

THE PREACHER'S MISTAKE

“Steady ... work him against the current ... that's it ... tire him out ...”

Chuckling softly, Joey looks over his shoulder at the Episcopal minister. “Thanks, your eminence ... you know, I have done this before.”

“Sorry Joey,” Mike Daniels says, laughing sheepishly. “It's just with a fish this size ... I can't help myself.”

“Don't sweat it Mike. If you were holding this rod I'd probably be barking over your shoulder.”

“... watch out, he's going to jump ... holy moly ... look at the size of him.”

The rest of the gang gathers as Joey unclips a landing net from his vest.

Letting out a long slow whistle, “Bagels” shakes his head. “Man, that's someone's granddaddy.”

Joey slips the net beneath him. “Got him.”

Retrieving the spent fish, he wets his hands and eases the hook out.

Camera in hand, Bullets captures the ‘trophy’ for posterity.

“About 18 inches ... I'd say two pounds, and a natural,” Vince says. “No hatchery for this bad boy.”

“Nice color ... a big fish for a stream this size,” Kristi adds.

Admiring his catch for a moment, Joey slips the rainbow back in the water, gently holding him against the current. Reviving quickly, the trout flicks his tail and glides back to the safety of an undercut on the opposite bank.

“I’m hungry ... let’s get some lunch,” Ace says, climbing up on the stream bank.

Mike, Joey and Darryl break down their gear as Vince remains in the stream, watching the trout settle into a holding position.

“You coming, Bullets?”

“Yea, in a minute.”

Looking skyward, a smile ambles across Vince’s face. In a half-whisper, almost to himself, he says ...

“... Now I know why You sought out the company of fishermen.”

Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. We’re up here on Copperhead Run. It’s early October, probably one of the last warm days before the first frost. “Uncle Joey” just landed the biggest rainbow trout we’ve seen here in years. Used a grasshopper imitation. The trout love em; they’re like hot fudge sundaes.

In addition to Joey and Reverend Daniels, Pastor Randall, Vinnie “Bullets”, Sammy “Bagels,” “Ace” Martinson and his wife Kristy have made a day of it. Joey and Vince left their staffs to run their stores, Ace isn’t flying today, and Kristy’s mom is in town watching the boys. “Bagels” makes his own schedule, and I guess the clergymen have their sermons ready for the weekend.

There’s a rock outcropping ringed by boulders a little way downstream; sort of a natural table ... a good place to eat lunch. And it affords a magnificent view of the valley below. On a clear night you can see the lights of the city and the tops of the skyscrapers downtown. The leaves are beginning to change and some of the maples are almost at peak color. In a week it’ll be awesome.

Stomping around on the rocks, the gang lets their presence be known; after all, the stream didn’t get its name

for nothing. Lunch is broken out and from the looks on their faces they're already lost in thought. The beauty of the valley below has that effect.

What do you say we sit back, listen in, and enjoy the view?

“Won’t be long before the first frost kills off the crickets and grasshoppers,” Bullets says, sitting back against a large boulder, a roast beef sandwich in hand.

“Yea ... guess we’ll be back to fishing hardware,” Joey chuckles.”

“And using a Bunsen burner to keep my fingers warm ...” Pastor Randall says. “Hate to say it fellas but gotta pass on the winter trips this year ... getting a little too cold for these ole bones.”

“Wuss” ... laughs Vince.

Feigning a hurt look, the Lutheran minister shakes his head, the hint of a smile on his face. “Thanks, Bullets. Give it time, you’ll be singing the same tune.”

Stretching out, Sammy looks up the mountainside. “Won’t be long till all the trees turn color,” he says. Mother Nature’s in all her glory. Gotta admit, nothing compares to God’s handiwork.”

“Amen,” Kristy sighs. “...who could disagree with that?”

“Oh, I don’t know ... God, Himself?” comes a voice from behind her.

Startled faces turn to see Mike Daniels, thermos in hand. “You been in the altar wine again, rabbi?” Ace chuckles. “I mean what on earth could compete with this?”

“How about a sewage treatment plant?” Mike says, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Eyes wide, Bagels shakes his head. “What’ve you got in that thermos, padre?”

“The usual.”

“... could've fooled me ...”

“Sammy, the way I see it, churches and synagogues aren't the only place man praises God. Hospitals and sewage treatment plants do the same.”

“You're serious ... I'd laugh if I thought you were kidding ... thing is, I know you're not.”

Setting his sandwich down, Joey nods slowly. “I think I understand where Mike's going,” he says.

“How so?”

“Well, last Sunday I woke up to one of those religious programs on the radio. This preacher was ranting on how sinful and wretched man is and how insignificant we are compared to the glory of God. It's like he took delight in it.”

Pouring himself a cup of coffee from Mike's thermos, Reverend Randall nods. “I think I know who you're talking about, Joey. The guy has a little independent church just south of the city. I've met him ... nice enough fellow, though I'd say his “theology” is a bit extreme.”

“Yea, sounds like him, Reverend. To his way of thinking, man is wretched ... evil by nature. And if I'm hearing correctly, Mike's saying man is just the opposite.”

A small smile of satisfaction creases Mike's face. “Exactly, Joey. If you believe in the Genesis account of creation, man is God's final creation. His most dignified one ... made in His own image and likeness.”

Chuckling, Sammy sips his root beer. “Well, as the Jewish scholar of the group, I second that,” Bagel chuckles. “The Talmud teaches as God created; each creation took on a greater dignity.”

“And, what was the last thing God created,” Kristi asks, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Woman,” Sammy says softly, the twinkle in his eye matching hers.

“And don’t you gentlemen forget it,” she laughs.

“Touché,” Sammy chuckles, tipping the brim of his fishing visor.

So, you’re saying man’s accomplishments delight God?” Kristi asks.

“Right ... think about it. It wasn’t too long ago man didn’t know what germs were. Now we’re changing hearts and kidneys like they’re light bulbs.”

“So, as much as we enjoy God’s creation, you’re saying He takes delight in the city’s wastewater treatment plant?” Sammy chuckles.

“Exactly. And maybe MRI machines, the island of Manhattan, jet planes, automobiles, washing machines, and microwave ovens. Ever wonder what God thinks when he watches a child eat an ice cream cone, or a man or woman make a motion picture, or use a computer? Hospitals, jet planes, and mint chocolate chip delight God, they don’t amaze Him.”

“You know, I once heard a speaker say that while wisdom is a gift of God, intelligence is not,” Ace says. “At first, I liked the idea but the more I thought about it something bothered me. And then it occurred to me that intelligence, while not a gift of the Holy Spirit, is an attribute of God.”

“And since man is made in God’s image and likeness, you’re saying what, Ace ... that using our intelligence for good is a form of prayer?” John asks.

“Sure, think how any good parent feels when kids do well at something they’ve undertaken.”

“Makes sense,” John says.

“God gave man intelligence and we give glory to God when we use it ... that’s what Mike’s getting at,” Joey says. “Sure, we praise God when we pray or act in charity or gratitude, but don’t we do the same when we work ... create ... make something benefiting ourselves and others? Something that improves the human condition?”

“Exactly,” Mike says. “To use a computer term, we need to stop thinking of man as sinful or depraved as the default position. Sure, sin is part of our world, but God made man to be productive, creative, and intelligent. When we take those abilities and make the world better, don’t we give honor and glory to our Creator ... isn’t it’s a prayer?”

“I think that’s how our Heavenly Father sees it.” Pausing, he chuckles softly.

“...I know the guys at the sewage treatment plant do.”

Is God insulted when someone speaks of how man is so sinful ... so insignificant?

Which begs a question? If God has invested Himself in us, what return on His investment will we make? In the end, will we hear, “well done good and faithful servant ... since you have done well with small things, I have for you a greater thing...?”

Or will we be bound and thrown into the dark where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.

