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Self-Love and Theology - We Can Do Better

Teresa Trout

May 8, 2020

This past summer I worked at the Benedictine Girls Camp that is held at the College of St. Benedict every year. I was able to be a camp counselor for an awesome group of teenage girls, and while I wasn't excited about going back to dorm life and the rigorous schedule that I knew the camp would include, I was excited about sharing and growing in my faith while building relationships with these young women. One night during our evening prayer we were reflecting on the greatest commandment: "Jesus answered, The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28-34). When I asked these girls what they thought about this passage they gave typical responses. They all knew this passage and what they were supposed to be getting from it. But as I had read the passage, something had clicked for me that had never clicked before, and while I was hesitant to share what I was thinking with them, I thought about what I had needed to hear at their age. Young Teresa didn't need someone to tell her that she needed to love God and her neighbor, she knew that. She needed someone to tell her that she needed to love herself. That was the roadblock that no one had ever explained to me. I was told that a God had created me in Their own image, and I have to love that God, but what if I didn't like *my* own image? I was told to love my neighbor as *myself* but what if I didn't love myself? I can't remember exactly what I said to them in that moment, but I tried to explain to them the lightbulb that had just gone on in

my head in simple terms. I don't know if what I said to them impacted them in the way that it did me, but this capstone has become an answer to my own questioning and lightbulb in that moment. Young Teresa needed it, and maybe you do too.

It's from this place that I make the claim that in order to truly live out the greatest commandment one must start at a place of radical self-love. In making this claim, I am further making the argument that churches should be consciously promoting notions of self-love and acknowledging and challenging the damaging mentalities that have permeated through teaching regarding one's self, body, and physicality. If we are truly created in the image and likeness of God, along with our neighbors, we must be encouraged to see ourselves as deserving of love and respect in order to truly be able to love God and neighbor.

My intention here is exploration and conversation, I'm not attempting to solve any one of these issues that I am bringing up. At least, certainly not in a clear cut and simple way. My hope is to raise questions and awareness surrounding the kind of messages that are being expressed in our churches and how they impact us. Growing up in the church, and even still today, I was craving positive messages regarding who I was, and who I was becoming, and I know that I wasn't the only one. This wasn't for lack of understanding who God was, but a lack of being told the importance of loving myself.

Ultimately, in order to have this conversation, we must start at why self-love has been so difficult. We hear "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This love of God is so big and powerful, but it also gives us what feels like a clause; we are sinners in need of a savior. I will not patronize you and explain the ups and downs of the arguments of original sin and such, we all know them. The point is still that within the Christian Tradition there is a common narrative

of self-loathing that tells us we are sinners in need of the Savior. And while this narrative can have worth, we must acknowledge that it can also be incredibly damaging to a person and can create a self-hatred that is not remotely beneficial to their personhood. How has the narrative of self-loathing that tells Christians that they are worthless sinners who need to be saved from themselves changed the way we view God? Does the need to be saved impact how we see ourselves in a positive or negative way? And if it's negative, is that still okay? Or is this just a problematic notion in general? What does that idea have to do with how we view our physicality on earth? These are complicated questions, and I can't fully answer them in this short amount of time, but I will offer the claim that while this narrative does not have everything to do with the physicality of the person, it certainly does have an impact on how we view ourselves as people.

This narrative not only informs how we view ourselves, it also informs how we decide to respect and care for ourselves. And within all of these issues of self-love and the lack thereof within many aspects of the church, a natural conclusion to come to is that there is also a lack of self-care. This is true in roles of ministry and leadership, but also in the congregations and lay ministers. This self-sacrifice that is being put on a pedestal as the ultimate sign of Christianity, while producing glorious fruits in the work that is accomplished, can leave people burnt out and feeling unable to take care of themselves because they will feel guilty doing anything that is not for the good of God's people. Leanna Fuller argues, "Sustainable self-care is about more than spa indulgences. Sustainable self-care is about setting boundaries on your time . It's about nurturing healthy relationships. And it's about holding the balance that we are both strong and fragile at the same time" (Fuller 16). We tend to forget that we ourselves are also God's people and need care as well.

This forgetting of our own needs seems to be fed by that narrative of self loathing that tells us that we don't deserve to be good to ourselves anyway. "This agency, this claiming of freedom and responsibility, which commends the continued use of the term "self-care" because it serves as a reminder that each person is made in the image of God and thus is called into the abundant life promised by the creator. To ignore that calling through practices of inordinate self-denial - even when done in the name of ministry or service - is, ultimately, to fail to take responsibility for the gifts we are each given" (Fuller 16). That failure is too often seen when people don't see their own needs as still important, even if something else is asking for their time.

Unfortunately this trend is not exclusive to adults within churches; youth and kids are impacted too. In Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker's book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* they comment on this concerning mentality that is even seen in youth. "I counsel some of the religious kids, and the more attached they are to traditional ideas about Jesus, the more likely they are to think of their abuse as 'good' for them, as a trial designed for a reason, as pain that makes them like Jesus" (Brock & Parker 3). This is terrifying to read, and unfortunately is very similar to some things that I've heard from people around me. I've even seen it in myself. However, this mentality is simply not sustainable. "Self-care moves beyond simply being a 'good thing' for individual caregivers to do, and instead becomes a vital practice that can help counteract destructive social and cultural dynamics while also contributing to relational and communal health" (Fuller 17). Self-care is an active part of self-love, and sometimes it's hard to actually make those steps to prioritize it within our church communities, but it's detrimental to our physical and mental health if we don't.

While I believe there are many aspects to a true and whole version of self-love, if we are talking about loving who we are, naturally we have to talk about who we physically are. Our body. The vessel that we go through life in. Very often, “We are obsessed with our bodies. Or rather, we are obsessed with everything that’s wrong with our bodies” (Crabbe 1). Regardless of teaching, what body we exist in impacts the way that we view ourselves and the world, so it is incredibly entwined in one’s self-love journey. Tradition tells us that we are created in the image and likeness of God, *imago dei*, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:27-31). This physical flesh that we are living in is part of our identity within creation, and if we believe this, we must also believe that we are *good*; in all aspects of the self.

While church understanding varies in the importance of the physical body, Catholic Tradition teaches the importance of both the body and the soul, which proposes an importance of our physical body. In *Introducing Body Theology*, Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart offer many insights into the topic of body theology. They note that “Probably the most important article of Christian faith is that God became [human]. It is therefore hard to believe that the body has been so despised, rather than loved and celebrated, by generations of Christians” (Isherwood 15). This point is incredibly powerful, for if we believe that salvation comes from this body of Christ, and further that we as Christians are the Body of Christ, then the body should be a celebration of power. But this body power is also found in another often forgotten example, “From the moment when Mary agrees to give birth to a special child, bodies become sites of revelation and redemptive action” (Isherwood 11). Examples of the power of one’s body can be

found throughout the bible, but so often we don't talk about these stories in this way. If we start to view these stories from this lens, it starts to change our mentality surrounding our bodies.

This idea of powerful bodies is only the beginning. Isherwood and Stuart also talk about the negative ideas that continue to be reinforced about bodies. "The body is also perceived in terms of enemy hood. It desires, lusts, alienates us from the created order, reduces us to entirely self-centered creatures and makes it hard for us to attain the virtue of love" (Isherwood 74). How do we address the issues of conversations about one's body to be leading towards conversations regarding sin? In my own religious upbringing, when bodies were brought up within a religious context it was almost always in conversation about how to regulate the sins your body would cause you to commit. Desires of the body were "bad" whether they were for food or sexual pleasure.

When you start to wade into the conversation surrounding food regarding religious traditions, the water gets murky. "Throughout Christian history asceticism—particularly manifested in practices of strict self-denial and extreme fasting—has been a means by which some believers and religious virtuosi have expressed their piety and spiritual devotion. In several contemporary case studies, women diagnosed with eating disturbances have used religious beliefs to justify their extreme dietary practices" (Henderson & Ellison 955). While churches are certainly not endorsing eating disorders, there are concerning notions perpetrated Perpetuated???by the mentalities that are promoted and the way food is talked about within the church is usually in regard to encouragement of fasting. The argument is quickly made that dieting and fasting are completely different, as they are done with a different goal in mind. One to lose weight, one to become closer to God, however, "this common reasoning assumes a separation of the body from the perceiving and willing mind; it also assumes that the mind can

control how the person experiences [their] body, regardless of the person's historical situation and socialization"(Coblentz *Horizons* 223). How is this language impacting the way we view what we are using to nourish our bodies. The Eucharist, practiced in many different Christian traditions, can be a great example of seeing a communal meal as a celebration, and an act of love and grace, but in order to do so these conversations and intentional acknowledgements need to happen.

In Hannah Bacon's ethnographic research done within a UK diet group she noted the way that theological mentalities are used to encourage stronger dieting. "Although it is common for commercial diet groups to employ the moral categories of 'good' and 'bad' to refer to food or eating behavior, this organization also adopts the rhetoric of 'syn' [synergy - used to describe "danger" foods] in its official weight loss plans. By adopting this Christian symbolism, links are established between food, danger and the need for self-control...Members also associate sinful food with danger and temptation" (Bacon 311). While it certainly doesn't help to hold churches and religious communities responsible for these harmful rhetorics, it's important to acknowledge and challenge the foundation that these organizations are building from.

Stepping outside of the theological context for a bit, self-love in terms of body confidence and the body positivity movement have been becoming more and more common in the secular world. While the term "Instagram Influencer" might make you scoff, there are some incredible women and men who have become influencers across social media promoting self-love to growing audiences all over the world. One of these influencers, Megan Jayne Crabbe, known on Instagram as "@bodyposipanda" writes in her book about her first experience finding this kind of self-love on social media. She writes, "Here, for the first time in my life, was someone saying that you don't have to spend your days starving, sweating, and hating yourself.

That it's possible to accept, and even love, your body just as it is" (Crabbe viii). Many of the people that run these accounts have very similar stories. Why is this happening and why is it important?

“According to numerous reports in academic literature and popular press, eating disturbances—i.e., practices ranging from binge eating, excessive exercising, weight cycling, and chronic dieting—now afflict an alarming percentage of women in the USA. Approximately 80 % of American women report dissatisfaction with their bodies, and the incidence of serious eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa, has increased by an average of 36 % every 5 years since the 1950s. These problems can undermine not only physical health, but also psychological well-being; excessive weight preoccupation and weight loss attempts are associated with depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety” (Henderson & Ellison 955).

People are starting to take notice of the way that body-image is negatively impacting people at an alarming rate. And while these statistics are specifically about women, men are feeling the impacts as well, it's just talked about even less. Influencers are trying to enact positive change in regards to this issue by offering their own journeys to self-love as encouragement and conversation. This intention is not for nothing; there's a reason why these women and men have thousands of followers. They're inspiring, and they're bringing about a revolution in how we see and talk about ourselves.

Why is this narrative important and informative for our theological context? It serves as an example of the power of encouragement. When putting this kind of encouragement to the test, researchers have found incredibly positive results when religious language is used to uplift one's body image. In a study done by Inman et. al. which looked at how young women's self esteem was impacted by viewing statements about God's love for them after viewing media showing

“perfect” airbrushed women, they found that “Specifically, reading religious body-affirming statements that emphasize a God who loves a person unconditionally—flaws and all—might mitigate the negative media effects. If a person feels affirmed and unconditionally loved by God, viewing thin women should not be threatening” (Inman 99). One thing that is important to note is that the women in this study were already very secure in their faith, not women who were just starting to understand their relationship with the One who created them. Regardless, this study is a great example of how we could be talking in our churches about the beauty of bodies, and ourselves in general, in very explicit ways in order to help people to find a deeper love of themselves. As Jessica Coblentz suggests, “we should note the images in our local parish bulletins, websites and even worship spaces. Do they feature individuals who embody society's prevailing beauty ideal in shape, size, class and color? We should diversify these images to celebrate all bodies, especially those typically underappreciated” (Coblentz *NCR*). What kind of beautiful conversations would this simple step start?

So what's the point? What does this mean for us? If the claim that I am truly making here is that to fulfill this greatest commandment you must start at a place of self-love, what does that signify? Personally, the more I have been able to love myself the more I have been able to love God, and the people around me. If I can look at myself, the person that I am always the most critical of, and accept and love myself for what I am, that changes everything. I become thankful for a creator God that made me just the way I am, and as I recognize that I am made in the image and likeness of God, it enables me to respond with love for God. In turn, I look at my neighbors, the people on this journey of life with me, and can see their beauty. Even if there are things I don't like about them or am inclined to judge them for, I can look at them with an all encompassing love, because it's what I've learned to do with myself. Through a continuous

journey of choosing to love myself everyday I can more easily look at God and neighbor the same way. However, this is hard to do without encouragement and active conversation in the places we find support. If church is meant to be a foundational part of our lives, I believe it has a responsibility here.

So ultimately, what does this mean for *you*? When you stop and pay attention to the way that reading this has made you feel, how do you want to respond? For just a moment, I ask you to imagine a church community, whatever denomination, that places self-love at the forefront, that encourages that love of “neighbor as yourself” starts with yourself. What does that look like? For me, it’s one that I want to be a part of. And we can. As I mentioned earlier, my intention here is exploration and conversation. Any one of these topics has the possibility for a paper or book of their own, and indeed there are some out there. There are also people like Rev. Beverly Dale, who actively preaches a self-love message. My purpose here is more of a call to action than anything else. I don’t think these challenges I have mentioned have perfect and specific answers, but I think what is most important is that we are paying attention to the ways that our churches are talking about how we see ourselves. How can we do better? What kind of messages of love and acceptance of ourselves should, and can, we be spreading? If we truly want to live out the greatest commandment, this is how we do it. It’s called radical self-love. It’s the way that God looks at you, and I challenge you to try it.

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