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Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
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It was almost three o'clock in the afternoon on a sunny spring day in Sun Prairie: Sunday, April 7, 2013. Maureen Mengelt was out for a jog.

Bruce Burnside, the Lutheran bishop of South Central Wisconsin, was late for a church ceremony where he would be delivering the sermon. He'd been drinking. And he was texting and adjusting his radio and fumbling with his GPS as he drove to church.

As Bishop Burnside was exiting the off-ramp from Highway 151 he lost control of his car, crossed a median, and struck a light post before hitting Maureen Mengelt. She died soon afterwards.

Bruce Burnside was convicted of second degree reckless homicide and first-offense drunken driving. Last month he was sentenced to ten years in prison and five years of extended supervision.

Many articles have been written and many sermons have been given trying to make sense of this devastating accident, trying to come to terms with drunk driving, the roles and responsibilities of clergy, and what constitutes fair punishment.

But I don't want to talk about these things tonight.

I want to talk about Bruce, and I want to talk about regret.

Bruce is my friend.

I met him at an interfaith gathering soon after I moved to Madison. Several years passed, but we reconnected a couple years ago, and we rekindled our friendship. We shared several meals. He came over to my house a few times. We talked about religion and politics and family and the joys and challenges of working as clergy.

I know that it might be difficult to hear me talk about Bruce, the perpetrator of the crime, instead of about Maureen. Maureen was the one who was killed. She left behind her husband, Kevin, and three children, Megan, Andrew, and Allyson. At Bruce's sentencing I heard her husband and children talk about their grief. I heard them share how much they miss her and how painful life is without her.

I don't want to minimize their pain, and I don't want to apologize for what Bruce did. Bruce's actions were reckless and completely irresponsible.

But this Yom Kippur, I want to talk about living with the heavy burden of regret.

At Bruce's sentencing he told the judge, "I have never been so sorry and sorry is such an insufficient word for this kind of guilt. Nor have I ever lived with such shame or regret or remorse. No one deploras what I have done more than I do."

Most of us will never have to live with the guilt of killing a person, but we *all* live with regret. The regret of not pursuing our dreams, of making decisions that helped us in the moment but hurt us as each year passed. The regret of choosing expediency instead of what we knew was right. The regret of using sharp words and angry gestures. The regret of indifference, insincerity, and dishonesty. We have lied and cheated, accused others, avoided responsibility, and destroyed relationships. And we wish it weren't so.

Regret is a bitter feeling. When mild it can gnaw at us. When severe, it can paralyze us.

Regret is when we think that our present situation would be better if we had acted differently in the past.

Regret is when we hate ourselves for not having acted, for standing idly by when we could have done something.

Regret is when we realize that we're responsible.

When regret is strong it can lead to denial. We try to imagine the situation away. We try to pray it away. We ask ourselves how we could have done such a stupid thing or made such a thoughtless decision. We blame ourselves. We beat ourselves up. We punish ourselves. Sometimes the shock is so great that we can't even remember what happened. But sometimes we can't forget. We can't get the terrible memories out of our minds. We replay them over and over again.

We feel helpless. Regret reminds us – in the starkest way possible – that there are some things that we can't change, no matter how desperately we want to rewrite the past.

Sometimes we can't set things right.

Sometimes we can't fix what's broken.

But there is a potentially positive side of regret. It can motivate us to change. And it can motivate us to do *teshuvah*, to take responsibility, ask someone for forgiveness, make amends, and commit to behaving differently in the future. Regret holds the possibility for a different story to be written. Not necessarily the story we would have chosen, but a story that we can live with.

When Moses climbed up Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments, the Israelites got restless. He'd been gone for forty days. They thought he might not come back. They got scared. They panicked. They needed a new god, so they made a golden calf to worship.

God saw what was going on and sent Moses back down the mountain so he could see for himself what was happening. As he climbed down he heard the people singing. As he

approached the camp, he saw them dancing. “This is the god who brought us up out of Egypt!” they shouted.

Moses boiled with rage. How could they do this? Why hadn’t they waited for him? After all they’d been through together. He hurled the holy tablets against the foot of the mountain. They shattered into a million pieces. And Moses’ dreams shattered along with the tablets.

God was also boiling with rage. God wanted to destroy the people for their idolatry.

But Moses pleaded with God on the people’s behalf and saved them. Maybe Moses had more faith than God. Maybe he knew that even though people are capable of making terrible mistakes, they’re also capable of doing *teshuvah*.

God acquiesced and told Moses to climb up the mountain again. It was the first day of the month of Elul, which is the month that comes right before Rosh Hashanah. Moses spent another forty days on top of the mountain. He carved two tablets of stone like the first set and wrote down the Ten Commandments. He returned to the people on the 10th day of the following month, which is the 10th of Tishrei – Yom Kippur, the holiday that commemorates the *second* giving of the commandments. Yom Kippur is the day of second chances.

The first set of the tablets couldn’t be fixed. They were broken beyond repair. But God gave Moses another chance. God gave the people another chance.

Jewish tradition recognizes that we’re capable of creating brokenness beyond repair. We’re capable of creating devastation that transcends simple solutions. This is what it means to be human – and even though we *should* act responsibly, and we *should* avoid reckless behavior, and we *should* treat our loved ones with care, we still harm, hurt, and destroy.

But Jewish tradition also teaches that there is always the possibility for healing. We can’t return to what was. We can’t change the past. But we can move forward, maybe in different ways or in new directions.

The Rabbis tell a midrash, or a story, that when Moses returned to the people on Yom Kippur, they put the second set of tablets into the *aron ha-brit*, the Ark of the Covenant. But the people also put the broken pieces of the first set into the ark. They carried both sets – the whole and the broken – during their forty-year journey into the Promised Land. They placed both sets – the whole and the broken – in the Temple in Jerusalem, the holiest place in Jewish tradition.

The *aron ha-brit* was also called the *aron ha-edut*, the Ark of Witness. The ark is a witness to the brokenness of our world, to the harm that we cause, to the pain that we carry. Our actions can have terrible consequences. But the shattered fragments that we hold are holy.

People tell us all the time to just move on, to stop dwelling in the past, and to rid ourselves of regret. But that's not the message of Yom Kippur and it's not the message of the midrash. We carry our brokenness with us, just like the broken tablets. We shouldn't let the brokenness consume us, and we might need to let go of the pain and hurt and anger. But those broken tablets in the ark are a sacred reminder of the past. We can learn from our past and do *teshuvah*. As we continue our journey we can learn to live with the whole and the broken, side by side within us.

How do we walk on this journey?

One subtle message comes from Biblical Hebrew, where words can have multiple and opposite meanings. The word *chet* means to sin and to purify. The word *barak* means to bless and to curse. And the word *nacham* means to regret and to comfort.

We might think that regret and comfort are in conflict and that if we have serious regrets then we'll never experience any real comfort. Or we might think that regret is stagnant – that if we carry regret with us, then we'll always be stuck in a dark and bitter place.

But Jewish tradition teaches something different, that where we are now is not where we always have to be. Stories change and perspectives change and people change.

The word, *nacham*, in addition to meaning both to regret and to comfort, carries with it a sense of change or a shift in perception. Throughout the Bible *nacham* is used to refer to God's regret. And when God regrets something, God has a change of attitude. God wishes something were different. This was the case with the story of the Golden Calf. God regrets creating a covenant with the Israelites and wants to destroy them, but Moses intervenes and pleads with God, who changes His perspective and abandons the plan.

For us too. Through regret we might have a change of perspective. When we understand past events in new ways our hearts and emotions can change. We are better able to experience comfort. It works the other way too: when we experience the comfort of others we can see things in new ways.

Neither regretting nor comforting is a final act. They mark a process of transformation. *Nacham* lies in the middle of utter despair and a perfect restoration of what was. We are transformed not by shedding ourselves of regret, or the brokenness within us, but by shifting our perspective, experiencing new emotions, and accepting the comfort of others.

After the tragic accident that killed Maureen Mengelt, Bruce started attending Orchard Ridge United Church of Christ, which is led by a colleague of mine, the Rev. Winton Boyd. Pastor Boyd writes that in their church they commit to "journey together" – to go to into the "unwanted, dark, difficult or surprising places with each other." They stand with each other in difficult times and they stood with Bruce as he became part of their community. They reached out

quietly to him. They came to his sentencing to stand with him before he went to prison. They offered him comfort as he struggled with his regret. After Bruce's last service at the church he told Pastor Boyd, "Please remember that what you do here matters. It matters immensely."

What we do matters. It matters immensely. When we continue our journey carrying our broken shards, do *teshuvah*, and accept the comfort of others, we keep open the possibility for a different story to be written. Not necessarily the story we would have chosen, but a story that we can live with. May this be a year of new stories, of a shift in our perception of what was, and of openness to what might be.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.