



# ‘...As you love yourself...’

*A cautionary tale by Matt Nott*

Looking back, I can now easily see the signs that I was heading towards a breakdown. Thankfully God redeems, and breakdowns can often (if we are willing to go through the painful process of transformation) lead to breakthroughs.

2020 began with extra vigour as I sought to prepare the church for my upcoming sabbatical. I worked harder and longer to get the church shipshape so I could focus on a much-needed review of my spiritual rhythms and practices. In truth, I'd been running on empty for a long time.

Then the pandemic hit: fuelled by adrenaline, uncertainty and the belief that this could truly be a 'kairos' moment, I led as best I could and decided to postpone my sabbatical. I couldn't abandon ship at such a time as this.

Yet something was wrong deep within me: a creeping bitterness; a growing resentment, leaving me questioning whether all this was worth it. Was I really up to the job? Two personal body blows hit across the summer and I was ready to hand in my notice.

Thankfully, my leaders noticed and offered me compassionate leave. Initially offended, I was about to reject their offer... but deep down I knew they were right. I needed to rest and to find God in the midst of it all.

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# '...As you love yourself...'

With my emails and phone screened by my beloved wife, and a scarily empty diary, I prioritised sleep, sorted out our overgrown garden, had an adventure climbing Snowdon alone, met trusted spiritual advisers and started counselling. **I'd recommend counselling to all of us ministers.** Several months on, I'm a work in progress but I'm learning the importance of loving myself.

Have you noticed how easy it is to gloss over those four words of the greatest commandment... as you love yourself? We devote ourselves to loving God and loving others, but if we don't learn to love ourselves then what we have to offer God and others is limited, at best. Put another way, if we don't prioritise sustaining our own wellbeing we all too easily find ourselves, like the older brother in the prodigal son's story (Luke 15), feeling like we are 'slaving' - instead of owning our identity as beloved children of the most-high God.

This rich parable has much to teach us. I realised I'd stopped responding out of love, instead viewing myself as a 'slave' to church and to others. When I find myself 'slaving' my heart becomes hardened, my barriers to God and others go up, and self-preservation kicks in.

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**"I am with you... you matter to me". He asks me and you to love ourselves as he loves us. Out of this love we can choose to love God and choose to love others.**

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I'm learning that in taking care of my own needs (emotional, mental, spiritual, physical and social wellbeing) I'm more able to truly love God and love others. By instilling boundaries and healthy rhythms, I'm more able to sustain myself for the triathlon of ministry - my heart is softer and my identity is stronger.

So what are the changes I've actually made? I offer them as a starting place to explore how you can demonstrate loving yourself:

- 1.** Communication boundaries - turning off phone/emails/social media accounts on evenings and days off. Sounds simple, yet I know so many people struggle to do this. It's made even harder when most of our church 'workforce' are volunteers who give their time outside of office hours. Trust me, they too will benefit if you moderate when you reply. To remain contactable by family and close friends, I bought a personal mobile. My church phone gets turned off when I'm not on duty.
- 2.** Daily time with God - often called a quiet time. I've had a mixed experience of this daily rhythm. If it becomes legalistic, this time with God quickly feels like another work appointment. If I view it as a chance to encounter God's love for me in prayer, word and worship then I find real joy in it. I try and mix this up, as sitting at my office desk is just too tempting a place to let my mind switch into what the day ahead holds. I enjoy running and

this often allows me to connect with God away from others and the to-do list.

- 3.** Margin in my diary. How many of us do back-to-back meetings? Probably most of us. I've learnt that having time to plan and process is essential. Coming out of a tough pastoral meeting then launching straight into a Sunday planning meeting doesn't do us (nor those we are meeting with) any favours.
- 4.** Work only two sessions a day. There is nothing new here, yet it's so easy to be 'ministering' from the moment our eyes open to the moment they close again at night. This is no way to sustain your wellbeing and ultimately leads to something having to give. If you're like me, we give up that which is good for our wellbeing.
- 5.** Take time for yourself. It turns out, taking a Sabbath is good for your wellbeing! (Who knew?). A complete pause... to celebrate that God is good, that he is in control, and we are free to 'be' rather than 'do'. To prioritise feasting, having fun, resting, taking a breath, and getting perspective. I now spend each Friday morning in silence and solitude; it's a work in progress as I live in a busy house (and I like to talk) but this new rhythm prepares me for my sabbath day on Saturday.

# A cautionary tale

6. Regular retreat days. Once a month I take Friday to go away (obviously not in lockdown, but I look forward to the day when I can travel). In the meantime, I get a takeaway coffee and walk, or pick up one of the pile of books I kept meaning to read, or sit and meditate on one of the truths about who God is and how he feels about me. A day with Dad.
  
7. Working to my strengths. There are things that I'm not great at when it comes to 'running' a church, but I'm coming to accept this is OK. This is why teams exist. I need to prioritise what I'm good at. For me this is pastoral care and discipleship - it might be different for you. I need to make sure I'm not stuck in sub-committees, chairing every meeting, preaching every sermon so that I can give my best to that which I was created to be and do.

There are many others who speak into this more deeply. I have much to learn so I simply offer this cautionary tale with the prayer that it will help you to 'love yourself'. God sees you and says, "I am with you... you matter to me". He asks me and you to love ourselves as he loves us. Out of this love we can choose to love God and choose to love others.



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