

THE FIRST STEP

“Six... no help ...”

The dealer continues sliding cards, face up, across the table. “... three diamonds ... possible flush. King ... pair showing.”

Lifting the corner of his hold card, Rabbi Green’s face lights up.

“Josh, I swear that just might be the worst poker face this side of Deadwood,” Father Bob says, chuckling softly.

No reply from the man with the devilish gleam in his eyes ... just a sly grin and a wink of the eye ...

Hi, I’m “Tony Baggz.” It’s the Wednesday evening Interfaith Council finance meeting. Oh, and if you’re wondering from the conversation you just heard, you’re right; it’s also a poker game. It floats from house to house and tonight the game is at Reverend Daniel’s home. Okay ... I know what you’re thinking ... a poker game in a minister’s house? Don’t worry; it’s just an excuse for friends to get together. It’s a nickel and dime game. No serious money ever changes hands. A big pot is sixty cents, and losing ‘five large’ might be five bucks ... and most times it’s more like fifty cents. And since the winner has to host next week’s game and provide the spread, winning here’s like making a hole in one ... winner pays. It all evens out. Its good food, good fun, good friends ... just an all-around good evening.

Uh oh, the game's heating up. Rabbi Josh just tossed a nickel into the pot ... he's serious ... I mean the man's been known to fold three of a kind. Must have a good hand. Yea, he's got that look on his face ...

... **Let's listen in...**

"Raise you five," says the rabbi.

"Bullets" matches the bet. "Call ... why I'm sticking around, I don't know."

"Three diamonds showing and one in the hole, Vinnce? ... darn good reason I'd say," the Rabbi says."

Bullets grins at his adversary ... what can I say ... another great poker face. No professional poker players around here.

"You guys in?" asks Pastor Randall, gathering up the cards. He folded two cards ago.

"Fold", "Too rich for me", "Adios," come the replies as two of the other players toss their cards to the Lutheran minister.

Carmin Spinelli laughs, "Down to just you and Bullets, Rabbi ... it's showtime.

The Lutheran minister deals one card to the rabbi and one to Bullets. "Last card down...and ..."

"It's not fair!"

The sound of a phone being slammed into its cradle startles the players. Seems someone's upset.

"Jennifer ... what's the matter?" Mike Daniels says, looking toward the kitchen.

"Nothing dad."

"Come on Jen, something's wrong, I know that tone."

The Episcopal Rector's sixteen year old daughter, Jennifer, walks in the room and plops down next to her dad. "Hi everybody," she says, waving at the players ... "sorry about that."

Putting his arm around his little girl's shoulders, Mike gives her a hug. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"It's my friend Alex, Dad. Her father left them last year. Now her mom's sick, they've lost just about everything, and her boyfriend just broke up with her; he says she doesn't spend enough time with him. The jerk!"

"Sounds rough."

"Dad, a year ago they lived in a bigger house than ours, and now they're almost on welfare! Alex doesn't know what to do. Her mom tries to work but she lost her job because she has to go to the doctor all the time. People treat them like lepers. Alex says her mom won't give up and I want to help but I don't know what to do?"

"Just be her friend, sweetheart. Right now that's all you can do."

"That's not enough, dad."

"Sound familiar?" Carmine says, looking across the table at Bullets.

Nodding yes, Vince reaches for his drink.

"What are you talking about Mr. Spinelli?" asks the teen.

"Well, last week a couple of us were talking about a situation just like you describe ... a woman back in Jesus' time. She had a problem like your

friend's mom."

"How?" Jennifer says, a look of interest crossing her face.

"Well, for twelve years she was sick, she had a condition that left her what they called 'unclean'. She couldn't go to the market, the temple, friend's homes, public places ... anywhere really. She was at the end of her rope ... a total outcast."

Pausing a second, Carmine looks across the table at Josh. "Rabbi, have I got that right?"

"You're doing fine, number one ... sure you're not Jewish?"

"Maybe on my mother's side, padre."

"That would be the 'sainted' side of the family I take it," Josh says in his best imitation Irish brogue, an impish grin creasing his face.

Carmine smiles, shakes his head, and continues.

"Anyway, this woman was sick and had lost everything. Spent all her money on doctors and such, and had nothing to show for it. She was lost and had nowhere left to turn. Her situation looked hopeless. And then she heard Jesus was coming through town."

"Sure, Mr. Spinelli, I know the story," the teen says.

"Okay, so what happened?"

"Well, she touched Jesus and He cured her, right?"

"No."

"No? ... but I thought ..."

"No, Jen, Jesus didn't cure her. She did ... she cured herself. She had faith and she acted on it. She took the first step."

"... so what you're saying is just have faith and everything will be fine? Sorry, Mr. Spinelli, that's too simple ... life doesn't work that way," the teen says, a frown on her face.

Sitting at the table, folded cards in hand, Father Bob nods.

"You're exactly right, kiddo, it doesn't," says the priest. "And that's the point Carmine's making ... that people have to act on their faith. This woman realized she couldn't just sit still, waiting for someone else to solve her problem. It hadn't worked in twelve years. She knew she had to act ... and she did. Of course, the healing came from Jesus, but it was she who acted to take her life back. Carmine's right ... in a very real way, she cured herself."

Reverend Daniels strokes his daughter's hair and continues.

"Right now their situation is difficult, sweetheart. Life's like that sometimes. And as much as you care, you have to understand that Alex and her mom have to refuse to quit and take that first step ... you can't do it for them."

"Call" says the Rabbi.

Bullets turns over the last card, the three of clubs. "Kangaroo straight," he says.

"No magic on the last card, huh Vince?" chuckles the Rabbi.

"Nope. Guess the poker angel passed over this hand," Bullets says, a sly smile on his lips; a devilish look in his eyes.

A momentary silence ensue as Josh smiles and then breaks into a hearty laugh. "Passed over ... Passover, get it?" he says looking at the others around the table.

John Randall shakes his head as the players break into laughter at the Rabbi's joke.

"Pot's mine, all forty cents." Rabbi Green rakes in the nickels, chuckles, and looks over at the priest. "Bob, maybe we can help," he says, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I mean ... hey, I have this windfall ..."

Sipping his coffee, Father Bob smiles and shakes his head in amusement at his friend's offer. Setting down his cup, he turns to the teen. "Jennifer, it sounds like Alex's mom is trying to keep things together ... am I right?"

"She's trying everything she can, Father Bob. But every time she tries something, she gets knocked back down. It's just like dad says sometimes, if she didn't have bad luck, she wouldn't have any at all. But she's determined not to let anything tear their family apart."

"Sounds to me like they've already taken that step, Bob," John Randall says, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

"You know, I have a friend going to Europe on business for two years," Bullets says, gathering the cards for the next hand. "He's looking for some good people to house sit. He doesn't want to rent it out and come home to a burned out shell. Alex's family sounds like they might be a good fit. Let me see what I can do."

"We're looking for a couple part time waitresses and hostesses at the restaurant," Carmine says. "We could probably work something around Alex's schedule. Maybe the two of you would like some part time work?"

The teen breaks into a big grin. "I would ... and I think Alex would too."

Fr. Bob looks at the young girl. "I'll talk to Doc Rogers, Jennifer. The Council was established for just this type situation. We probably can help if they want it. And if they do, tell Alex to have her mom call your dad."

"Oh, thanks you guys," the teens says, "you're awesome."

A young girl smiles ... and a room lights up.

Our redemption is a free gift of a loving God; a debt paid by His Son once and for all on a cross at Calvary. Our salvation, however, is a different story. That we must work out day by day, in fear and trembling as St. Paul said. Each of us must take that first step; we cannot wait for someone else to do it for us. Taking responsibility for our daily needs here on earth is mandatory. It is just as true in our relationship with our God.

Faith is needed for salvation. True. But faith works best when put into action. There's an old saying; "pray like everything depends on God, and work like everything depends on you?" It's a good thought. After all, faith isn't some spiritual talisman that makes everything all right if one just wishes on a star...

... or a God.

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.