

The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!  
The one the Lord doesn't consider guilty -  
in whose spirit there is no dishonesty -  
that one is truly happy!  
When I kept quiet, my bones wore out;  
I was groaning all day long -  
every day, every night! -  
because, Lord, Your hand was heavy upon me.  
My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought.  
So I admitted my sin to You;  
I didn't conceal my guilt.  
"I'll confess my sins to the Lord" is what I said.  
Then you removed the guilt of my sin.  
That's why all the faithful should pray to you  
during troubled times,  
so that a great flood of water won't reach them.  
You are my secret hideout!  
You protect me from trouble.  
You surround me with songs of rescue!  
The Lord says: I will instruct you and teach you  
about the direction you should go.  
I'll advise you and keep my eye on you.  
Don't be like some senseless horse or mule,  
whose movement must be controlled  
with a bit and a bridle.  
Don't be anything like that!  
The pain of the wicked is severe,  
but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord.  
You who are righteous, rejoice in the Lord and be glad!  
All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy! Psalm 32

For a few months in 2011 I visited a young man in jail who was the grandson of some parishioners. He was an addict, who along the way had lost his wife, his children, his home, and his job. I knew he was doing the 12 Steps in jail, and during one of our visits he asked me if I'd hear his 5<sup>th</sup> Step. I said yes, not knowing what to expect, and the next time I went to the jail, he read page after page after page to me through the thick plexiglass wall that separated us, his fifth step: "We admitted to God, to ourselves,

and to another human being the exact nature of our wrong-doing.” It was excruciatingly painful to listen to another person pour out the horrible things he’d done to get a “fix”; the hearts he’d broken; the relationships he’d trashed. I had to force myself to stay seated in that hard orange plastic chair, because a part of me could hardly bear to listen to his pain. I don’t remember that he cried when he read this epistle to me... I’m guessing he cried when he did the hard work of the 4<sup>th</sup> Step of a “searching and fearless moral inventory”, and then wrote it all down, the pages and pages of disappointments, sins, and regret. It’s said that religion is for people who fear hell, and spirituality is for people who’ve been there. This young man had been in hell, and I felt shaky as he read to me... like I too had walked too close to the rim of hell. But in writing down and then confessing to me his regret, he seemed to walk out of hell and shake it off his shoes, and into God’s waiting arms of love and mercy.

Not all of us don’t have to be in that terrible hard place - jail and addiction, devastated family members, and heartbreak by the dump truck - but all of us know regret. All of us know those times when we can’t sleep and regret climbs up on the bed beside us and begins a litany of the things we’ve done and said that have caused harm... the ways we’ve let God and ourselves and other people down... the sometimes deliberate and sometimes unconscious ways we’ve been unloving, unkind, unforgiving. Pretty soon the Regrets are having a family reunion on your bed, and all of them have a story to tell about you.

My spiritual director is Catholic and I recently asked her about the act of confession, which is now called “The Sacrament of Reconciliation”. A sacrament is an outward and often simple sign of something that’s inwardly profound and sacred... a

sign of grace... a sign of God's presence. I am in awe of the idea that confession is a sacrament. I walked out of the jail after hearing someone's 5<sup>th</sup> Step confessed to me; we prayed with full assurance that God had forgiven and wiped away this man's sin and even his regret... and it felt sacramental. I have come to see confession: the letting go of sin and accepting, believing in, God's grace... as a sacrament. Not all of us have to be in a terrible hard place, but all of us are sinners, and have regret.

Psalm 32 is a lament, a prayer of sorrow and regret. It was probably written for the Israelites to pray together, a communal lament, but each of us can pray it, because all of us can relate to it. "When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long - every day, every night! - because, Lord, Your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. So I admitted my sin to You; I didn't conceal my guilt." On page 3 of the worship program under "The Witness" is an explanation of regret that says: **Spiritual Regret is lament - grief and disappointment - for the ways we have turned away from God, or hurt others, or hurt ourselves.**

There is a place to write some notes, or draw some images, or just to reflect on your regrets. This is just for you and God... no one else needs to look at it. **Lord, I regret turning away from You... Lord, I regret hurting... Lord, I regret hurting myself...**

Psalm 139 is one of my favorite scriptures because it reminds me of the transparent nature of God's relationship with me, that everything about me is known to God. This is from the Living Bible translation: "I can never be lost to Your Spirit! I can never get away from my God! If I go up to heaven, You are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, You are there. If I ride the morning winds to the farthest oceans, even there Your hand will guide me, Your strength will support me. If I try to

hide in the darkness, the night becomes light around me. For even darkness cannot hide from God; to You the night shines as bright as day.” Interestingly, or maybe amazingly, God is not repulsed by knowing everything about me, about us. God knows us completely, and loves us unconditionally. That knowledge makes confession bearable... God already knows our sin, our mistakes, our regret. Confessing it is a way to let it go it... of stepping away from regret and its cousins despair, helplessness, and self-hatred... stepping away from its hold and moving into God’s arms of love and mercy. You don’t have to be afraid to be transparently open and honest with God ~ because God already knows. Look again at page 3 of the worship program, where it says: **Step 5 of the 12 Steps of Recovery is “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrong-doing/regrets.”** And right below it is another place for thoughts, images, pictures, and prayers. Take a moment. **Lord, I confess to You sinful/hurtful/shameful actions, attitudes, and failures that I regret...**

I wonder if the 5<sup>th</sup> Step includes admitting what we regret to another person because we need to see the on another human face the look of God’s love and compassion. All of us need to know that we are worthy of love and mercy and understanding. This is one of the gifts of the church as the Body of Christ. We can be, as the psalmist wrote about himself and his people, “Like a senseless horse or mule, who must be controlled with a bit and a bridle.” And yet Jesus calls us the light of the world... and the Apostle Paul described us as gloriously gifted, indispensable parts, of a living body. We can be the face of God’s love for each other.

Jesus never pretended to be anyone other than Himself. He didn't pretend to be holy, and He was critical of and criticized by those who valued appearing holy. Instead Jesus modeled vulnerability for us, crying, laughing, loving, even confessing. On the last night of His life, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus confessed to His Abba-Father that He was afraid of what was coming... He was afraid of the cross, He was afraid to die. And in confessing His fear, Jesus was able to let go of its hold on Him, and to step confidently into His Abba-Father's arms of love and mercy.

When we are vulnerable with each other, confessing our regret, our sin, and brokenness, we are able to loosen its hold on us, and step into Jesus' arms of love and forgiveness. And then we are more able to reflect His transparent love to others. I think wanting to be holy, loving, and merciful, are good things but they can be stumbling blocks to us Christians. Because we don't just want to be all of those things, we want to appear to be all of those things. And so when we make mistakes we might not admit that we are followers of Jesus. Or we might want to put on a mask face and pretend to be... less than who we really are. Look again at page 3, and spend a moment thinking about the people who know you and love you exactly as you are. And look around you, at who you might be vulnerable with... trusting that you could confess your failures and regrets to a brother or sister in Christ, who would also offer you love and understanding and compassion. Again on page 3 there's a place for your thoughts that says: **I can confess my regrets, confident that I will be listened to with mercy and without being judged, to ...**

The psalmist wrote that God's hand was heavy upon him, but when he confessed his sin and regret, God removed it from him. And then the psalmist broke into a song of

praise. “Lord, You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble! You surround me with songs of rescue!” and then “Faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord. All you whose hearts are right (because you confessed your sin and regret) sing out in joy!”

Protestant Christians used to be view Catholic Christian’s confession with some skepticism, that perhaps nothing could be kept secret from a priest. I’ve read that there was concern that President Kennedy, who was a Catholic, might not be permitted to hold state secrets from his confessor. Our Catholic sisters and brothers have something that we have overlooked: a ritual, a practice, to access the sacrament of confession and forgiveness. Confession is a spiritual practice. It moves us to seek God’s forgiveness. It moves us away from the rim of hell where guilt and shame belch and bubble, and into God’s arms of love and mercy, into peace, and serenity.

Jesus never talked about guilt. He talked about change and repentance, so it’s not enough to be sorry, to have regret. When we follow Jesus we follow Him into a new way of being, where we are not afraid to confess our sin and brokenness, because we are confident - because we have experienced over and over! - His love and mercy. The psalmist wrote: “The Lord says, ‘I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I’ll advise you and keep my eye on you.’” Spiritual practices are ways for you to experience God’s grace... God’s love and mercy... God’s sweet partiality to you. One of the spiritual practices is regret. At the bottom of page 3 and the top of page 4 are three practices for releasing regret and accepting - that is walking into the arms of - God’s love and mercy. Amen.

### **Spiritual Practices for Releasing Regret and Accepting God’s Mercy**

\*Pray the ancient Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is prayed over and over, as a chant or a mantra.

\*Pray Psalm 139: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

\*Cup your hands over your face as you name your regrets, then open them as cups to receive God’s mercy, then splashing your face with mercy as with cold, clean water.