

A common, and unfortunate, point of view

THE ORGAN GRINDER'S STUNT MONKEY

"Make a 'hot dog doggie' for my little sister," a tiny voice pipes up. She's sick and couldn't come today."

Hmmm...a hot dog doggie, that's a new one. Then again, I guess "dachshund" is a little tough for a five-year-old.

The clown beams at the tiny tots surrounding him. "Tell you what; I'll make a whole bunch of hot dog doggies, how about that?" he says.

Squeals of delight echo through the air, Hey, you gotta give it to him, the man knows his audience.

Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. Right now, I'm looking at a six-foot man in a five-foot red polka dot suit, an explosion of curly red hair, size twenty-five shoes, a flower that squirts water, a cowbell and a huge smile. HoBo the clown is making his famous balloon animals. And the little tykes can't get enough. Just watching the smiles and the laughter lifts everyone's spirits.

It's a beautiful summer Saturday afternoon. We're here at the Mt. Nebo Baptist summer penny carnival. It's another effort underwritten by the Interfaith Council of Churches ... a way to give the kids and their parents a day of fun for a quarter. Everything costs just one penny. It's a day of blue skies, clowns, cotton candy, rides, games, ice cream sundaes, and the famous dunking booth. I'll bet every kid under ten on the South side is here.

Several of the local clergymen are here, together with Mike "the Russian", Uncle Joey, "Hammer" Robinson, "Ace" Martinson, and Vito Spinelli. They're sitting at the

next booth, wrapped in wet towels, watching the fun and working on some ice cream sundaes. You see, these guys are the guests of honor at the dunk tank. An attraction that has gained great popularity since it was introduced and has come to be affectionately as “Dunk the Monk.” Uncle Joey has just returned from the tank, and now it’s Reverend Mike Daniels turn as the target du jour.

The guys love this event ... wouldn’t miss it for anything. Each has been in the tank once, and you can’t tell who’s having more fun, the little kids, or the big ones.

Let’s listen in

Dripping wet, Joey towels himself off.

“Oops, there goes Mike, John Randall laughs, as a king-sized splash is heard.

Chuckling at John’s remark, Pastor Swanson hands Joey a soft drink. “So, my friend ... baptism by immersion ... how’s it feel?”

“Great your eminence,” Joey chuckles, popping the top on the can “... gotta be loads of fun in January.”

Overhearing the comment, Father Bob chuckles and looks at the sea of laughing kids. “You know, Martin, I’ve never seen these kids so happy. They are the definition of the word, delight. So much laughter and joy in something as simple as an ice cream cone and a balloon animal. Days like this make you realize what’s really important.

“As in, “unless you become like one of these little ones you shall not see God. For such as these is the kingdom of heaven made,” Mike the Russian says, a mischievous grin on his face.

“Something like that,” Father Bob laughs.

A reflective look ambles across Billy Swanson's face. "Makes you wonder if, as a little boy, Jesus ever did something like this?"

Pastor Williams turns to his friend. "Oh, in some way I'm sure he did. Billy. Why do you ask?"

"Well, just last Sunday someone asked me if Jesus ever smiled. It's a question I imagine we all hear occasionally."

"I get it four or five times a year, myself," Martin says; I'll bet we all do. After all, scripture doesn't really show you the informal or casual side of Jesus' existence ... what life was like in those times ... what people did for fun or amusement. I often wish I knew more about that side of our Lord's life.

The Pentecostal minister nods his head. "Watching these little ones, I wonder who delighted Jesus most ... I mean, besides the obvious ... parents, little children, kittens, puppies"

"How about Martha's sister, Mary," Vito offers. "She just wanted to listen."

Seems the guys have been listening and have decided to chime in with their opinions.

Mike "the Russian" laughs. "A woman who just wants to listen? ... that'd delight me."

Laughter abounds at Mike's remark.

"Peter," ... comes another reply. "Lazarus ... or maybe the one leper who came back," comes another.

"The Good Thief, maybe"? Ace says.

Father Bob nods in appreciation. "... all good answers." Pausing, he looks across the table. "Joey, you're kinda quiet ... any ideas."

A thoughtful look crosses 'Uncle' Joey's face as he finishes toweling his hair. Then taking a sip of the drink, he turns and smiles at the grey-haired priest.

"Me, I'd say a Roman soldier," he says.

Reverend Randall raises an eyebrow. "The Centurion? The one who asked Jesus to heal his servant?"

"Right."

"Why him, Joey?"

"Well, because to him, Jesus wasn't just some sort of celestial vending machine ... a cosmic jackpot, if you will."

Vito chuckles softly. "... vending machine ... you lost me."

Joey smiles gently at his friend.

"Ask yourself Vito, how many people see God as a glorified jackpot. They put in a request ... pull the handle that is a prayer, and if nothing materializes, they quit on God ... say He either doesn't care, or worse, doesn't exist. To them, God is little more than a celestial version of Santa Claus, or maybe a slot machine, and their relationship with Him is dependent on what He doles out for them."

A good many, I'd say, Hammer says, a gentle reflective tone is his voice.

“Right, and from what I’ve read, it was no different back in Jesus’ time. In fact, maybe worse. It was always, show us another sign, jump through the hoops and maybe we’ll believe in you. And make sure to do it on our terms, not yours.”

“Good point,” Hammer says softly, nodding in agreement.

“And then suddenly this man of authority appears. He has a request ... heal his servant. Jesus agrees and when the Lord moves to accompany him, he says something our Lord wasn’t expecting. ‘Don’t trouble yourself ... I don’t need to see ... I believe ... you just say the word.’ Finally, someone who didn’t demand Jesus turn himself into some celestial organ grinder’s stunt monkey, performing for his satisfaction.”

Laughing, Father Bob shakes his head in amazement. “Celestial organ grinder’s stunt monkey? Joey ... was that what I heard? And if it is, next Sunday’s sermon just got a lot easier.”

Joey just winks at his pastor.

“Does that mean Joey gets a cut of next Sunday’s collection?” Vito asks, grinning at the priest.

Shaking his head, Father Bob chuckles and drops his chin to his chest.

Just then Mike Daniels appears, dripping wet. “Somebody please hand me a towel.”

Martin’s booming laughs greets him. “Anybody miss, Mike?”

“Not one. A couple of those kids ought to pitch for the Yankees ... I saw some wicked fastballs.”

Sitting down, Reverend Daniels chuckles as Vito’s little girl, Maria, grabs her father’s hand. “Your turn, Daddy.”

Tousling her hair, Vito picks her up. "You want daddy to go for a swim?" he asks, as the little one just beams. Walking toward his watery fate, a hearty chorus of "*Wade in the Water*" breaks out.

Turning, Vito looks at Billy, laughs and shakes his head ...

... "by immersion, right Rev?"

How many of us treat people based only on how useful they are? You know, "what have you done for me lately?"

How many of us treat God the same way?

How many of us base our faith and our actions only on what God does for us ... if he performs to our satisfaction ... how useful he is in our lives? How many of us pull the handle of prayer, expecting the goodies to appear, and walk away disappointed when we don't get what we want, when and how we want it? How many of us fail to show God the same patience He shows us?

Or maybe, how many fail to recognize the answer to a prayer, especially when it comes in a manner we don't expect? We ask for a healing for a dying friend or relative, and when that person lives on maybe six months, then passes on, do we recognize that those six months were the answer? That God granted, not a cure, but rather time to tie up loose ends, love more deeply, mend fences, and to enjoy life even more ... like that country song of recent memory says, a chance to live "like we were dying."

How many of us should offer our Creator a little more delight, and maybe demand a lot less proof?

You ... me?

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz

