

In His Image: Healing Our Self-Esteem

Susan Brinkmann - 2025-03-27

INTRODUCTION: We welcomed back Susan Brinkmann for the twelfth time as she concluded our Lenten series on healing. Susan reminded us how important it is for women to be healed of the damages of the culture that we live in, all the mixed messages that we receive every day, the paradoxical messages that we are told. On the one hand, public figures tell us they are fighting for women's rights, and on the other hand, they elect a man as one of the 2023 women of the year. The objectification of women sets impossible standards for us to live up to, and we are treated in the culture like bodies, with lip service paid to everything else we are. This objectification has left us women with record levels of low self-esteem. And this is just our external world, much like the tip of the iceberg from Elizabeth's slide from last week. There is so much more going on beneath the surface, in our internal selves, the hurts from our families and relationships when we were growing up. All this added together leads to many confused, hurting women – we do not know who we are, we do not know who we are supposed to be, we do not know what we are supposed to do, but we do know what we are supposed to look like! As a result, Satan has been enjoying a feeding frenzy at our expense.

A CRITICAL ROLE: As women, we desperately need to heal our wounds because we play such a critical role in the world. From the closing statements of Vatican II *"...and above all we beseech you women, watch carefully over the future of our race, hold back the hand of man, who in a moment of folly might attempt to destroy human civilization... Women of the entire universe, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world."* We must make healing a priority, not just for these last few weeks of our Lenten TASTE talks, but forever. Susan told us that "neuroplasticity" is just a fancy word for learning. We learn by repetition, so we can carve a path in our brains with the positive messages of healing that we have learned over these last four weeks, and we need to keep repeating them. If we consider the mission given to us by the Church to save the peace of the world, we need to heal ourselves because this world is a mess, and it needs saving. And because the world is a mess, so are we. We are all impacted by the evil that surrounds us.

THE SIGNS OF OUR TIMES: How do we fix this? How do we fix ourselves? We do for others and for ourselves as St. Paul told us: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Rom 12:21). How do we do that? We need to understand the signs of our times. Pope Leo XIII had a vision where Satan told God if he could have 100 years, he would destroy the Church. And God, knowing the outcome, agreed to it. But why did Satan ask for 100 years, and not forever? If we get beyond 80 years or so, a few generations, people will begin to forget, and eventually the faith will be extinguished. Even though many have wandered away from the Church, it has not been extinguished in the 140 years since Satan made that statement. He did not win. Jesus promises *"So I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of netherworld shall not prevail against it"* (Matt 16:18). A gate cannot attack. Jesus is declaring war on Satan – we attack the gate, not the other way around. When we raid the dominion of hell, its gates will not be able to prevent us from eventually tearing it down. The world is on defense, not us. We are on offense, and Satan is terrified of us because we are the foot soldiers of his arch enemy Jesus. We are closing in. Susan sees it every day at "Women of Grace," where many are seeking accurate information on New Age and occult based activities.

IT BEGINS WITH US — SELF-DENIAL: We are all pounding at the gates in our own families. We are doing it by overcoming evil with good. And the process begins with ourselves. We need to rid ourselves of our own individual evils, our laziness, our woundedness, our inordinate attachment to people and to pleasures. We need to discipline ourselves. The great exorcist, Fr. Ripperger, had a 30-day prayer regime to clear out all types of demonic harassment by helping a person become more disciplined in their spiritual life. The regime consisted of getting up at a fixed time, praying certain prayers, consistency every day for 30 days. The self-denial required drives demons out. The more disciplined we are, the less demons are going to want to attack us. Consider the option of going after a soft target, where the soldiers take off the weekends, skip out on training versus an army that is training daily, working out, honing their weapons. It makes sense to go after the soft target. The combination of prayer and self-denial makes us hard targets.

LOVING UNCONDITIONALLY: The practices of prayer and self-denial, along with our developing of the virtues, is what makes us strong in our personal spiritual lives. How do we use our strength to bring the light of Christ into the world? The first thing we have to do is learn how to love unconditionally. This means we have to remember that everyone, even those we find difficult to tolerate or accept, or those who have hurt or betrayed us, is a child of God, on whom God longs to shower His grace and mercy. Will we let Him do that through us, even if we would rather not? It is difficult, but He will help us if we let Him. We have to be people whose hearts are in a constant state of conversion, something that is easier for us who are wounded. Conversion is easier because we are more willing to try anything when we are wounded. We have to be willing to be changed.

Jesus gave us the great gift of Divine Mercy for these times. The devotional practices that He revealed to St. Faustina were given to us to make us into vessels of mercy through which God's love can be poured out upon the world. But they are not sufficient unto themselves. We also have to show mercy to ourselves. We must learn to love ourselves, with all our failures, woundedness, weaknesses, and annoyances. This is unconditional love, and it can only be done with grace. And it is only the heart, open to conversion, that allows that grace in. A converted heart is a humble heart that knows its limitations. For us wounded, we have an advantage because we already know that we cannot do it on our own. We do not rely on ourselves because we do not have a high opinion of ourselves. We are not standing in the Lord's way by repeated attempts to do it on our own. Our job is to be patient, wait on the Lord while He works upon our hearts and helps us to become true vessels of mercy for the work of pounding at those gates. It is difficult to do at times, but not if we have the right attitude.

THE MERCIFUL OUTLOOK: Fr. Gaitley refers to this right attitude as the "merciful outlook." It is the difference of doing mercy versus being mercy to others. The merciful outlook is all about developing an authentic, genuine love for another person. This is true mercy. Sr. Faustina spoke of the efforts needed to live sincerely and unaffectedly with those from whom our nature flees or with those who have made us suffer. Humanly speaking this is impossible, and so she tries to discover Jesus in such a person. In such acts, love is pure, and such a practice of love gives the soul endurance and strength. The merciful outlook is in her effort to

discover the Lord in such a person. She actively **looks** for Jesus in them, because she knows He is there. Jesus taught us that we are all a part of His Mystical Body when He called out to Saul: "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" We must realize that each person, no matter what their circumstances, shows us a unique facet of the mystery of Christ, because they are part of the Body of Christ. And when we love someone, we love all of them. When we do this, they feel it, they sense it. We cannot fake this love. We learn to see as God sees, even in the unrepentant sinner. We still see their vocation to greatness because they are part of Christ's Mystical Body. The merciful outlook does not pretend sin and annoyance are not there, rather the merciful outlook makes a strategic choice to look past them, to go for the greater good. Is that not what God does with all of us?

APPLYING THE MERCIFUL OUTLOOK TO OURSELVES: Before we can apply this merciful outlook to others, we must apply it to ourselves. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves unless we learn how to love ourselves. Loving ourselves is a challenging concept for many of us. Many Catholics are raised with the idea that they must serve others without regard for themselves. In order to be a true Christian, we must deny ourselves and love and care for others. True self-love is not a selfish or prideful self-love. Authentic love of self is a recognition of the gift of God that is us. Just like the merciful outlook sees Christ in others, we need to learn to see Christ in ourselves. Too many of us are unable to accept our imperfections. There is pride hidden in our inability to accept our flaws. Instead, we need to learn how to accept ourselves with all of our imperfections and still love ourselves as God does. We continue to strive, with the help of grace, to overcome our imperfections with a calm, confidence in God, without becoming upset and overly critical of ourselves.

There is research that shows that learning how to love ourselves in this healthy way makes us happier and healthier and more compassionate. The main reason people are not more self-compassionate is that they are afraid they will become self-indulgent. They believe self-criticism is what keeps them in line. Most people have gotten it wrong because our culture has told us that being hard on ourselves is the way to be. The question we need to ask ourselves is are we more merciful to others than we are to ourselves? How quick are we to forgive ourselves after a fall? Our answer to that question is vitally important because some experts say that if we do not forgive ourselves for the things we have done in life, the people we hurt, the sins that we committed, then we have not experienced the fullness of redemption. How can we genuinely experience the act of being redeemed if we cannot forgive ourselves? We are not fully redeemed at that point, and we are living in a contradiction. Sadly, it is a common problem. It seems to stem from a need to punish ourselves after we sin. By doing this, we are not showing mercy for ourselves.

ON FORGIVENESS OF SELF: St. John Paul II comments on the Gospel encounter of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery. Instead of condemning her, Jesus took her side. He turned the tables on the men who were accusing her, and asked who among them was without sin. Jesus seemed to say to her accusers that this woman, for all her sin, was above all a confirmation of their own transgressions, of their male injustice, their misdeeds. This episode recorded in the Gospel of John is repeated in countless situations in every period of history. A woman is left alone, exposed to public opinion with her sin, while behind her sin, there lurks a man, a sinner guilty of the same sin, indeed equally responsible for it, and yet his part in it escapes notice.

We can be so disparaging and unkind to ourselves for the smallest of mistakes. Susan told the story of a woman who was berating herself for not being able to fix a printer, when all of a sudden the thought went through her head: "*Do not talk to my daughter like that.*" Her whole being felt still as she felt those were the words of God. Some of us think that if we forgive ourselves, we are condoning what we did. We often do not forgive ourselves because we are disappointed in ourselves, which is prideful and self-centered – it is all about self-pity, self-condemnation, self-punishment, self, self, self. This kind of self-centered behavior blocks God's mercy. If we persist in not forgiving ourselves, we become spiritually and emotionally numb, even depressed. Self-forgiveness is the ultimate challenge of Christian redemption and reconciliation. It is often the difference between the fully redeemed and the superficially redeemed, the mature and the immature Christian. Self-forgiveness is also the key to experiencing the tremendous healing potential of God's mercy. Having mercy on ourselves changes us, gives us insight into ourselves, and we can grow from that insight. When we extend God's mercy to ourselves through self-forgiveness, not only are we redeemed, we are also, in so many ways resurrected, we become new, we have a second chance. We deserve another chance.

GUILT: All of us have been hurt. All of us have done the hurting, but we will never heal emotionally and spiritually unless we forgive ourselves. What is holding us back from this forgiveness? Susan believes it is mainly guilt. Too many of us do not know how to handle guilt. Guilt is a fact of life, and feeling guilty is normal when we sin, when we hurt others, and when we act against our moral convictions. We must handle guilt mercifully. Guilt can be a powerful stimulus to change. We can learn from our failures. And guilt can also be an opportunity for enhancing our relationship with God by increasing our faith in His mercy. For many of us, we feel a great disappointment in our moral lapses, keeping our guilt ever present, and making it too easy to slide into self-criticism and self-condemnation. By doing this, guilt works against us rather than for us. Guilt becomes a torment rather than a stimulant. Jesus does not care about our sin, he cares that we are truly sorry. Most of the torment is our own doing.

Healthy self-criticism is always sensitive and constructive. There is an admittance of past sin, but also self-love, and self-respect and a constructive plan for moving forward – this is the merciful outlook. It produces insight, which helps us to know ourselves better, and opens us to the possibility of change and conversion. It challenges us to accept and love the reality of who we truly are. It challenges us to have mercy on ourselves, and to let go of the false images of who we wish we were, instead of who we truly are, daughters of God, made in His image. We should ask our Lord: "*Who do you say that I am?*" and take that question to prayer, and to Adoration. The answer we hear will not be what we expect to hear because He does not see us the way we see ourselves.

CONCLUSION: Having mercy on ourselves changes us for the better. We are better equipped to be the vessels of mercy God needs us to be in this critical time in the history of the world. This is how we overcome evil with good — first in ourselves, and only then, in the world around us. These are dark times we are in. And yet, "*Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more*" (Rom: 5:20). Let us not be tempted to discouragement, but rejoice because there is so much grace here for the taking right now. Thanks to those graces, this is an unprecedented time to grow holy because things are so evil. So keep pounding on those gates until we tear them down.