Contrition in its many forms (Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

The prodigal's return looks more like a strategy than a wholehearted conversion.

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Although Psalm 32 is counted among the Psalter's seven penitential psalms, there is nothing lachrymose about it: it both begins and ends with outbursts of joy. This is because it presupposes a chastened sinner's turnaround or *metanoia*—a change of heart and mind familiar to all of us in the words of John Newton's "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind, but now I see."

Over the course of its 11 verses the psalm charts this move from before to after, all rendered in the intimate voice of a first-person speaker. To paraphrase: As long as I kept silent about my sin, I wasted away in a spiritual desert, "dried up as by the heat of summer": I groaned all the day long. But when I said to myself, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"—and when I did so—I was forgiven my guilt, was surrounded "with glad cries of deliverance," and was granted the steadfast love accorded to all those who return to the One from whom they have strayed.

The psalm then ends exuberantly with a call to celebrate: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, / and shout for joy, all you upright in heart."

It is easy to see why the lectionary pairs a text which begins "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven" with Luke's parable of the son who once was lost

but then is found. Jesus' story also has at its heart a forgiving father's call not only for an extravagant feast but for the joyful noise of music and dancing (15:25). It is necessary, as the father says, to rejoice.

St. Augustine draws on both passages when he tells at length of his own repentance, in the eighth book of his *Confessions*. Echoing the psalmist's day-long groaning but with far greater detail, he recalls, "I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees. … I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain." In this agony of repentance, he identifies less with the psalmist than with the parable's younger son, who, after a period of "loose living," finally "came to himself," in Luke's enigmatic phrase. In a sermon on the parable, Augustine describes this reckoning as a mordant fit of self-recrimination. The guilty conscience "lashes itself in its thoughts, it beats itself, indeed, to speak more truly, it slays itself."

But is this what we find in the parable? Instead of the gut-level remorse Augustine describes, the prodigal's return looks more like a strategy than a wholehearted conversion. His immediate goal is to find something more edible than pig's feed: the growl of an empty belly motivates his return. Moreover, the rhetorical skill of his premeditated speech easily trumps the cry of a broken and contrite heart. "Treat me like one of your hired hands," he plans to say, pleading with artful humility for only a little instead of presuming to expect a lot. But rather than dwell on the motives of the return, Jesus draws attention away from the shallowness of the son and toward the depth of the father's generosity. His mercy is what matters, not the degree to which the son deserves forgiveness or through his misery has earned it.

Contrition takes many forms. For the Psalmist it begins when the Lord's hand is heavy upon him; for the younger son in the parable, it is when his stomach growls. We inevitably come to ourselves in different ways. But what ultimately matters when the rush of mighty waters threatens to overwhelm is to ask for help, and to do so without the dodge of deceit or any clever ploy. Hiding gets us nowhere; it is seeking that matters, whatever initially may be the motive. Admitting that one is lost turns out to be the first step to getting found. Selah!