

DECEMBER 04, 2022, LUM SUNDAY DEVOTIONAL
“MY FIRST CHRISTMAS PRESENT”

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: LUKE 18, THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

BLESSED THOUGHTS: “BIND US TOGETHER”

First, let’s focus on this movie quote from a great western, “Ride the High Country,” where an aging Joel McCrae tells his old partner, played by Randolph Scott, “I just want to go to my house justified.”

When this Gospel reading appeared in the approved cycle, our pastor did his usual great job of unpacking it and making it real to us all in the pews... but, then, he always does. I remember how often he stressed that all of us have a lot in common with the Pharisee in that we do take our religious duties seriously and try to do what God wants of us every day. And, in Jesus’ day, the tax contractors would “bid” on the amounts that Rome needed to raise from each province, and anything over that amount they got to keep for themselves: tax collecting was usually a corrupt enterprise, and loyal Jews thought of other Jews who won these tax collection contracts as collaborators and looked down on them. For whatever reason, our “tax collector” must have gotten thoroughly ashamed of his activity, because he had no other prayer than what I like to call the sinking man’s prayer, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.”

Again, our pastor stressed that God loved both men, the Pharisee and the tax collector! The tragedy was the distance between the two of them—in the Temple yet!

Now, in this the first of my 2022 Christmas Gift Devotionals, ***the First Gift that I pray our God will give to us all is the gift of Reconciliation***. So much of our politics is marked by unhealthy polarization. Even our churches sometimes get pulled apart when people no longer listen to one another and seek that unity which the Spirit wills for us all. Sadder, still, are those family dinners at the holidays when arguments and fighting break out because people no longer care for one another, and family ties unravel. One wider family broke apart after an old Uncle died and an argument broke out over who got his old umbrella! Oh, somebody got the umbrella, but lost loved ones in the process! Unbelievable.

But I want to share “the rest of the story.” Yes, I listened to our pastor preach on this Gospel, and, afterwards, everyone went to communion to share in the same loaf of bread which was—for us—the Presence of Jesus Christ. Even over the coffee hour I could sense so many positive vibes in our spiritual family. But then it happened! It was about Four A.M. Monday Morning when I had my nightmare! I wasn’t in a church, let alone the Temple, but I was very

close to a wildly out of control meth addict! All the fears you can image overwhelmed me, and I woke up wanting someone to come and take this guy away! My heart was pounding, and there would be no more sleep for a long time, until I figured out what this dream was all about.

Actually, it didn't take me long! When I was a little kid, I was scarred by the alcohol abuse in my family. To this day I hardly ever touch a beer or even a glass of wine. Later on, in the parish, I saw how people for whatever reason often self-medicated themselves with alcohol, and I really was unable to help them all that much. After I left full-time ministry, I wanted very much to learn how to do just that, and my first step was to work in a Residential Therapeutic Community for Teens called Summitquest. Most of these boys were in recovery from drugs, but all had serious mental health issues. Several dozen times I had to physically restrain these kids (I was about sixty at the time!) And on several occasions, I was physically attacked and injured—but I made a difference. After I left that job to do child welfare work, I even came back on Christmas Eve to lead a worship service for those boys as part of their Twelve Step Program. Then, while working in child welfare, I referred many parents to the Freedom Center, our Substance Abuse Recovery service provider.

My most special "client" was our own dear niece who got entangled with opioids. I had many Christian friends praying for her, and—God be praised—she is clean and sober to this day!

So, why the nightmare? Because I'm getting to be more and more like the Pharisee, concerned mostly with my own personal challenges, and I may not always see my brothers and sisters in the shadows, the ones who feel rotten about themselves, who have hit bottom and who teeter on the edge of the abyss, and whose last, best prayer is a version of the Jesus Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

This is my first 2022 Christmas Present: may you cut down the distance between yourself and that person far-off, and may you and I pray his prayer with him (for we all need it!), "God, have mercy on me a sinner."

Then, may we all go to our house—right with God—and together!

PRAYER: "THE JESUS PRAYER" CHANTED IN ENGLISH

If you are able, click on this link and let this prayer bring your God's mercy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y161opINoVs>

OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS GIFT BLESSING

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:3

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,[f] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

John 17:20-24 [CHRIST'S PRAYER FOR US]

"BIND US TOGETHER"

Bind us together, Lord, Bind us together With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, Bind us together, Bind us together with love.

There is only one God, There is only one King; There is only one Body,
That is why we sing:

Bind us together, Lord, Bind us together With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, Bind us together, Bind us together with love.