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Are you doing enough self-care?

A sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton in the “Still Haven’t Found What We Are Looking For” series
Delivered on September 25, 2022 on 1 Kings 19:3-9 The Message.

3-5 When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life to Beersheba, far in the south of Judah. He left his young servant there and then went on into the desert another day’s journey. He came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: “Enough of this, God! Take my life—I’m ready to join my ancestors in the grave!” Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush.

Suddenly an angel shook him awake and said, “Get up and eat!”

6 He looked around and, to his surprise, right by his head were a loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. He ate the meal and went back to sleep.

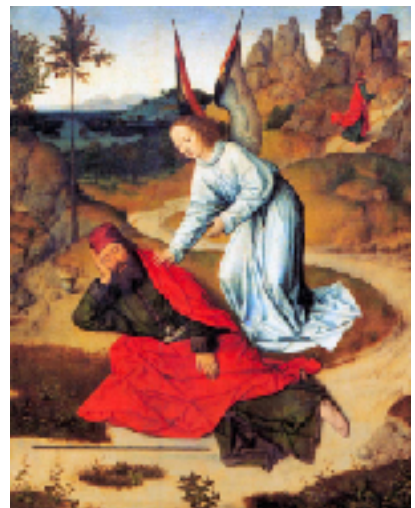
7 The angel of God came back, shook him awake again, and said, “Get up and eat some more—you’ve got a long journey ahead of you.”

8-9 He got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep.

Prelude

Poor Elijah the Tishbite. He’s had rough go.
But with enough self-care it seems he’s recharged and ready to get back at it.

Before we go any further, I am Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor here at UMCg. and I thank you for joining in this series called: We Still Haven’t Found What We’re Looking For and so far in this series we’ve looked at how we wear ourselves out with busy-ness because we some how have sold ourselves on the idea that if we over extend ourselves then somehow we’ll seem worthy, important, or redeemed. Last week, I spoke about how sometimes we use things like work like a narcotic, so that we can avoid hard stuff in life and be rewarded for being productive and no one is the wiser. But when we are honest whether we’ve filled our waking hours with activities, work, and even volunteering to the point of no





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leisure and edging out important relationships are we really living the good life? Living a life God intends? Or are we still just trying to find something to bring deeper meaning and purpose that the black hole of work and busy-ness can't seem to bring? You're welcome to look back on my past messages on YouTube to see what I think the Bible might offer us as an inoculation to the rat race I've just described.

One modern solution to all the hustle and bustle that leads to our stress, anxiety, insomnia is that we're just not doing enough self-care. If only we took better care of ourselves, find the perfect work-life balance, then all will be right in the world and in our lives. That's the message that surrounds us, right?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not down on self-care. I have my own self-care regimen. And even Elijah helps us see that self-care is important. But what I feel led to talk about today is how self-care can become it's own blackhole too, like busy-ness and work. If we're not taking a healthy approach to self-care or if we failed to question the systems that suck the life out of us while telling us to do more self-care, then maybe even with a solid helping of self-care not even self care can save us and we still haven't found what we are looking for.

Alright, that was a big set up to our topic today. Let's pause here for prayer before we go deeper.

If you've noticed, I stop for prayer before we get into the substance of the message. This pause for prayer two fold: 1) I often invite God's Spirit to prepare us -both you and me- for what God might want to speak today through the scriptures and message and 2) that you'll pray for me that God might use me to do something more than I can do alone. So let's do that now:

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,

We take a deep breath and ask that you fill us with your Holy Spirit to work in our lives. As we exhale, we seek to let go of that which prevents us from responding faithfully to your movement. Inspire my words and open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds to the the message you have for us today. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Sermon

I want to get back to Elijah this Tishbite, but before I do let me start with a definition. As a multi-generational church, I need to remember that we all use varied vernacular. Let me toss out a definition of self-care: the World Health Organization defines self-care as **“the ability of individuals, families and**



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communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider.”

When I talk about self-care I’m referring to a set of intentional practices that promote health and wellbeing. These often include activities that lower stress, like mediation, prayer, exercise. Self-care practices include setting and maintaining boundaries (like down time, off-line hours), stating your needs, asking for help.

But a half a bottle of chardonnay, while it may help destress, it is more like self-

medicating than self-care. As Christians, we

might consider self-care practices as spiritual disciplines: intentional practices that help us grow in our love of God and neighbor.

Prayer and mediation, exercise and healthy eating, healthy sleep routines, rest, boundary setting, meaningful hobbies or volunteerism, quality time with family and friends are all - spiritual disciplines that also serve self-care purposes. The difference is the intention of the practice. A question we can ask about a self-care practice is: **Am I**

engaging in these practices to grow in my love of God and love neighbor as my self?

Oo am I doing them for me? To make myself look good? To escape my insane world? To hide form my problems? One is self-centered or serves the purpose of oppressive systems, one is God-centered and brings life to us and our communities - I suspect most of us would prefer the later and I would say we’re called to the later - that’s the take away today. I’ll unpack that again at the end to give us something concrete to work with. But back to Elijah, for real this time!

Elijah the Tishbite, we don't know much about his upbringing, where he came from, or his pedigree. We just know that when we meet him in the book of Kings, God’s people -the Israelites- had gone astray. Instead of worshipping Yahweh -God- they started turning to another god, Baal. This so called god was the object of worship for many but Baal was just a hedonistic blackhole of a god that never led to anything truly satisfying. Elijah is called on the scene to confront the powers that be and call the people back to God from Baal worship.





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Elijah warns the people of a pending drought and famine that will only relent if the people turn back to God. But the people don't, they like Baal who only asks the people for their pleasure. So Elijah sets out on a three-year campaign to change the hearts and minds of the people and their leaders. It's a hard, exhausting job.

Along the way Elijah blesses a widow with a never-ending food supply, raises her

only son from the dead, and he sets up this really cool competition between Yahweh and Baal where Baal is exposed as a figment of imagination as Yahweh sends fire down from heaven (read 1 Kings 18 if you want to know that story).



The result of Elijah's work is that he is successful and exhausted, but now a bounty has been placed on his head by the king's wife and worshipper of Baal. So he's now fleeing for his life. Elijah is spent and collapses under the shade of the broom tree and he's so spent he just wants to die. He can't do it anymore - even if it's God's work. (Thoughts of self-harm and suicide even appear in the Bible and those are usually a sign we've overdone it or that the systems we are in have overused us.) Elijah didn't self-medicate, though. Instead, he was clear with God, his boss, that he couldn't do it anymore. Who would blame him? Do a good job. Get the people on the right track and now people want to kill you. Yikes!

Elijah rested. God even sent an angel who made the best bread and a jug of water with that Liquid IV stuff sampled at Costco and it revived Elijah. Rest, healthy eating, proper hydration, some prayer, a forty-day retreat, a change of scenery and a new job within the company that honored his needs and boundaries and Elijah is back at it - good as new. Notice here that Elijah's self-care routine wasn't for him to escape life, it wasn't just about himself, it was what he needed to do to be able to continue serving God.





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For self-care to be truly life giving, it needs to fit in the spiritual disciplines range of helping us grow in our love of God and neighbor as self.

I'm going to trust that we are in touch enough to be able to differentiate between self-care and self-medication. Chocolate, wine, or THC or anything in excess might help destress -and being less stressed might help us love God and others better- but self-medication is a blackhole and it won't replenish us. I speak from experience.

This leads me to one more important thing about why there might not be enough self-care to actually find what we are looking for. We live in a whole set of systems, that will take and take and take whatever we offer them. Sometimes in the name of good causes.

For example, here at the church we've done good ministries over the years, but as the church has shrunk and we haven't right-sized our ministries. So we put in on the pastors and the staff to keep up that which was once done by volunteers. It's all good stuff, but the system we built tends to ask more of employees then is reasonable or is compensated. I'm working to change that for two reasons, it's the just thing to do by our employees - myself included- and second we can't grow into something new as a church when we are overloaded with the ineffectiveness of the past. We are making changes and it is getting better, but **self-care doesn't fix a broken or unjust system - the system needs to change.**

Oppressive systems are prevalent in our society. Education is another big one - we ask teachers and students to do more, more, more with less, less, less and if student's don't perform then its all the educators fault, not a fault of the system. Or the stock market went down, so we're going to let 1,000 people go. The work of a laid off employee doesn't go away it just get piled on to those who remain and then when we're all crushed by the unjust load we're collapsing under the broom trees in our lives, we're told we are the at the problem - not the unjust system - because we're not doing enough self-care. The Baal answer to this problem tends to be a 90 minute webinar on self-care which puts us further behind and never addresses that our needs for rest, replenishment and boundary setting. Let me be clear no amount of self-care can overcome an oppressive system. It's not your fault you can't keep up. We are people, not robots who can work without breaks or boundaries.

One way to make sure self-care doesn't actually do anything for us is to demand that we do self-care. In doing so, something helpful turns in to something



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justifying or another thing to produce. What is supposed to be a means of grace becomes legalistic or just one more thing on our already too full plate.

Jesus never related to people based on their ability to produce something: widgets, a successful career, perfect parenting, or even those with the best self-care routine. If anything Jesus focused his time and energy making the people who don't have it all together his friends.

In Matthew 9:36, Jesus looks at people like us who are hurrying this way and that and not finding what we are looking for as 'sheep without a shepherd.' Instead of silently judging us for running around aimlessly, or shouting at us to 'just relax' or chastising us for not doing enough self-care, Jesus has compassion on us. He doesn't wait for us to calm down or find the right routine. Nor does Jesus leave us a victims to the blackhole of being overwhelmed and not cared for. He teaches the crowd -and us - that the judgement that we're all afraid of for failing at keeping up, or failing at self-care, or failing at not being able to produce more, isn't at all how God sees or values us. Instead, we are loved just the way we are. We don't have to earn God's grace and acceptance. **We are loved because we exist, not because of we produce or by how much we try to prove we can take care of ourselves.**

Because we are loved, we can actually find real rest. We can collapse under the broom trees of life and tell God - "I can't do it anymore. I just want to be able to love you, God and my neighbors with the love you have for me" and God will respond. We will find rest and refreshment. It might not come in ways we expect or like, but God is compassionate with us and will deliver us from ourselves and oppressive systems.

So this week do self-care but start it with a prayer like this:

Jesus, thank you for loving me just the way I am and seeing me with compassion. I want to find true rest and refreshment. I present my self-care practices to you. Help me to strengthen the practices that help me love you and my neighbor more deeply and to leave those that are self-centered or self-destructive aside and in doing so start to find that which I am still looking for in you.

Amen.