

Sacred Self-Care: Why Rest Comes Before Work (Not After)

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Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 00] And then, of course, there's a story about a teacher asking kids what their dream job's going to be, and they're going around, firefighter, an MBA star, and all of that. And one kid's like, I'm sorry, teacher.

When I dream, I don't dream about working. We are in the middle of a series called Sacred Self-Care, and we're in the season of Lent, which are these days that lead up to Easter, remembering Jesus' death and resurrection.

And we are talking about the need for caring for ourselves, that we are full-bodied human beings that are not meant to dream of work all the time, but are also meant to be fed and nourished and cared for.

Now, today's sermon is going to be what I call a kitchen sink sermon. Meaning, like, if I were to present this in seminary or undergrad at my homiletics, my preaching professor would probably give me a low grade because he would say, Anthony, you're trying to do too much, okay, in one sermon.

And what happens is that Tanetta and I, we were just at a conference over this past weekend. It was enriching. It was fulfilling. Good conversations. It also meant less time to prepare the sermon, which means less time to leave things on the cutting room floor, which means you get the kitchen sink, everything in the kitchen sink.

[1 : 26] But I'm going to try to offer you a theology of self-care, all right? In, you know, 30 minutes or less, a theology of self-care and a little bit of testimony and a little song and dance, and we'll see how this goes.

So if you have a Bible, there are no words on the screen. There was no time to prepare slides, so you're going to have to do this yourself. Find a Bible, head to the book of Genesis chapter 1. It is difficult for me to talk about self-care and being a human being without getting into Genesis and some good creation theology.

So Genesis chapter 1, and we're towards the end of the chapter, actually a little bit into chapter 2 as well. So this is the sixth day of creation.

Just so you know, in case it was a question, we do not preach like six-day creationism as literal six 24-hour days. But Genesis 1 does give us this theology of creation about what God is like and what God is up to in the world, that God created the material world, the physical world, as good and blessed it.

And in verse 26, God says, let us make humanity in our image to resemble us, so that they may take charge of the fish, of the sea, and the birds, and the sky, and the livestock, and all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.

[2 : 49] Verse 27, in some Bibles, you're going to see this sort of like tabbed out because it's poetry. God created humanity in God's own image. In the divine image, God created them.

Male and female, God created them. Verse 28, God blessed them and said to them, be fertile and multiply, fill the earth, master it, take charge of the fish, of the sea, the birds, and the sky, everything crawling on the ground.

God said, I give you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds, and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all the wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and everything on the ground, to everything that breathes, I give all the green grasses for food.

And that's what happened. God saw everything that he had made, and it was supremely good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. And then there's a chapter break, but it's actually the same narrative.

The narrative doesn't shift until verse 4. So same narrative, chapter 2, verse 1. The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day, God completed all the work that he had done.

[3 : 53] And on the seventh day, God rested from all the work that he had done. So imagine you are the humans. You have just been created on the sixth day, and God says, I give you all of creation to rule over, to subdue, to care for, to be co-regents alongside God.

That is your task. That is your job. You go to bed. You wake up, and you say, okay, God, what's next? And God says, rest. The first full day of humanity's existence in this narrative is a day of rest.

And so the first thing I want you to take note of is that rest is not earned. It is given to us as divine gift. Rest is not the result of days of labor.

Rather, it is God's first commandment to humans. Yes, you will rule. Yes, you will subdue. Yes, you will care for creation. Yes, you will be co-regents with God.

And the first step of that is a day of rest, which means that we don't rest from our work in God's economy. We don't rest from our labor.

[5 : 09] We don't rest from our toil. Rather, our work is the fruit of our rest. If we do not have a foundation of care, of rest, of Sabbath, then our work and our fruits will end up being rotten.

Okay? That's Genesis 1. We're going to flip ahead now to the book of Amos chapter 8. Amos chapter 8. Amos is what's called a minor prophet, meaning you've got the major prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

And Ezekiel, they write these big, long books. And then you have what the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Bible, calls the book of 12. And those are the 12 smaller books of prophecy.

So you're in the book of Amos chapter 8. And Amos is just like filled with banger after banger. Like it is just a hit machine of Amos prophesying against the injustices of his society, of Israel and Judah, and all of the ways that they have wrecked their culture with oppression.

And Amos is there to tell it like it is, to speak truth to power. And in Amos chapter 8, verse 4, this is what Amos writes, reporting the words of the Lord. He says, Hear this, you who trample on the needy and destroy the poor of the land, saying, when will the new moon be over so that we can sell grain?

[6 : 37] When will the Sabbath be done so that we can offer wheat for sale and make the eppha, which is a unit of measurement, smaller, and enlarge the shekel, inflate the shekel, and deceive with false balances so that we can buy the needy for silver and the helpless for a pair of sandals and sell garbage for grain?

In verse 7, the Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, surely I will never forget what they have done. Verse 8, will not the land tremble on this land account and all who live in it mourn?

So in this prophecy of Amos, Amos is saying, hey, you, you who oppress, you who trample on the needy, destroy the poor of the land, this is what you're like, okay?

So now he's reporting the mindset of these oppressors. Their first thought is, when will the new moon, so it's a holiday, when's the holiday going to be over so that we can sell again?

When's the Sabbath going to be done so we can offer wheat for sale? So the mindset of those that trample, the poor and the needy, those who oppress are, hey, can we be done with Sabbath already so we can get back to the business of capitalism, back to the business of oppression?

[7 : 58] Please don't make us rest any longer. So you can see, there's like a slippery slope here, this urge to rush past rest in order to get back to business.

This urge to rush past holiday, to rush past Sabbath, to rush through sitting still so that we can get back to business.

Now, I know my congregation, I know that none of you are the ones who are oppressing the poor and the needy, at least not intentionally, right? And yet, we are infiltrated, we are influenced by a culture that is continually saying, hey, do you want to turn on notifications?

Hey, do you want to stay connected all the time? Hey, the sale last, not just President's Day weekend, but it's also the pre-sale and the post-sale. And we're going to send you six newsletters about the sale after the sale in case you miss the sale.

And oh, by the way, the more you spend, the more you save. Cole's cash just raining from the sky. And so we're in a culture that has no interest in Sabbath, no interest in rest, even to the point where care, self-care, self-care is now a product that can be packaged and sold to us.

[9 : 28] And so the very act of caring for yourself is just another cog, another gear in the wheels of capitalism, which we're just going to keep on cranking and turning. I know in my time, you know, teaching, preaching, discipling folks here, that even bringing up the word Sabbath, even bringing up the word rest, hey, what if, what if you set aside 24 hours or you didn't buy, you didn't sell, you didn't create or produce anything but your own pleasure and joy, brings up anxiety in people because that means you have to put the work down and the work is never done.

How can you put it down? And again, like I said, I don't think any of us are consciously, intentionally trying to, you know, sell the needy for a pair of sandals.

Yet I do think that it can be easy to buy into a lie that says, we're going to rush through the Sabbath and rush through the rest so we can get back to good business. And then we get more and more deceived about how necessary we are to get things done and our souls end up more and more crushed.

And it's those who have crushed souls that end up crushing other souls. Okay, we're going to skip ahead to Mark chapter one, the gospel of Mark chapter one.

First chapter of the gospel of Mark, perhaps one of the earliest written down stories about Jesus. Mark chapter one, Jesus has already been preaching and declaring the good news, the gospel of the kingdom.

[11 : 04] He's been healing. He's been casting out demons. And then in verse 35, it says early in the morning, well before sunrise, it was daylight savings day that day. Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.

And Simon, who eventually is known as Peter, Simon and those with him tracked him down. And when they found Jesus, they told him, everyone's looking for you. To which Jesus replied, let's head in the other direction.

Oh, Jesus. Let's head in the other direction to the nearby villages so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come. This is my notes.

This is the extent of my notes. Even Jesus needed care. You're not better than Jesus. Okay? That's all I wrote down. Oh, man. Even Jesus needed care.

Even Jesus needed rest. Even Jesus needed to step away and get away and head in the other direction from the demands of the crowd. There was no more important work than what Jesus was doing.

[12 : 12] Okay? If anybody deserved to have a Messiah complex, it was the Messiah. And yet, even Jesus says, I'm going to step away. I'm going to hide myself away to be alone with my Father, to be alone with God.

And even when somebody comes demanding, hey, the people are looking for you, Jesus actually takes that as a cue, as a sign to like, okay, then maybe I actually need to back off.

I, for one, will admit to having a little bit of a Messiah complex myself. Feeling like, oh, man, my life story and my credentials and my qualifications have led me to be in this place at this time.

And I need to give my all, all the time to make sure that I am caring for people and serving people and giving people all the things that they need and all that they want. And so, I am going to sort of bleed myself dry for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the church, to which God just sort of chuckles and says like, are you better than me?

Do you think that you're that important? Sabbath and rest and care are this opportunity for me to remind myself that the world's going to keep on spinning without me.

[13 : 30] That's a reminder that God's work is both, God both invites me into God's work and also, I am not necessary to God's work.

And that's humbling. Humbling in the true sense of the word, humbling. Not humbling like, oh, I was invited to this great honor, I'm so humbled. Like, no, you're honored. No, humbled in the sense of like, no, I must become lesser so that God must become more.

I remind myself of my position in God's economy. The first day of humanity's existence, God says, rest. All right, we're going to keep going.

Acts chapter 4. Acts chapter 4. Next, we get an image of what the early church was like. We read this in verse 32.

The community of believers was one in heart and mind and none of them would say, this is mine about any of their possessions but held everything in common.

[14 : 36] And the apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. Grace, which is this charisma, this, the charismatic gifts, this gift of God was at work among them all.

Verse 34, listen, there were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds from the sales and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles and it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

So I know there can be some tension around concepts of self-care, particularly among like a progressive activist congregation like ours because we have this sense of urgency.

We look around the world. Man, I was thinking about, you know, we have our announcement script. We are, we follow in the way of Jesus. We have this vision, mission, values. Therefore, we're queer affirming.

Therefore, we're feminist. We pursue anti-racism to all of these sorts of things. And now I feel like we're sort of at this point where we have to say things which should have been obvious but apparently are not.

[15 : 47] we're against fascism. We're, we're okay if you punch a Nazi. Like, just some things like that that you thought, man, we didn't think you'd have to say that but apparently we're in a place and a society and a culture and a nation where like some of just the bottom foundational stuff that we thought was settled is not settled.

So with this particular congregation that is responding to this crisis that we're in as I put in our WhatsApp joking about daylight saving like, you know, we skip an hour at least it's one less hour in a failing democracy.

Self-care can seem indulgent. Self-care can seem like we have to put it, we need to put that off. And I, what I see here particularly in the book of Acts is that self-care, yes, on its own when it's packaged and sold to us as a solution is insufficient.

Okay? Self-care on its own is insufficient. Self-care has to have a trajectory. It's aiming towards something, towards a holistic, a whole individual and a whole community that has no needy persons among them so then, in the words of the book of Acts, that we can turn the world upside down, that when we present the good news of the gospel of Jesus about equality and freedom, in some cities it creates riots because it pisses people off so much, in some cities it brings joy because it's a word that sets the captives free, but in order to do that you have to make sure that there are no needy persons among you, that you have a community where you hold things in common, and so self-care has to be met with community care, with a dedication among the community that we've got each other's backs.

So self-care, on its own, yes, I understand, indulge it. It cannot fix things by itself. All of us going home, taking our bubble baths, and then drowning ourselves, there solves nothing.

[17 : 54] Okay? But, those of us who are at work, we need to make sure that we are working out of our rest, that our fruitfulness comes out of our abiding with Jesus, with God, with God as God shows themselves through each other, so then we can get to the work ahead of us.

Now, we're going to flip over a chapter into Acts chapter 5, and we get this wonderful however statement. However, a man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property.

And with his wife's knowledge, he withheld some of the proceeds from the sale, and he brought the rest and placed it under the care and under the authority of the apostles.

And Peter asked, Ananias, how is it that Satan has influenced you to lie to the Holy Spirit by withholding some of the proceeds from the sale of your land? That property was yours to keep after you sold it.

The money was yours to do whatever you wanted. What made you think of doing such a thing? You haven't lied to other people but to God. And when Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead.

[19 : 08] And everyone who heard this conversation was terrified. Some young men stood up, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him. About three hours later, his wife entered, and she didn't know what had happened to her husband, and Peter asked her, tell me, did you and your husband receive this price?

You know, X dollars, X shekels for the field? And she responded, lied. Yeah, that's the amount. And he replied, how could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's spirit?

Look, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they'll carry you out too. Not that very moment she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men had entered and found her dead, you can kind of imagine their sigh, another one to bury.

they carried her out and buried her with her husband. Trepidation and dread seized the whole church and all who heard what had happened. I talked about this once in a class I was teaching.

Antonio, you were there because I remember you laughing in my face. And I pointed out, this story does interesting things about sort of the Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, prophetic sort of tradition about God smiting God's people, okay?

[20 : 17] And then you read this story in the book of Acts like, oh man, God's doing the same thing to which what I pointed out is it does not say God killed them. It does not say God killed them.

They dropped dead. It's all that the author of the book of Acts is willing to say. Now, we may jump or leap to conclusions. Well, clearly it was God. My theology is a little bit uncomfy with that.

Maybe yours is too. I wonder if it's not so much that this is a statement about what God did or did not do, but rather that there is some theology going on here that says when the community brings together their possessions in common, they have no needy among them.

And when somebody lies and withholds from the community, it kills not just the community, but the withholders themselves. And God doesn't need to get involved.

God doesn't need to do any smiting or smoting. God doesn't need to reach down his finger and stop someone's heart. It's actually the very act of withholding which is deadly.

[21 : 30] I wonder. So when I think about self-care and I put that in the context of community care and what we are shown is possible in a community that has no needy among them, that has every need met, and then when I begin to see that disintegrate by just one person, one couple, withholding what was theirs to begin with, death, then you begin to see death show up in the community.

And the trepidation and the fear that the community holds, again, the scripture, the passage does not say that that fear is towards God. Rather, I wonder if the fear is, well, if they're going to start withholding, do I need to start withholding?

If they're going to hold something back, do I need to start holding something back? And rather, that scarcity mentality spreading like wildfire in a community so that suddenly, at the very act of holding what is mine, then there are more needy persons among them.

I wonder. Let me get into some testimony. This past December, I had my first anxiety attack.

Now, some of you watching, listening, you may be thinking, well done, you made it to 37 years old with your first anxiety attack. I envy you. And I get that. I have, some of you know my story.

[23 : 06] I need to tell my testimony again, like my life story in this context. It's been some time. But I have a life story that started out very hard with foster care and open heart surgery and bouncing from a couple different homes and feeling rejected.

And long story short, because of this like sort of traumatic background in history, it sort of taught me, both in soul, mind, body, everywhere, to be entirely self-reliant, entirely independent and not needing anybody else's care or concern.

Thank you very much. And as I've been in therapy and working on this in my adulthood, some of that has began to unravel. And as I've expressed with my therapist, I'm like, yeah, I've never had an anxiety attack.

I've never been diagnosed with anxiety or depression or anything like that. My therapist has very, you know, gently pointed out, like, yeah, you would never let yourself. It's just this shell, this enamel that's protected you for so long.

So in December, I go to a Christmas party and begin to have all of the symptoms of anxiety or panic attack with the elevated heart rate and breathing and sweating and just, like, needing to escape and run away.

[24 : 22] And I'm sitting in the car sort of crying, which crying is this, again, rare thing for me, and having both this feeling of, like, this sucks, as anxiety attacks do, and also, is this a good thing?

Is this a good sign? That the enamel is beginning to be chipped away in some way that allows me to experience pain that I haven't felt before? So I have that experience.

I tell my wife, Emily, about it. And then, you know, through all of that, our 2024 was actually a really challenging year for our family. Some of this stuff showed up in, like, our prayer request thing on WhatsApp.

We had a child go through, like, a physical and mental health series of bad experiences that we've been dealing with. Church finances at the beginning of the year were challenging.

We had to close down our evening service for a while, which was an unpopular decision. So that led to lots of, like, difficult conversations. We had congregation members going through, like, horrendous things that, you know, secondhand trauma for myself.

[25 : 26] And then just other challenging things personally. So that was all taking its toll. Have this anxiety attack. Tell Emily. And then, of course, like, then I'm starting to, like, just notice all of the ways that, like, anger is popping up in my life and sadness and just this sort of, like, need to stay in bed and hide away from it all.

And I know better. Okay? I know better. I have stood on this stage or our evening church stage, and I've talked about the importance of taking your meds and a theology that says that you don't need medication because, you know, God's just gonna heal you is trash theology and you should not believe it.

You should talk to your therapist and talk to your psychiatrist. I knew all of that, and yet I was, had this, like, sort of giant asterisk on myself that said, not me, though. I'm a pastor.

I'm a theologian. I've gone through worse things. I don't need to talk to my doctor about this. So I waited two months, which, again, I know in the grand scheme of things, some people wait years before they talk to a professional.

I waited two months, which was two months too long before I finally called up my doctor and told them the, you know, non-preaching version of this story. They gave me the assessments, and the assessments come back to say, like, yeah, yeah, you have anxiety and depression.

[26 : 51] So I tell my therapist all of this, and express just, like, how that ruins my sense of self-image, independent, self-reliant, been through so many harder things, and even though I would never tell my congregation this, in fact, I've told them the opposite, certainly my theology and my belief in God makes me sort of immune from anxiety and depression, to which my therapist is just like, yeah, that's not how it works, buddy.

Like, it's not how it works. So I get prescribed with meds. They work. And I begin to feel better, and I begin to have fewer, worse days.

There's no end to the story. We're in the middle of the story as we speak, right? Still meeting with, you know, getting blood work drawn and all that sort of stuff. But I tell this story as a reminder to myself and as a reminder to all of us that the lies that our culture tells us, the lies that even sometimes our religion tells us, you're alone.

You've got to figure this out on your own. You've got to be self-dependent and self-reliant, and your work is too important for you to stop and rest as a lie from the devil.

And if it can affect your pastor, I know it can affect you, and we've got to set those lies down. Friends, you deserve to be well.

[28 : 25] Our God is not interested in any future or present where you are miserable. God is not interested in any theology that tells you that the cost of someone else's joy is your suffering.

God is not interested in a story that says that you don't deserve care. And so, we have to create communities where we give ourselves and we give our neighbors and our friends permission to be cared for, to care for ourselves, because day one of humanity's existence is rest.

God, your son Jesus showed us the way of how to withdraw and be alone, how to walk along the seashore with friends, of how to feast among those that society said didn't deserve food.

God, may we follow the way of Jesus, creating communities where there are no more needy, where every one of us, our needs are met.

As one preacher, friend of mine says, not just everyone deserves soup, but everyone deserves good soup. Not just where needs are met scarcely, just barely, but where there is abundance, where your grace, as the book of Ephesians says, is lavished upon us.

[30 : 04] God, may we be a lavish community to ourselves and to each other, because we deserve to be well. Thank you.