

*Praying with Broken Hearts:
Spirituality for Difficult Times*

An Online, Self-Paced Retreat

Participant Workbook

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Session 1: Introduction

Welcome to this self-paced online retreat! Thank you for joining us. The purpose of this retreat is to take some time to reflect on some of the more challenging parts of our lives in the light of God's love.

French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from the human inability to sit quietly in a room alone." We are very good at distracting ourselves: work, television, the internet, bustling activities, even family life. We can find ways to keep ourselves from being quiet, and so many of the things inside us go unnoticed ... and, sometimes, unhealed.

Our culture doesn't do a great job of convincing us that rest, quiet, and stillness are essential to our health. Even "Me-time" is meant to be productive, to make us better workers and producers when we return to work. That may be so, but we also need rest, quiet, and stillness to look into our hearts with honesty and to live the love of God.

Endless busy-ness can keep us from letting that honesty and that love of God soak deep into our hearts. If we keep busy, we don't have to experience our broken hearts, our sadness, our grief, fears, or anger. We can "power through them." We keep moving, we keep pushing forward ... and we do not experience the healing presence of God.

Being human involves so many challenges and difficulties. We are mortal. We are limited. We experience tragedies, heartaches, and pain. This retreat will invite you to reflect on the following areas: your humanity, grief, loneliness, failures, fears, sadness, anger, pain, mortality, spiritual dryness, and your belovedness. You may find one session to be more difficult than another; if you need to take a break, do so. You do not need

to “finish” a session for it to be fruitful, helpful, or prayerful. You may skip over one or more sessions if you wish. If things come to mind that are particularly difficult, painful, or emotional, do not hesitate to seek out some help from a therapist or counselor.

The purpose of this retreat is to invite you in reflecting on your experience of some of the more difficult parts of life and to pray them. The purpose of this retreat is not to solve a problem, to make you more productive, to fix anyone, or to substitute for the emotional work that is best guided by a therapist. No, this retreat is ultimately about you being able to slow down, to reflect on your experience, and to perceive the presence of God’s love even in the difficult parts of life.

Consider these very true statements:

You are a human being created in the image of God.

You are a child of God.

You are a beloved child of God.

You are a beloved child of God when you grieve, when you are lonely, when you fail, when you are afraid, when you are sad, when you are angry, when you are in pain, when you are dead, and even when you feel spiritually dead. Nothing in heaven or earth changes this

wonderful, true, holy fact:

you are a human being created in the image of God,
and you are a beloved child of God.

Format:

This retreat is formatted over twelve sessions, including this introduction. You may take the retreat more slowly if you wish, but the recommendation is to do no more than two sessions in a given week to take adequate time for reflection.

Let things bubble up in your life. Notice them, jot them down.

Each session revolves around three questions:

1. What is your experience around this difficulty?
2. What does the Bible have to say about it?
3. How do we pray in the midst of it?

This workbook will offer some additional questions and observations to guide your reflection. It is supplementary to the online material. You may want to use some additional paper to jot down ideas as you go.

Guidance:

Before a session, you may want to spend some time thinking about the topic for the session. What comes to mind? You may want to create a safe, quiet place to be alone with your thoughts.

Feel free to pause the session along the way if you want more time to write. You are in no rush. You can use whole sentences or bullet points to keep track of your thoughts; they are your notes, after all!

You may find you need to return to a session when something comes up later. You do not need to ultimately “finish” a session in linear order. This workbook is about gathering your ideas, experiences, and prayers.

Take some time to reflect on your hopes and goals for this retreat. Are there particular sessions you are most excited about? Most nervous about?

Make sure that you end each session with a period of prayer. You may sit quietly and wait for words to bubble up to your mind. You may want to engage God in a conversation. You might even want to write out your prayer to return to later.

Take a moment to pray to God for guidance and grace as you enter this retreat time. What would you like God to help you with as you reflect?

Session 2: Praying Our Humanity

What does it mean to be human? To be human in some cases means to be limited and fallible (“I’m only human!”). To be human in other cases means a nobility of spirit, a power of compassion (think of the words “humane” or “humanitarian”).

If someone were to ask you what it means to be human, what would you say to them? How would you describe it?

One of the most challenging parts of being human is being limited. We cannot be in many places at once (though we try!). We make mistakes. We don’t know everything (and sometimes find out we were wrong). We find ourselves unable to do the good we wish we could do. We must often ask forgiveness from God and from each other for what we have done and left undone.

Where do you most acutely feel human in your life?

In the Book of Genesis (1:26), God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness,” so God created humans in the “image of God,” sometimes known by its Latin translation, “Imago Dei.” To be human bears an imprint of God’s own being. Theologians over the ages have asked what exactly that means. What do you think? What is the most “divine” aspect of being human?

And then in the third chapter of Genesis, humanity eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (which God had said not to eat from), and humanity is sent away from the Garden of Eden. What is the most “human” part of being human?

Now take some time to reflect and to pray. What parts of being human are you grateful for? What parts do you wish you could change?

Session 3: Praying Our Grief

Grief is a big emotion that encompasses many experiences. We may feel grief over the death of someone we love. We may grieve even over someone for whom we have mixed feelings. We may grieve other kinds of losses such as a job or a particular vision of our future.

Perhaps most simply stated, grief is an experience of loss. Even if we believe with deep faith that a person we loved is in the nearer presence of God, we will not be able to hold their hand again in this life. That is a painful reality. Our earthly future must unfold without them physically in it.

We generally meet our first serious experience with grief in childhood, whether it be a pet, a friend, a relative, or even the grief of leaving a place or thing important to us. What are your early memories of grief?

How did your family and friends talk about grief in your childhood?

What was helpful (or unhelpful) in what they said and did?

What is your current response to grief? What meaningful things do you do when you are grieving?

One of the most profound sentences of Scripture comes from the Gospel of John. Jesus has gone to the tomb of Lazarus along with Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha. "Jesus began to weep." (John 11:35). He loved Lazarus, and he loved Mary and Martha. Love is at the root of our grief. We love, therefore we miss them. Even if we have mixed emotions around a death, we still hoped for love, and thus we grieve.

Another image from Scripture that can be helpful in thinking about grief is the depiction of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, standing at the foot of the cross. "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (John 19:25-27). Jesus' death is painful, torturous; Mary, the one who held him in her own womb for months and held him in her arms, beholds his suffering and cannot save him.

Grief also touches on our feelings of powerlessness in the face of death. We cannot stop death from happening. Our love will not prevent it, and we may fear that they may not know how much we truly loved them. We may even grieve before the loss occurs.

Keep in mind that just as Jesus grieved, so we can grieve. Our hearts are capable of being broken because they were made for love; even so, we should remember that love does not end. Love continues in God.

In what ways do you see the ongoing power of love? Your love, the love of those who have died, the love of God at work in the world?

Session 4: Praying Our Loneliness

Our modern culture might properly be called one of loneliness. While it is easy to seem connected to so many people online, we may not find the connections as deep and meaningful. We call people “friends” online, but we may not be able to share with them our pain and heartache. There is immense pressure to carefully curate our online personas, to share only certain parts of our experiences in order to share our best selves, our happiest selves.

Add to this how many local social institutions (the parish church among them) have not had the same strength and numbers as in years past. Civic groups, religious organizations, and clubs provided ways for people to meet people, to feel supported, and to be connected to the wider community in meaningful ways.

Feeling alone can be difficult all on its own. We may long for interaction and companionship. Loneliness can also bring up difficult experiences from our childhood or younger days – perhaps we weren’t picked for games, or were bullied. Maybe loneliness brings up feelings of abandonment. What do you feel when you feel lonely?

Some of us are more introverted, some more extroverted. Some cherish alone time more, some are energized by people or crowds. What brings you energy?

In the Bible, many people feel lonely and alone. The prophets, for example, often felt alone. They had a call from God to speak the truth, and yet no one would listen. Some were abandoned; recall that Jesus' disciples fled after his arrest, and he was alone as he faced his trials before Herod and Pontius Pilate. Are there other stories that you recall from the Bible that resonate with your own experiences with loneliness?

In the Bible, those who are lonely often count on their connection to God. No one else may understand them, no one else may be listening, but God is – and that is true. It is deeply true that God is listening to us in our loneliness. We may not hear God responding with words or even feelings of love, but God's love is present.

In what ways do you feel God's presence when you are by yourself? How would you know God is responding to the prayers of your heart?

Our loneliness reminds us both that we are individuals, but also that we are made for one another. We are profoundly connected. Even the most solitary person is connected to God, and to the whole human family, and to the rest of creation. Many solitary people have felt profound connection to the world through time in the wilderness, or in the beauty of nature. We are all creatures of a loving God, and God notices us all.

Where do you feel connected to others? To creation?

Session 5: Praying Our Failures

Begin with some free association: what comes to mind when you hear the word, “failure”?

Our culture has a strange relationship to failure. We like stories where someone overcomes failure and finally succeeds. We love a story where someone overcomes all odds and triumphs. But do we still believe that people are more than the sum of their successes and failures?

Perhaps it can be put this way: our culture thinks of setbacks and successes; the only problem is when the setback becomes final, and then it becomes a failure because the person didn't try hard enough.

With failure comes a feeling of shame, of being judged by others. A failure is a reminder that we are not perfect. We fear disappointing others. We worry that our future may be messed up because of it.

What scares you most about failing?

We may also consider what our messages around failure were like in childhood. Did our parents expect us to get it perfect? Were they lenient? Were we fine with mistakes in school, or did even a B cause us anxiety?

The Bible in many places is not concerned with “success.” In Deuteronomy 32:51, Moses makes a dreadful mistake, and he is forbidden to enter the Promised Land that he’s led the Israelites toward; yet Moses is one who got to speak to God, face to face, like a friend (Exodus 33:11). Would we say Moses is a failure because of his mistake and because he doesn’t get to enter the Promised Land? His costly mistake had consequences, but Moses himself was not a failure; he was still a beloved child of God who got to talk with God *face to face*! That is a joy that cannot be taken away from Moses.

Do you trust that God loves you even if you were to make a most dreadful mistake like Moses? Nothing in this world, not even our failures, can separate us from the love of God in Christ (see Romans 8:38-39).

Take time to reflect on what signs of God’s love you can turn to when you experience feelings of failure. What joys, gifts, and graces of God in your life do you treasure, and how will they remind you of God’s everlasting love?

Failure is not a measure of your worth. You are made in the image of God, a creature of God, a beloved child of God. This can never be taken away from you, nor can you lose it because of any failures. Even if you find yourself making the same mistakes or sins again and again, *you are still a beloved child of God made in the image of God.*

Take a moment to turn to page 4 in this workbook. Read all of those “You” statements at the bottom. Read them aloud – and read them again. They are the truth, and they are meant for you.

Session 6: Praying Our Fears

We're told to be fearless and to overcome our fears, and if we're still afraid, then we better not show that we're afraid.

Yet we're all afraid of something. Fear does not have to lead to feelings of panic or a scream of fright; in fact, it might be better to separate fear from fright just for that purpose. Fright comes from something that shocks and surprises us in the moment; fear is something we anxiously dread far in advance.

List some of your fears. Start from the most concrete: "Spiders," or "Lightning." Then go to the more abstract: "Being alone," "not being thought of as successful."

What were your childhood experiences with fear? Were you particularly fearful (or fearless)? How did others react to your fear or fearlessness?

What brought you comfort when you were afraid as a child? What brings you comfort now that you're older?

The “fear of the Lord” is very misunderstood. For many, the “fear of the Lord” conjures up images of an angry, wrathful God who is ready to punish and destroy on a whim. The Hebrew word for fear (יָרָא, yare) however, includes within it an understanding of respect and awe. To fear God is not to cower in our shoes; it is to understand that we are creatures, and God is God. To fear God is to avoid putting ourselves (or anything else) in the place of God, and to respect God, to be in awe of God. We appreciate that we are limited human beings.

When we face our fears, we are facing our limitations. To be afraid of heights often includes a fear of losing control, of falling and being unable to stop. To be afraid of snakes is to be afraid of a wild animal that can strike with venom quickly. Behind many fears is a fear of death, the most fundamental human limitation.

To live in the fear of God, however, is to respect, honor, and, in many ways, cherish that our limitations are held in God’s hands. When we are scared, we are held in God’s hands. Even if we die, we are in God’s hands. God is God; we are not God, and we are limited and mortal.

There are many stories in the Bible that can give us courage. Are there any passages that are particularly meaningful for you when you are afraid? What suggestions might you give to someone who is afraid?

Imagine God holding you when you are afraid. Imagine God is singing you a song and rocking back and forth. What would God sing to you?

Session 7: Praying Our Sadness

Sadness, like grief, comes in many forms. It can be a strong emotion that is felt acutely with tears; it might be something under the surface for a while. We might be able to go about our day; we might feel so crushed down that staying in bed is preferable.

It is important to keep in mind that we will talk about sadness as it pertains to spirituality; a clinical diagnosis of depression is outside the scope of this retreat. While some of this may be helpful for someone experiencing depression, it is always important to seek out professional clinical assistance for depression, either in ourselves or someone we love.

Sadness is an emotion that makes its presence known. When we are crying, the tears and sobs bring us back to our bodies. We feel our sadness in our very being! And others may see our sadness, too. Sometimes we might be sad but go about our day as best as we can. The sadness is under the surface, giving its grayish tint to our day.

How did people react to sadness when you were growing up? How did people respond when you cried? Was it ok to cry? Was it ok to be sad?

Nowadays, how do you respond to sadness? In yourself? In others? Are you comfortable with someone crying? Do you try to joke? Do you try to encourage them?

You might also consider what you find helpful when you are sad: walks, reading, alone time, comedies, or maybe you want to be around people.

One of the least cheerful books of the Bible is Ecclesiastes. It is not a book that glosses over difficulties or jumps to a happy message; it soberly addresses the challenges of life. Ecclesiastes 7:3 says, “Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.”

Now, what could this possibly mean? How would the heart be made glad by sadness and sorrow instead of laughter?

Sometimes sadness has the ability to cut through illusions on the surface of things. Often our culture wants to pretend that everything is going just fine; how often have we been pressured to say we’re doing well just because we’re told not to share what’s really going on! Sadness is our reminder that something is, in fact, *not* going well.

And we’ve all had experiences where we are sad and yet we laugh. We may be crying, but in that moment we are honest: we love, or we are hurt, or we need something.

In that moment of sadness, we actually have to pay attention to ourselves and to our hearts. In that moment, our sadness pulls our attention to our feelings and invites us to truthfulness with ourselves and others.

What if you imagined your sadness as a signpost pointing to something amiss in your heart, mind, body, or spirit? What might it be pointing to?

What things particularly make you sad? What do they tell you about yourself?

Session 8: Praying Our Anger

How we relate to anger now reflects what our experience of anger was like growing up. Healthy families make room for anger. Anger can be someone saying, “That hurt my feelings!” or “I’m frustrated by this behavior!” or “I don’t feel heard!” Anger is an emotion that signals a feeling that something is not right.

Oftentimes, however, anger is not practiced in healthy ways. Some families over-express anger; anger just keeps escalating! Some families try to suppress expressions of anger in order to “keep the peace.”

When you think about your own experiences with anger, how would you describe your family’s relationship to anger? How was it expressed? Who could express anger? How did people react to someone else’s anger?

What about today? What are you like when you get angry? What do you do when you are angry? How do you express it?

Christianity has a hard time with anger, to be honest. There’s often a lot of pressure to “get along” and to “make peace.” Some traditions assume that anger itself is a sin. Anger is not a sin. Anger is simply an emotion, so

the problem can lie with how we express it. We should be able to express to others what has made us angry (and be honest with ourselves about it).

We can find in the Bible expressions of anger at injustice or coldheartedness. Prophets were angry at injustice. Paul was angry at selfishness or egocentrism in the churches he helped. Sometimes even Jesus got frustrated during his earthly ministry. There's a balance with anger that is hard to achieve: anger might be expressing an honest frustration with something that's wrong, or it could be bullying or dominating. How has the church shaped your experience of anger? What messages have you found helpful? Unhelpful?

Healthy anger, then, should also be directed to action. It's full of energy, after all! Healthy anger would lead to an action plan – what will remedy the situation? What will make it better for everyone? What needs to be said that isn't being said? How will justice prevail?

Take a moment now to think of a time you've been angry recently. What caused the anger? What did you decide to do in response? Was it helpful?

How might we pray with our anger? We might ask God to help us keep our anger clear – to get angry over the right things, and to direct our anger toward positive, healthy action. Where might anger draw your attention in the future? Where do you need to grow in your response to your own anger? And others' anger? You might even decide on a short prayer when you are angry: "God, help me to see what I should do!"

Session 9: Praying Our Pain

Pain puts us in connection with our bodies. Pain is, ultimately, a signal our body uses to say, "Something's not working right!" We tenderly care for our injury, or maybe someone else helps us in our healing.

Pain or limitations may continue for a long, long time. We may get tired from the pain. We may feel exhaustion because the pain doesn't go away, or maybe there isn't a proper treatment for it. We wish the pain would go away because we're endlessly aware of it; we no longer need that signal.

Are there particular pains that you are struggling with? What has your experience with pain been like?

There's also the heartbreak of watching someone we love struggle with pain and limitations that we cannot fix. As children, we may have watched pets struggle with a health condition that could not be remedied and wished we could explain to them what was wrong. Maybe we watched a relative afflicted with a chronic condition that could not be healed. What were your own formative experiences of others' pain?

Pain can be an experience of our own powerlessness or limitation. We might encounter a pain that keeps us from doing certain activities that we formerly enjoyed. Maybe the pain causes us embarrassment or shame. Imagine someone else suffered that same pain: What would you tell them?

In the book of Job, we encounter Job who suffers from many things, including a terrible, yet non-fatal disease. His friends at first sit with him in silence – they cannot speak his pain away. But when Job begins to lament, they lose their patience, trying to justify his suffering. Yet Job refuses to suffer in silence! His pain is real, even to the point of wishing he had never been born (Job 3:2-4)!

When we are with those we suffer, sometimes our silent love is the best we can do. When we are suffering, sometimes the pain takes up our whole world, and those we love can do so very little for us. Sometimes we want people to help us in our limitations. Sometimes we want to keep trying because it reminds us of what we are able to do.

If you were afflicted with an ongoing, severe, chronic pain, what would you want someone to do to show you they care?

When Jesus is crucified, he begins praying to God with a line from Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When we suffer, we may feel forsaken by not only those we love, but also by God. This experience is shared by Jesus – who was God incarnate! The Gospel reminds us that Jesus shares our experiences. It is ok and normal to feel this way in the midst of deep pain. What Jesus offers us is this: keep praying. Jesus keeps praying, even on the cross. He shares with God the deep pain of his heart. Even if the world has stopped listening, God is still listening. God still cares.

Find a prayer that you can hold close to heart when you are suffering, such as a psalm or the Lord’s Prayer. Remember that you are always close to God, even when it feels like you are alone in what you are enduring.

Session 10: Praying Our Mortality

Facing our mortality is a necessary part of the spiritual life. When we grieve, we face the deaths of others, but we must also contemplate our own death. One day we will no longer be alive.

Scripture is mostly silent on what death and the existence immediately after death is like. Scripture is concerned with us living rightly in this mortal life, rather than speculating on what death is like. We do not have control over exactly when we shall die, but we do have control over how we behave while we live.

What do you imagine death is like? Or existence after death? What have you been told from others? From church? From movies and TV?

Sometimes we talk about a “good death.” What would be the most positive situation for you when you die? What would it be like?

What spiritual practices do you think would be meaningful at the time of death? Have you ever experienced them when at someone else’s death?

One cannot talk about Christianity and death without reference to the cross of Jesus. Jesus Christ died. We believe that a righteous person, the Messiah, God incarnate, suffered death on the cross. His righteousness and his divinity did not spare him from the universal human experience of death. The Messiah has gone before us and we follow in his footsteps. What might you ask Jesus about death?

We Christians also believe that in baptism we share not only in Jesus' death, but we also believe that in it we share in his resurrection. Jesus died, and Jesus conquered death; we will die, and we will conquer death with him. Death is not the final word in our lives. Divine life prevails over death itself. The Gospels show that Jesus has a body in the resurrection – he eats with his disciples and even has the wounds of his crucifixion. The Gospels want us to know that just as Jesus truly died, so he is truly alive. We will share Jesus' resurrected and divine life for eternity.

It is important to remember not to dwell on our mortality in a morbid way. We do not *desire* death. We *accept* death because of its inevitability. We know that death is not the last word.

Our own mortality can feel scary because so much is unknown, yet we know that Jesus walked that way before us and is also with us in the midst of it. Take a moment to talk with Jesus about what you feel. Does contemplating your mortality help you to feel more courageous? Loving? Peaceful? Does it encourage you to make positive changes in your life, or make positive change with others? How will you keep death (and resurrection!) in mind in a helpful way?

Session 11: Praying Our Spiritual Dryness

Many assume that a life of faith is one free of doubt, frustration, or dryness. Even the most deeply spiritual people can experience seasons where the usual prayers or practices do not seem nourishing, or they find themselves doubting many things about the faith.

A mature faith makes room for these things. Spirituality has a word for these seasons of emptiness, dryness, and even doubt: desolation. Like a desert wasteland, these seasons of desolation can feel like they stretch out far and wide, and it might even feel like prior seasons of deep joy were just a mirage.

Have you experienced a season of desolation? What did you do when you felt that way? Was there any advice or spiritual practice that helped keep you going?

Monastic spirituality has made a lasting contribution to understanding spiritual dryness. Monks and nuns persevered in the midst of spiritual dryness; they kept praying, worshipping together, and doing acts of compassion and service for others. Spiritual dryness can be difficult, even scary, but it can also be an invitation to spiritual growth. In seasons of desolation, we must often keep going by strength of will and desire. We might not have the energy to pray, but we *want* to pray, or even if we don't *want* to pray, we *want* to love God and others, and so we keep going. We keep praying and worshipping even if it feels dry because we desire God, not the warm feelings we may have previously had in prayer. It's much like being married: there are some days that the warm feelings of

romantic love make it easy, and there are days when we have to remember that love is ultimately something we do rather than feel.

A helpful piece of Scripture is Psalm 42. In it, the Psalmist expresses that his soul thirsts for God even though he feels abandoned. Even if we don't actively feel like our soul thirsts for God, we can keep praying as if we did. Spirituality assumes that the soul desires God. Our souls were made to love God and others, and we can trust that deep down, our soul remembers its purpose.

How might you remind yourself of your love for God when things are difficult and dry? What prayer or practice might remind you of that?

While it is beneficial to keep our prayer rhythms going during a period of spiritual dryness, we may also need to engage in some reflection. What brought about this time of spiritual dryness? Sometimes the dryness helps us to yearn for God instead of the "warm feelings" of prayer; such dryness might be a gift in disguise! Sometimes the dryness comes because our spiritual life needs more nourishment. You might consider talking with a wise spiritual leader, friend, or a spiritual director to discuss your experience. They can help you listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Who might you turn to in a time of spiritual desolation and dryness?

It bears repeating: experiencing spiritual dryness is a normal part of the spiritual life. It is not a sign of a lack of faith. It can be, in fact, a season of hidden spiritual growth. It can be a time of deepening our desire for God, of loving God for God's own sake, and it is a time of trusting in God's love for us.

Session 12: Praying Our Belovedness

God loves us all, no exceptions. *No exceptions.* Oftentimes we try to carve out exceptions to God's love. "God couldn't love *me*. I've done terrible things." "God couldn't possibly love *that person*, or *those kind of people*." But it's the truth. God loves us all. God knows the depths of our hearts and everything we've ever done, and God loves us.

Trusting in God's love is an experience of humility and vulnerability. God knows – and God loves. God looks upon us with love. When we do good things, God rejoices. When we do not-good things, God is saddened but love us the same. Being loved by God, being *beloved* by God, is a fundamental fact. We were created by God, and God loves us.

This is not easy sentimentality. It is a truth that bears repeating again and again because it encourages us to keep going, to keep trying, to keep praying. It challenges us to rise to the occasion, to try to love as God loves. It comforts us when we are downtrodden. It has inspired countless people to work tirelessly for justice, mercy, compassion, and truth. God's love is the truth that sustains the world and sustains each one of us. No wonder that the Bible says that God is love (1 John 4).

We are often reminded that we are beloved because of the love of others. When others tell us that we are loved, it is God's love working in them as well as their own love.

Take a moment to reflect on occasions when you have felt beloved. What are some of the most meaningful times when you have felt deeply loved?

Being beloved goes beyond feelings of love. We are loved even when we feel unloved or unlovable. We are loved by God when we are sad, angry, or spiritually dry. Love is truth, not merely feeling.

How will you remind yourself of this fact of being beloved by God even when you aren't feeling loved?

When Jesus is baptized, a voice proclaims from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is the Beloved. The same love that God has for Jesus the Beloved is the same love that God has for us. In baptism we are sealed with love. We are swept up into the same relationship of love that God has for Jesus, and so we can try to respond with that same love back. God loves us, we are beloved. We love God, and God is beloved. Love, love, love.

Again, this is not a sentimental description of feelings of love. This is the kind of love that perseveres when that feeling of love is absent. This is the kind of love that will work hard to care for others, to admit mistakes, to seek truth, to keep going even when things are hard, scary, or difficult. This is a powerful love, and it is a divine love.

How would you describe the love of God?

How do you practice the love of God in your own life? How does God's love transform you, and transform the world through you?

Conclusion

Now that you've taken this journey of reflection, what insights have you gained? Are there things you wish to explore more? How will you take these insights into your own life, and how might you share them with others?

Remember, this process of praying our broken hearts is the work of a lifetime. We learn to appreciate our humanity in all its limitations, and we learn to cherish our belovedness in deeper ways throughout our lives. There is no particular "stage" we ever need to be at in our lives because each life is unique, and God is at work in us in different ways.

Return to the very true statements from the first session:

You are a human being created in the image of God.

You are a child of God.

You are a beloved child of God.

You are a beloved child of God when you grieve, when you are lonely, when you fail, when you are afraid, when you are sad, when you are angry, when you are in pain, when you are dead, and even when you feel spiritually dead. Nothing in heaven or earth changes this

wonderful, true, holy fact:

you are a human being created in the image of God,
and you are a beloved child of God.

How do these words feel now? What stands out for you? How will you respond to this wonderful knowledge of being a beloved child of God, a human being made in the image of God?

