

Amish Race Car Drivers

‘Okay, I’ll bet you Boardwalk and Park Place you can’t put this miniature candy cane in the punchbowl from here.’

Looking at the Catholic priest in the green and gold Notre Dame yarmulke, Mike Daniels, rector at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, chuckles. “You’re on, John.” Tying the candy cane on the end of the fishing line, Mike flicks his wrist sending the "lure" toward the punchbowl ... and bounces it off Tiffany Spinelli’s shoulder eight feet away.

“And you’ve won how many casting tournaments?” Pastor John Randall laughs, clasping Mike on the shoulder.

Tiffany looks down at the candy cane then up at Mike, shakes her head, laughs playfully, and whispers ...

“... boys and their toys ... some things never change.”

Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. It’s early in the New Year and we’re here in the back room at Spinelli’s. It’s the Sunday holiday party for the Interfaith Council ... an all-day event.

The unofficial kick off for the New Year’s activities, the Council decided to have the Christmas party now since a lot of the gang are either away or are busy during December. And since today is the feast of the Epiphany, recalling the visit of the Three Wise Men, it fits. Everyone’s either here or will drop in later. Santa, a.k.a. Nunzio Spinelli in a red suit, black boots, a pillow for his belly and cotton for the eyebrows and beard, is sitting by the fireplace handing out gifts to the little children. The delight on their faces and the excitement in their eyes makes the scene doubly festive.

Small gifts, most of them of the gag variety, are being exchanged among the adults. Father O’Malley got Reverend Daniels a plastic pocket fisherman rig. What’s funny about

that is Mike is a master fly fisherman and giving him a ten-dollar plastic pocket rig is like giving Rembrandt a paint by numbers set. John Randall is playing with his miniature horse racing game; Billy Swanson with his three new baseballs ... the exploding kind ... my guess, he doesn't know that yet. Dave Walsh is admiring his new putter ... the one with a hole in the middle - Dave's golf game leaves something to be desired. Father Bob is perusing his miniature wine-press, and Martin Williams is proudly modeling his Luke Skywalker toy light sabers. There are camouflage golf balls for Gumshoe, a beginner's cookbook for "Mike the Russian," a big water pistol for Vinnie "Bullets," a prank TV remote for Reverend Jacobson, a do-it-yourself witch doctor kit for Doc Rogers, a super-soaker for Crazy Pat, a game called "Operation" for Tommy McMichael, a book on Irish cuisine for the Spinelli brothers, a miniature "basketball game for the vertically challenged" for Bagels, and an assortment of whoopee cushions, dribble glasses, and even a few things I won't mention in polite company. Some of these guys have a wicked sense of humor.

Ah, the food is being served. Everything from sausage lasagna and stuffed manicotti, to kosher chicken and beef dishes ... and about everything in between. And the desserts! I just gained three pounds looking at the dessert table. No one eats before this party, and probably for two days afterward.

Filling a plate, Tommy heads to a table with most of the men of the cloth. Sitting down next to Rabbi Green - decked out in his brand-new Notre Dame Fighting Irish football jersey - he shakes his head and chuckles; a question forming in his eyes.

Let's listen in ...

"Rabbi, don't get me wrong, but I don't get you guys," Tommy says, a grin on his face, confusion in his eyes.

Sipping his coffee, Josh's eyes light up. "How so?"

"Well, first off, and please, no offense intended, but why are you and Sammy here? This is a Christmas party and, well, last time I checked it wasn't on your official calendar of events."

"Because it's a great party, Tommy ... it celebrates the birth of a little Jewish boy," the Rabbi says, laughing, an impish look in his eyes. "I'll always celebrate that."

Tommy chuckles softly, almost to himself. "Okay, I'll give you that one," he says. "Then maybe what confuses me more is, well, I've never been around so many ministers of different persuasions who get along so well. Back home clergymen barely acknowledged each other if they passed on the street. Heck, friendly clergymen were about as common as Amish race car drivers."

Smiling at Tommy's dismay, Josh clasps him on the shoulder. "Don't get the wrong idea, Tom. To a man we admit we have our differences. But first and foremost we realize a common identity."

"Common identity ...?"

"That we are all made in the image and likeness of our Creator."

"Okaaay ..." Tommy says.

"You see, Tommy, God made a covenant with Abraham; we Jews call it the Covenant. Christians consider it the Old Covenant, and your Carpenter from Nazareth is your new covenant. On that point we differ. But on one thing we do agree. It wasn't God's first covenant; an unspoken one ... 'Let us make man in our image and likeness.' And in that we find common ground."

"I don't follow ... unspoken covenant?"

"Well, look at it this way. If someone gives you something precious, doesn't there exist an unspoken agreement that you would treasure it ... use it wisely? An unspoken covenant."

"I guess so."

"Right, and because the Creator gave us that incredible gift of Himself, we realize a responsibility to bring the gifts of His creation we have freely received to others."

Pausing, Josh nods in the direction of his fellow clergymen and continues. "We all recognize a common call of service and realize together we can accomplish more for others than we can individually."

Setting his coffee cup down, Reverend Williams joins the conversation.

"Josh is right, Tommy. And there was another incident that had a profound effect on this group," Martin says. One day several of us attended an inter-faith meeting and heard a speaker ... a priest of Bob's church ... give a talk that made all of us think."

Reverend Williams looks across the table at Pastor Randall. "You were there, John ... why don't you tell it?"

"It was really simple, Tommy," the Lutheran minister says, leaning forward in his chair. "This priest - I don't remember his name - said if you read the words of Scripture, you must read the punctuation too. He went on to cite the incident of the young rich man asking Jesus, 'What must I do to have eternal life?' Jesus' answer ... simple, 'obey the commandments.' And here's what really got our attention. The speaker asked, 'what if, at that point, the young man simply said thank you and walked away?' Would Jesus have run after him saying, 'Hey, wait, come

back, I have more to say. They're going to write this book and I have a great zinger about a camel and an eye and a needle?' No. 'Obey the commandments.' Period. Jesus simply told that young man the minimum needed to attain eternal life was to obey the Law God gave Moses on Sinai."

"You see, Tommy, the reason we get along so well is that we respect both the search for truth and the dignity of all. The Ten Commandments can be summed up in one word, respect."

Setting down his wineglass, Reverend Allen joins the conversation.

"We all believe that one day, the God we all worship will explain it to us," he says. "But right now, our common call is to respect and be of service to others. Worshipping together in our individual common understandings, that's community. What we do out here, the rest of the week, that's religion."

Tommy smiles, understanding in his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you guys said more tonight about what's right with religion with a plastic fishing rod, a football jersey, and a dribble glass than others do with all their words?"

"Because of the Eleventh Commandment, Tommy," chuckles Father Bob. "Thy actions shall speak louder than thy words."

Heads nod as Rabbi Josh turns to Tommy, a twinkle in his eye.

"Now ... about those Amish race car drivers?"

As Reverend Randall said, the Ten Commandments can be boiled down to one word, respect. Respect for our God, ourselves, and all others. I know, you're probably thinking, "I'd say love." Good point, but can love really exist without respect?

Realizing we are made in God's image and likeness demands we have respect for all who hold to a belief in the same God, but honor and worship Him in a manner that may differ from our own understanding. All of God's creation, really.

We are called to recognize the dignity of each human being. And to work together to make, or remake, this world in the image and the likeness I imagine the Creator had in mind when He set about His work.

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.

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