A surreptitious conjunction of private readings came about recently that brought the contrast of guilt and love to the fore. A favorite little devotional of short daily reflections is entitled “Thoughts from the Diary of a Desperate Man,” by Protestant author Walter Henrichsen, who writes from the perspective of one who had earlier in life suffered what most of us have suffered—the inescapable feeling that there must be something “more,” exacerbated by his enduring some of the worst earthly pain imaginable—loss of a child. In an excerpt, he speaks of the guilt arising from doing that which is wrong and evil, using the example of the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers in the biblical book of Genesis. (see Genesis 34:50)

In brief, Joseph was sold into slavery by brothers who envied the favoritism showered upon him by their father. In divinely shaped turns of events, Joseph eventually rises to be second in power in Egypt, and during a severe famine, his brothers come to him seeking food for their families. Unrecognized by them, Joseph tests them, and they recall the guilt which had apparently plagued them for 20 years, seeing in it the reason for their trial: “... they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us.’” (Genesis 42:21)

Those who are older probably can relate to the story quite well because remembrances of past failures in morality or kindness—for the Christian, “sin”—may haunt the memory, even if done long ago. Thus the incomparable value of a clean conscience—a value that increases over time. Many say, “I have no regrets,” but many mouthing the words know the self-denial within.

Fortunately, our story of Joseph and his brethren has a happy, even touching, ending—they reunite and renew their familial bond via Joseph’s magnanimous forgiveness and, to the absolute surprise and joy of their aged father, Jacob. Yet one cannot help but think of their valuable time lost, the pain endured during the intervening twenty years, especially by the father. What if the brothers had done right by Joseph from the beginning?

In that story, we see the destructive, torturous effects of hate and envy and yet the healing power of love and forgiveness. By analogy, the Christian sees Joseph as a “type”—a veiled foreshadowing—of Jesus, who would Himself be “betrayed” by His brethren (all of humanity by sin), and yet also save them in forgiveness nonetheless. Such is the love that Christians believe God has for the world—a love for which He in Jesus allowed Himself to be stretched upon a cross in the offering of divine embrace.

But not infrequently, many who have failed morally in their past a great deal fear, or are at least hesitant, to seek forgiveness of those whom they know they have offended. And so, like Joseph’s brothers, they travel through life with a burden growing ever weightier with time, especially when nearing the end of life. Most people have heard of Catholic “last rites” which a priest provides a person near death, but few have witnessed the tremendous relief the unburdening of souls of guilt long hidden, often for decades, allowing the dying to finally “let go” as if losing a desperate grip upon the soul to finally go to peaceful rest.

But such agitation is needless, for remedy is readily available in seeking forgiveness from one another and, for the Christian, from God, who Himself is always ready to forgive the sincerely penitent. Does He not urge the sinner: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good. ... ‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord: ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ... ’” (Isaiah 1:16-18)

“Oh, but I am so unworthy!” many often protest. Yes, you most certainly are ... as am I, and every person on the earth. But God’s love conquers our weakness; how could it not?

And so the second surreptitious reading—an excerpt from a sermon from the bishop St. Bernard of the 1100s, focusing upon love.

Bernard assures in his sermon: “Love is sufficient of itself, it gives pleasure by itself and because of itself. It is its own merit, its own reward. Love looks for no cause outside itself, no effect beyond itself. Its profit lies in its practice ... Of all the movements, sensations and feelings of the soul, love is the only one in which the creature can respond to the Creator and make some sort of similar return however unequal though it be. For when God loves, all he desires is to be loved in return; the sole purpose of his love is to be loved, in the knowledge that those who love him are made happy by their love of him.”

But how can a mere mortal match infinite and eternal love? He/she need not, and cannot. Again St. Bernard, who utilizes the image of Christ the Bridegroom with His bride the Church/His faithful:

“What then of the bride’s hope, her aching desire, her passionate love, her confident assurance? Is all this to wilt just because she cannot match stride for stride with her giant, any more than she can vie with honey for sweetness, rival the lamb for gentleness, show herself as white as the lily, burn as bright as the sun, be equal in love with him who is Love? No. It is true that the creature loves less because she is less. But if she loves with her whole being, nothing is lacking where everything is given ... she cannot love so much and not be totally loved, and it is in the perfect union of two hearts that complete and total marriage consists. Or are we to doubt that the soul is loved by the Word first and with a greater love?”

So let us seek to do good to all—the monotheist to love God above all, and all to love neighbor as thy self—the greatest wisdom and virtue of all.

“How great is the mercy of the Lord, and his forgiveness for those who turn to him!” (Sirach 17:29)