

I think I can assume that all of us adults here have, at least once in our lives, done something that's we've felt terrible about, whether it was intentional or unintentional – letting someone down, disappointing someone, causing problems.

And I'm hoping that all of us adults here have felt that same way about actions or inactions we've done, sins that we've felt awful about, because we know we've disappointed God, when we've felt heartily sorry for having offended God, and detest our sins.

That's what's happening in today's First Reading. It picks up 70 years after the Jewish people were deported to Babylon. Their grandchildren received permission to return to their homeland. They find it in ruins, and started reconstruction, There's so much to do. But to celebrate this first stage of completing the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, the prophet Ezra holds a special service.

He's reading from the Laws of Moses, and the people are weeping, because they're reminded of all their past failures: how they were chosen to be God's people, but kept turning away from him, repeatedly sinning, trying to be like all the other nations around them. They experience deep remorse, they are heartily sorry for having offended God, they detest all of their sins that led to the destruction of their nation and the loss of everything.

Ezra eventually notices the weeping and says stop it! This day is holy to our God, it's a celebration! Don't be sad, don't weep. The word of God is good news, not bad news. You've heard the word of God that leads the way to a brighter future. Celebrate that you're still God's people and get a fresh start. Go back to your homes and throw a party, and share your festive food and drink with those who don't have any. Rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!

He's expressing that tension that we Christians share with the Jewish people. We need to be able to acknowledge we are sinners who need a Savior, and yet still feel good about ourselves because we are loved by God. We are sinners and saints. We can feel guilt,

but not neurotic guilt. We can be heartily sorry for our sins, but not degrade that into low self-esteem.

These “aha” moments, when we detest the seriousness of our sins, are a grace. What we can't do is let the dark “aha” moment blind us to everything good in us; or go to the opposite extreme, and excuse ourselves with, oh well, I'm not that bad. ... Well, you're not that good, either. ... We need a Savior!

God wants us to continue growing in doing his will. And that's our conflict with the world. Christians are to be different. God calls us to be true to our best selves. That's God's will, but not the world's. The world's attitude is: anything's okay as long as you don't hurt anybody. It's minimum standards of behavior. That's why our faith is a thorn with unbelievers, that's why we rub them the wrong way. Because we keep striving to live up to our best selves and we promote that. They don't want to hear it, or live it.

Jesus tells us God's will in the Gospel: to imitate him in sharing our time, our encouragement and our talents, and help people who pass through our lives who are in any sort of need. This is our primary task in life, it's how we build up God's kingdom.

These people we make time for will see our joy, because we know we're sinners and still God's beloved, because we strive to do his will continuously better. Bring them the good news that the worst moments of our lives will pass, whether they're family problems, school problems, work problems or health problems. We are confident will be raised like Jesus.

Let's be heartily sorry for our sins and detest them. And then rejoice in God's gifts and goodness to us: born in the USA with all its freedoms, living in the 21st Century with all its advances in technology, the special talents and aptitudes God's given us; and most importantly, God's gifts to us of mercy and salvation. Go home and celebrate this with a party. Rejoicing in the Lord is our strength.