

Roll Tide

“Rooollllll Tiiiiide!!!”

“The Bowl” erupts in a frenzied cheer as the referee signals touchdown, putting the The "Boys in Black" up by ten on the “Skins.” Mimicking the referee’s signal, "Alabama" breaks into his trademark touchdown dance ... aahhh, touchdown dance ... well, just picture Riverdance meets the hula ... you get the idea.

“Hey Alabama, we’re on a roll today!” comes a shout from six rows up.

A ripple of laughter courses through the crowd. Down on the sideline several players turn and give him the thumbs up sign. Alabama flashes his familiar lopsided grin and returns the gesture. Seems everyone here knows him.

Strange thing is, we’re nowhere near Tuscaloosa ... this is a professional football game.

...Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. Long as I can remember, the neighborhood has had these seats here at ‘the Bowl’ ... almost half of section 136 by my count. The tickets belong to a dozen or so of the folks in the neighborhood gang and St. Kate’s, First Presbyterian, and Christ the Redeemer Lutheran each have seats that parishioners who have passed on, left to the churches. The guys in the neighborhood split the cost of the tickets so those who don’t have season tickets get to go to a few games. And each week some go to high school students who excel in their studies. This week it's four football players and two cheerleaders at St. Mark's Episcopal Academy who've maintained A averages. It's an incentive and a reward the guys have established.

The fella everyone calls “Alabama” is named Andy. He’s in his early twenties and he and his dad, Pete, belong to Martin Williams’ church. They’re a fixture here on game

day. A widower, Pete was a fireman in Engine Company 5 and about ten years ago was severely injured fighting a fire. So, Pete's on a disability pension and the Chief, "Crazy Pat" makes sure he and Andy have a ticket for all the home games. They're sitting two rows in front of Father Bob, Rabbi Green and Pastor Williams. Behind Martin a fellow in a 'Skins' jacket is watching Alabama with a decidedly puzzled look. Leaning forward he taps Reverend Williams on the shoulder ...

... Let's listen in...

"Excuse me fella ... name's John. Not to be nosy but isn't that guy down there a little lost?"

Chuckling, Reverend Williams turns to the stranger, "Hi, I'm Martin ... this is, Bob, and my friend over here is Josh."

Smiling, Father Bob shakes the stranger's hand. "Nice to meet you," he says as the Rabbi follows suit.

"I take it you're referring to 'Alabama'?" Reverend Williams, asks.

"Right, what gives ... This isn't exactly the Southeast Conference ...?"

"Yea ... I see your point. Well, Alabama's real name is Andy, and Andy has Down syndrome. And as a toddler, he nearly drowned, complicating things a bit. So he's a little 'challenged' as they say."

"Okay ... but ... what's with the 'Roll Tide' bit."

Father Bob laughs. "... gotta admit, it must seem a little strange," he says.

Smiling gently, the Baptist minister continues.

"Well, Andy's dad, Pete, is the fellow in the crimson windbreaker sitting next to him. Pete went to the University of Alabama. He's a die-hard Crimson Tide fan and he told us when Andy was little, they would watch the college games on Saturday afternoons. Whenever Alabama would score, Pete would raise his arms in a touchdown signal and holler 'Rooollll Tiiiiide.' Little

Andy picked up on it and now anytime his team scores, Andy hollers 'Rooollll Tiiide.' It doesn't matter who's playing."

"Or what sport," laughs Josh "... you should see him at a hockey game."

It's John's turn to laugh. "Yea, I'll bet that's rich ... especially if the Canadiens are playing." Pausing a moment, he watches Andy laughing with the kids from St. Marks. "And his touchdown dance... where'd that come from?"

"Well, he's on his own there," laughs the Rabbi. "Even his dad doesn't know where that came from. He just starting doing it one day. You'll notice we all cheer with Andy, but the dance ... heck, half of us would end up in traction."

Two rows down, someone passes Andy a couple of hot dogs. Waving to his benefactor, Andy looks around ... and then gives them to two little kids sitting in front of him.

"I've noticed that he doesn't seem to want for anything. That has to be the sixth hot dog someone's sent him, and we're barely into the second quarter."

"Yea, everyone looks out for Andy," Martin says. "We take care of him because he gives us far more than we give him."

"What could he give you?"

Martin nods at the priest. "Perspective ... and balance." Pausing, Martin takes a long sip of his drink, and continues. "You see, in the beginning we all felt sorry for Andy, and, truth be told, some of us avoided him. His disability made us uncomfortable. Now, he's one of the reasons we all look forward to coming here on Sundays. You see, to Andy, everyone here is his friend, and Andy loves his friends.

"Yea, I've noticed that."

"... if someone buys him a hotdog or a drink, he'll eat the first one, and then just give the next ones away. So, we buy Andy 'dogs and drinks and snacks so he can take care of his friends. Just watching him gives us a good feeling."

"Yea, and the vendors here all drive Cadillacs," Josh laughs.

"Andy sees everyone as good and that simplicity makes him special ... and unique," Father Bob says, chuckling at the Rabbi's remark. "What we originally saw as a limitation we now see as a gift. Andy's joy reminds us life is good and happiness is found in giving. He shows us our troubles aren't all that bad, and when we look beyond the surface we find a simple and pervasive kind of joy."

"... like, don't judge a gift by the wrapping paper?" John says.

Josh nods. "Exactly ... and the great thing is, he's infectious. The TV cameras love him. You can bet somewhere in this game his face'll be up there on the big screen. He's even been featured on TV a few times. Half the city knows Andy and his cheer and his special touchdown dance. He's kind of the unofficial mascot."

"OK, but what if the team loses, what happens then?"

"Doesn't faze him at all. He just knows they'll win next week ... he has that simple faith. And in a way, it doesn't matter to him ... just being here with his dad and his friends means everything. Like I said, simple."

More cheers and another chorus of "Rooollll Tide" cascades from section 136. The men turn their attention to the field as the Boys in Black just hit a big pass play for another touchdown. And Andy's on his feet ... another cheer and another crooked grin ... he's doing his dance ... along with the kids from St. Mark's. They're having a ball ... all of them.

And the crowd erupts in a cheer as the image of Andy and the kids appears on the Jumbotron.

Mr. "burgundy and gold" waves the hot dog vendor over. "Give 'Alabama' down there two dogs and a large cola ... it's on me."

Martin chuckles, "You know, John, they'll probably be eaten by someone three rows away."

"Then give him two more, John laughs."

Rabbi Josh turns to Reverend Williams and winks.

And in section 136, a man dressed in the other team's colors hollers

“Rooollll Tiiide” and does his own funny little dance ... along with the friends he’s just made.

Someone once asked Jesus if a young man’s blindness was punishment for his sins or the sins of his parents. He replied it was neither; it was so the glory of God may shine through him. Look hard enough at someone society considers a tragedy, a mistake, or worse, expendable and it often becomes clear that the world misses an important point ... or refuses to see it.

All people are made in the image and likeness of God including the handicapped, the Down Syndrome kids, those "challenged", and those marginalized and consigned to the edges of society ... seen but not heard. God’s plan for mankind doesn’t always neatly fit into modern society’s preconceptions of the value of a human life.

Truth, joy, happiness, and love don’t always come in the packages we expect ... or think they should.

Angels are messengers, and when a person shines through his or her suffering, disability, or troubles, they may be teaching us something valuable ... if we’re willing to listen.

In your life, are you being sent a message ... through an angel? ...

... who just might be known as, oh let’s say ... Alabama?

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.