Sunday, May 31, 1981
REGRET: ANOTHER NAME FOR GUILT
Psalm 51:1-4,10-12

One of the classic prayers of confession in the liturgy of the Christian Church contains the words: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.”

Is there anyone here this morning or listening on the radio that those words do not fit? But there’s another question — what do we do with our regrets about past mistakes and past inaction? What do we do with our guilt?

We feel guilty about failure in marriage; failure as parents; failure as children; failure in friendships; failure in living up to the moral standards we know are right; failure in school; and the list goes on and on.

And we do all fail time and time again. “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things v1hich we ought not to have done.” Our Christian faith never glosses over our failure and guilt. But more important, our faith gives us a way of handling our guilt so that it does not become destructive, but constructive. Unfortunately, many of us attempt ways of dealing with our guilt which are not helpful.

1. First of all, too many of us simply carry our guilt, our regrets with us. We are not able to find a healthy way to get rid of them. Thus, some people finally come to an almost total sense of self-despising or self-hatred. Their guilt stays deep within them until it finally paralyzes them from any action. I’ve known people where this kind of buried guilt has literally resulted in actual physical paralysis. Others simply become depressed, convinced that no one likes them or respects them, and their self-image gets lower and lower.

Biblical scholars have suggested that the paralyzed man brought to Jesus by his four friends had internalized his guilt so much that it caused paralysis. Perhaps this man had done something or failed to do something that so horrified him that he resolved to become a man of total inaction. In his own eyes he was the kind of person who was not worthy to act at all anymore. His physical paralysis was the logical outgrowth of his self-image.

In the story, you remember, Jesus went immediately to the heart of the problem. He said, “My son, your sins are forgiven....rise, take up your bed and walk.”

To take our guilt and swallow it is not an effective way of dealing with it. It only leads to deeper and further problems.

2. Secondly, there are people who instead of swallowing their guilt, wear it on the outside and at the same time cover it up. Then they simply transfer that guilt onto others and seek to alleviate the guilt feelings by accusing and punishing others. Thus, they never face up to their own failures, regrets and guilt in an. open and honest way.

Jesus Christ was aware of this way of attempting to handle guilt that day when some men brought a woman who they said had been caught in the act of adultery (where was the man who had been caught with her) and were ready to stone her to death. as the 1aw 0£ Moses commanded. They wanted to see the reaction of Jesus.

There was a lot of high and mighty moral indignation in the air — shrill voices, accusing fingers being pointed. How we all like to point out sin, mistakes, moral lapses, and guilt in others. Remember how Jesus said that day — “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone.”

After a short silence, they accusers all quietly slipped away. Once again, Jesus had gone to the root of the pro-blem. Here were people who were probably having trouble with their own sexuality which is why what the wom.an had done so upset them. Rather than deal with the beam in their own eye, they chose to get at the speck that was in her eye.

People have been trying to handle their guilt in this way for many, many years. There is a psychological principle to the effect that we tend to get most upset about those problems in other’s lives with which we are most uneasy in our own. Therefore, there is always an element of revelation in an act of condemnation. The Arabs have a saying that every time you point an accusing finger at someone else, three fingers point back at yourself.

We tend to hate in others what we most hate in ourselves. Thus, unfortunately many of the crusades that have been mounted throughout history have had their origin in this way of attempting to handle guilt. The people who are intent on hunting witches may well be trying to covertly deal with the “witchiness” in themselves of which these people make them aware.

But it is not an effective way of handling our own guilt. It accomplishes nothing. So, when you catch yourself pointing an accusing finger, or find yourself getting overly indignant about some supposedly immoral action on the part of others; be sure to also look carefully at yourself.

3. Thirdly, we sometimes try to handle our regrets or guilt by overreacting or overcompensating. We take our guilt very seriously but then go overboard in our efforts to repair the damage or in trying to make it up to those we’ve hurt.

I’m not saying that reparations or amends shouldn’t ever be made — there is often something quite responsible and heroic about such efforts. In fact, the 8th and 9th steps in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous suggest such efforts. The 8th step says, “Made a list of all persons we’ve harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.” And the 9th step is a follow-up: “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

Note particularly the phrase, “whenever possible,” and “except when to do so would injure them or others.” Making amends is not always possible, and even when it is, there is only so much one can do. We have to decide how much is enough. Sometimes people go on and on trying to make amends and never get beyond that, and the guilt is never lifted.

You may remember reading the story in the news some years ago about a father who had too many beers one Saturday afternoon while watching television. He got upset about something and rushed out of the house in a fit of temper, and accidently backed his car over his three-year-old child who had followed him out of the house. That man was eaten up with remorse and anguish. Yet what could he do to make amends to the dead child or his wife, or the grandparents? He could punish himself and hate himself and keep trying to make amends for the rest of his life and still not be finished. Some of the things we do or fail to do carry with them such a load of guilt that all we can finally do is ask forgiveness and then accept the

forgiveness when it is offered. Trying forever to make amends is not an effective way of handling our guilt.

What then does the Christian faith offer in the way of handling our regrets and our guilt?

1. The first step is simply to admit that we have done wrong. “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” No glossing over or covering up of our mistakes and sins. Forget the excuses. Forget the “if onlys,” forget the “what ifs.” Forget the defensiveness. Forget the rationalizations. Forget trying to blame others.

The writer of the 51st Psalm puts it plainly: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions; wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from sin.”

2. Secondly, in our guilt we need to recognize that ultimately, we have sinned against God. Thus the 51st Psalm continues — “Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done that which is evil in thy sight.”

God is the loving power that creates and holds the universe together. God is our creator and redeemer. And when we recognize that along with others whom we may have hurt in our sins, ultimately, we have offended God along with all the rest, that’s when deep forgiveness begins.

God is the ultimate forgiver. We human beings often find it difficult to forgive and forget. But not so with God. The good news is that God does not condemn us but rather forgives us. God’s love is not “reward” love, but gift love. The love which God has for us is not created or changed by what we do or fail to do. God’s love is constant. There is nothing I can do to make God love me anymore or any less than God already does. Love is not earned or withdrawn. Thus, God always gives us a second chance or a third, or fourth, fifth or two-thousandth or as many as we need.

When we accept this love of God as shown most clearly in Jesus Christ, then we are freed from our guilt, and we can start over again with a clean slate.

Sometimes we think that our repentance earns our forgiveness, but that’s not really the way it is. From God we do not need to earn forgiveness — it is freely given, because it’s a part of love. It is the experiencing of forgiveness that empowers the act of repentance. Forgiveness is the realization that God takes our sin seriously, but not ultimately. God knows there is always a future for us, and this hope is what empowers me to look at what I’ve done and learn from it and then go out differently in the future.

Because we know God’s love forgives us freely, we can repent openly and honestly and start over. So it is that any amends we make are not made so as to earn forgiveness but done as a response to the forgiveness. And when we have truly experienced the forgiveness of God, then we find it possible to forgive others.

That’s why the Christian faith is called the good news. That’s why on our order of service we list the “good news” immediately following the prayer of confession. It is a reminder and announcement that God continually forgives us unconditionally.

It’s another way of saying that we’re unconditionally accepted by God. All we need to do is to accept the fact that we’re accepted.

This is the Christian faith’s answer to the problem of guilt and regret. There is no other satisfactory solution. Go and sin no more. Rise, take up your bed and walk. God says that to us over and over again. Amen.