noteworthy - The Journal Blog*, <https://blog.usejournal.com/the-unspoken-complexity-of-self-care-8c9f30233467> (posted 17 October 2019; accessed 29 July 2020).

First, she identifies self-soothing. These are “activities that provide distraction and/or comfort in difficult times.” A few of the examples of self-soothing she offers are TV bingeing, bubble bathing, getting out into nature, and taking time off from home responsibilities and childcare. I’ve noticed that there have been several times since we’ve started sheltering in place that I’m had a craving for ice cream, and that has confused me because I don’t digest ice cream were well at all. Zandt has helped me recognize that this craving for ice cream has actually been a craving for soothing.

She (somewhat confusingly) labels the second aspect of self-care, “self-care.” These are “activities that help you find meaning, and that support your growth and groundedness.”<sup>7</sup> A few of the examples of self-care she offers are going to therapy, meditating, exercising (which, for some people, is also self-soothing), taking ownership of your finances, saying “yes” and “no” when you really mean it, and setting – and keeping – boundaries. For me, journaling is another activity that falls under this aspect of self-care.

Zandt then notices that “it takes a LOT to be able to even do self-care, since the systems and cultural norms in which we currently live can feel impossible to navigate on our own.”<sup>8</sup> That’s why we also need “Community Care,” the third aspect of self-care Zandt identifies. Community care are strategies communities develop to help one another when the larger system won’t let us take care of ourselves. She lists examples like childcare and educational collectives, freecycle and buy nothing groups, special friendships, worker-owned coops, and co-housing.

But community care is only one part of the solution. Often, “we also need to fundamentally overhaul ... the systems in which we live.”<sup>9</sup> This is something the Movement for Black Lives is working on, and it is really what the call to “defund the police” is about – the overhauling of the systems in which we live.

Which brings us to the fourth aspect of self-care that Zandt identifies: Structural care. Structural care is creating and sustaining the “systems that support community care, self-care, *and* self-soothing.”<sup>10</sup> Zandt lists examples like comprehensive universal healthcare, environmental defense and renewal, child- and eldercare, living wage, efficient public transportation, gender and sexuality liberation, racial equity and justice, and paid family leave.

It occurs to me that the story of the feeding of the thousands is an example of community care and maybe even pushes toward structural care. Matthew tells us that when the crowds who had been following Jesus heard that he had withdrawn to a deserted place, they walked around the lake and met him when he came ashore. When Jesus saw them, “he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”<sup>11</sup>

According to James Howell, the Greek that gets translated “compassion” has a literal meaning of “inward turmoil, a twisting of the guts.... [H]is entrails get all contorted, like a

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 14:14 (*NRSV*).

woman's womb in labor."<sup>12</sup> Jesus, suffering from his own grief, sees the needs of these people and his guts get so twisted up that he has to start meeting those needs. Meeting their needs is both an act of self-care and self-soothing for Jesus and an act of community care.

Then, when it gets late and the needs shifts to one of dinner, Jesus tells his disciples to give the people something to eat. The disciples don't think they have the resources to meet these needs, so they hesitate. And Jesus takes what they have and meets the needs of the people who were there. We can see Jesus organizing his disciples and the people to create community care.

The story ends with a note that there were twelve baskets full of leftovers. I can't help but wonder if, at some level, Jesus is leaning into some structural care as well. Something had to happen with the leftovers. If it was a typical church potluck, they probably got sent home with people who needed it. And why would they have needed food beyond dinner out there in that deserted place? Because the social structures of the day made getting their daily bread difficult.

Let me cycle back to the first things that I said: Self-care is not selfish. Self-care is necessary stewardship of the only gift you really have to give: you. Just remember that self-care is complex, so be open to new nudgings of how you can better care for yourself and one another, especially during these days when there are so many reasons to feel stressed out.

Amen.

- What are your self-soothing strategies?
- What are your self-care strategies?
- How can you participate in community care?
- How can you participate in structural care?

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<sup>12</sup> James C. Howell, "Weekly Preaching: August 2, 2020," *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10426/weekly-preaching-august-2-2020> (posted and accessed 29 July 2020).