



St. Dysmas

Of South Dakota

- South Dakota State Penitentiary
Sioux Falls
- Mike Durfee
State Prison
Springfield
- Yankton
Minimum Unit
Yankton

Advent 2015

Dear Friends of St. Dysmas,

Christmas is bittersweet behind prison walls. Bitter because of all that is missing; family, friends, gifts, food, trees, lights and music. In short, all the trappings of Christmas. It is hard to be incarcerated any time but Christmas may be the most difficult time of all.

Yet, Christmas is a sweet time behind prison walls. The word 'trappings' is defined as 'the outward signs of the day or event.' Stripped of the trappings we have only the thing itself; and that is where the sweetness lies. There are no distractions behind prison walls. No last minute buying frenzy, no disrupted travel plans. Christmas in prison is all about Jesus.

Oh, there are the Christmas bags we chaplains hand out; 3 pieces of fudge, 2 tiny candy canes, 6 pieces of hard candy, 1 scoop of peanuts and a handmade unsigned card (without glitter) from a Sunday school student. Make no mistake, the bags and their contents are treasured, the cards and the fudge in particular but as trappings go they are minimal.

When I am in a pensive mood I like to imagine that sometimes the fabric of heaven is rent by a tear and we are given, if only for a moment, a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. I recall a conversation with my friend Chris as I drove him home from chemotherapy shortly before his death. A few years before her death I asked Mom about Christmas growing up in poverty in Northern Minnesota. She told me each Christmas eve she would purposely get her socks wet so she would have to hang them by the wood stove before bedtime. She said her brothers would tease her if she told them she hoped Santa would stop. Of course, I asked, "Did you ever get a gift in your stocking." I recall her laugh, "No, of course not!" This was, astonishing to me, a happy memory for her—and now that she is gone, for me.

I recall laughing so hard I was crying at a funeral when grief and God's promises collided in an irreverent comment. As a pastor I have been honored by people's trust. One of the greatest rewards of being a pastor is being present not only at the Holy times in one's own life, but to stand with other's in the Holy times of their lives.

Of course, I'm writing to invite your support for our ministry. It's crucial. We depend on individuals for two thirds of our budget and most of it comes in December. We cherish and appreciate your partnership.

But I also want you to know when you gather with friends and family to worship on Christmas Eve, we will gather as well. And as the men come to receive the bread and wine of communion they will light a small candle and, rather than returning to their seats, they will form a ring around the chapel, lift their candles and we will sing, 'Silent Night.' Then, for just a moment all will be silent and there will be a rent in the fabric of heaven and there will be peace in the prison and peace in our hearts, a peace that passes all understanding.

May God's peace bless you this Christmas season.

Pastor Bob Chell