

DILEMMA

"I don't believe it!"

Shaking his head, Reverend Jacobson's long slow whistle and his words break the silence. Seems he's found something interesting.

"That good, Paul?" Rabbi Josh asks.

Looking up from the box he's examining, the Presbyterian minister chuckles softly. "I always knew one day my hobby would pay off."

"What hobby?"

"Old watches. My dad used to collect them. When I was a kid, he'd take me to antique auctions. I caught the bug, and I've had a passion for them ever since."

Turning back to the contents of the box, he lets out a sigh. "But never did I expect to find something like this."

"Sounds like it's got you stumped, Jake."

"I don't know about stumped, Josh. This is more a good news, bad news situation. It's a treasure ...

... and a problem, my friend."

Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. We're in the meeting hall of First Presbyterian Church. The Interfaith Council's spring yard sale is approaching and several of the gang are sorting donations. Rabbi Green, Father Bob, the Reverends Jacobson, Daniels, Walsh, and Randall are here as is "Uncle" Joey, "Mike the Russian," "Crazy Pat" Flanagan, and Sammy "Bagels." And a couple more guys may show up. There's a lot of cool stuff here

and looking around, I wish I had my checkbook with me. I could furnish the rec room I'm building with what I see here.

From the Presbyterian minister's reaction, a treasure has fallen into his hands. Problem is, it seems he's caught on the horns of a dilemma.

What do you say we listen in? ...

"Let me guess, 'Jake', you've found the Golden Goose," Father Bob chuckles.

"Almost, Bob," Jake says, motioning to Joey to come and look. "You're the jeweler Joey, what do you think?"

Holding up what is obviously a wristwatch, Joey lets out a low whistle of his own. "I'm pretty sure it's authentic," he says. "You just hit the jackpot, Reverend."

"You mean we hit the jackpot."

"Right."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense ..." Josh says, sipping his coffee.

"It's a watch, your holiness," Joey chuckles. "... a Vacheron Constantin, platinum case and bracelet, chronometer movement, moon phase dial, and multiple complications. Probably worth a small fortune. Vacheron's top drawer. It doesn't get any better."

"Nice, who gave it to us?" Bagels asks.

"That's the problem, Sammy. A lady named Janet Edwards."

"Edwards? She live up in the Highlands neighborhood?" 'Crazy Pat' asks.

Reverend Jacobson nods, yes.

“We know her. Tommy and I run errands for her occasionally. She’s gotta be at least eighty. Her husband, Dave, died a while back. Highlands isn’t exactly a neighborhood where you’d expect people to own something like that. I’d guess she’s of pretty modest means.”

“Yea, you’re right, Pat. She’s part of my congregation ... lives on social security and a small pension; just getting by I’d say. Since Dave died, she can’t do much to support the congregation. Maybe this is her way of giving back.”

“But why this, Reverend?” Pat says, shaking his head. “If money’s tight, why this? If Joey’s right, she could sell it and bank enough to ease her situation. It doesn’t figure.”

“My guess is, she didn’t think it was any different from other watches.” There’s two others here, worth a couple bucks, tops.”

“Still ...,” Joey says, his words trailing off.

“Well, Janet has no children. She’s probably giving away David’s things. Heaven knows where he got it. He loved yard sales. Maybe he got it there ... just didn’t know its worth. It happens.”

“So, what next?” Reverend Williams asks.

“Sell it for every last dime we can get!”

Carrying in a box of children’s toys, Walt Robinson interrupts the conversation. “It’s ours. Possession is nine tenths of the law. She gave it to us. Why, is not our concern.”

Seems Walt’s made up his mind.

“Don’t know if I can agree, ‘Hammer’,” Reverend Williams says, shaking his head

“I agree with Walt,” ‘Fog’ Gordon says, entering the room; a box in his arms. “If she made no effort to learn its worth, that’s her hard luck. If you

find a Picasso at a yard sale for ten bucks, do you have an obligation to tell the seller? I say no.”

“Reaching for a soft drink, Joey pops the top and shakes his head. “If you’re an expert and the seller is ignorant or otherwise unable to know its value, I say we do have an obligation, Jerry. And the Church backs me up.”

“... got to agree with Joey, fellas,” Martin says. He turns to Reverend Daniels, ... “Mike?”

“Well, the question is, do we do good for many by taking advantage of one poor widow?” Mike looks over at the priest in a corner chair. “Bob, Joey says the church backs up his position. What’s your take?”

Setting down the book he’s perusing, St. Kate’s pastor turns to the four men. “I just had this conversation,” he says. “Two of my congregation buy and sell antiques. Their position is, all’s fair in a free market. Let the seller beware. Problem is, the Church, in its concern for the poor, teaches it’s morally wrong to take advantage of the ignorant or the poor. It’s a form of stealing. Personally, I agree. An expert has a moral obligation to a seller, especially a seller of limited means, when the seller’s ignorance will be costly in a transaction. Especially someone like Mrs. Edwards.”

“Their reaction?”

“... like finding a skunk in a sleeping bag.”

“Fellas, from a business standpoint, I’d agree with you,” Reverend Williams says, turning his attention back to Walt and Jerry. “But we’re talking here about an elderly lady barely getting by; not some auction house not paying attention, or some jeweler who hasn’t done his or her due diligence. All of us have to stand up and give a sermon on Sunday and ...”

The sound of the Rabbi good naturedly clearing his throat interrupts the Baptist minister.

“... or Saturday,” Reverend Williams says, as a collective chuckle ripples through the room. “We all condemn stealing, and withholding the truth is no better than using a mask and a gun. After all, the purpose of this effort is to help people like Mrs. Edwards ... people just getting by. Do we do that by taking advantage of one of our own?”

Sipping his coffee, Mike Daniels nods in agreement. “We preach a standard of honesty and fair play. Stealing, whether at the point of a gun or a fountain pen is wrong. Doing nothing here makes us as bad as the embezzler in the back office. I have to agree with Martin and Bob.”

“Well gentlemen,” Rabbi Green says, a twinkle in his eye. “Far be it from me to be the New Testament scholar here, but wasn’t it was your Carpenter who drove some businessmen from the temple for taking advantage of others? Moneychangers, I think they were called. So, if we do nothing here, are we any better? Would we deserve the same treatment?”

“You agree, Josh?” Mike the Russian asks.

A smile curls Josh’s lips as he winks at Mike, saying nothing.”

“So, our next move is ...?” Reverend Walsh asks, to no one in particular.

Joey sets his coffee down “Here’s my suggestion. Tomorrow I’ll call a few watch dealers; find out what kind of money we’re talking about. Then we sell the article for the best price we can get. We offer Mrs. Edwards the proceeds less a fair finder’s fee. Say, ten percent. We do right by her and make some money for the Council.”

Reverend Jacobson beams. “I like the idea. Janet and David were always generous; always the first to step up when people needed a hand. I think it’s time we returned the favor.”

Heads nod all around as smiles break out on 'Hammer' and 'Fog's' faces ...

... even they agree.

“This is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.” Words spoken long ago in condemnation of those defiling a temple.

Ask yourself ... have times changed that much? How many business people today shout “Amen” or “Halleluiah,” make an altar call or parade to the communion rail on Sunday, then go out Monday with a fountain pen as a weapon, “it’s just business” as a motto, and ‘caveat emptor’ as their battle cry, and lie, cheat, and steal from the ignorant, the poor, the helpless, or the gullible? Kinda makes one wonder what they’ve been listening to all those Sunday mornings, doesn’t it?

When today’s moneychangers stand before their Final Judge, at their final accounting, how satisfied will they be with the future their actions here and now have purchased for them?

Talk about ‘buyer beware’!!

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.