

## FRIENDS

“More coffee sir?”

“Thank you young lady ... please.”

The young waitress fills his cup as the distinguished gentleman slowly stirs in some cream. Seeing two clergymen approaching, he sets down his spoon and stands to greet them.

“Mr. Krankus ... good to see you again,” Father Bob Scanlon says, as the two men shake hands. Oh, and allow me to introduce Reverend John Randall. John’s the pastor at Christ the Redeemer Lutheran Church down on Liberty.”

“Pleasure to meet you Mr. Krankus,” the Lutheran minister says. “I see you were a pall bearer for Mr. Watkins. Did you know him well?”

“Somewhat, Reverend; but I know his wife, or maybe I should say his second wife, Elizabeth a bit better. We grew up here, though I haven’t seen them much since they moved to Cincinnati. Liz and I were friends when we were younger ... high school sweethearts, actually. We lost touch when I went to West Point. Then about ten years ago I ran into her in Kendrick’s drug store. She was running an errand for John and we’ve exchanged Christmas greetings ever since.”

The conversation lapses. Looking out the window, Mr. Krankus shakes his head and returns his gaze to the priest. “Tell me Bob, I’m curious, and please don’t get me wrong, but why are we all here?”

“Do you mean this luncheon?” the priest asks. “Well, Orville, it’s a tradition here at St. Kate’s that we host a luncheon after a funeral service. It takes some stress off the family at a difficult time.”

“No, Father, I’m sorry, I should have made myself a bit clearer ...

“Why are we at a religious service for a man who had no use for religion at all?”

**Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. We’re here in the meeting hall of St. Katherine’s Catholic Church. Fr. Bob and Pastor Randall just**

**finished a funeral mass and graveside service for one Mr. Paul Watkins.**

**The distinguished gentleman seated with the two clergymen is Mr. Orville Krankus, a widower and a neighbor of St. Kate's; his house being next door to the elementary school. Mr. "K" is a retired Army officer and the kids call him "the Colonel." He's friendly with the children although the softballs and soccer balls that occasionally find their way into his rose garden are a source of annoyance ... not to mention the occasional confrontation. But he and Father Bob always amiably work things out. Then again, with as many rose bushes as the parish has purchased for Mr. K, the good pastor jokes that the colonel's garden could be called "Katie's pride."**

**Mr. K is a generous sort and enjoys supporting the various Interfaith Council functions. But, like his friend Mr. Watkins, not a regular church going man, although there is a curiosity that occasionally surfaces. And today, the fact a religious service would be performed for a man who was emphatically non-religious obviously seems confounding to him. So, his question should be good for an interesting discussion.**

... Let's listen in?

**"Oh ... I see what you're driving at, Orville," Father Bob says, chuckling softly. "Well, as a boy, Mr. Watkins was baptized in the Catholic Church. And although Mrs. Watkins belongs to John's congregation, she asked us for this funeral mass, believing her husband should be buried in the tradition of his heritage. She requested that John participate, and we were happy to oblige."**

**The grimace on the colonel's face suggests the answer doesn't satisfy him. "Why?" he asks. "I knew Watkins well enough to know he had no use for church or any talk of God. Outside of the occasional wedding or funeral, you'd more likely find John at a square dance than in a church. And John wouldn't be caught dead at a square dance. The man was a rock n' roll junkie."**

**Pausing, Mr. K chuckles at the thought ... then continues.**

“At best, John was an agnostic, though I’d peg him for a ‘dyed in the wool’ atheist. If he didn’t go to church and he turned his back on God, why a funeral mass? I thought you had to be in good standing for something like that.”

“How do we know he wasn’t, Orville?” Reverend Randall asks, a sly grin crossing his face.

“Wasn’t what?”

“In good standing.”

“What would make you say that, Reverend?”

“Possibly, because God didn’t turn his back on Mr. Watkins?”

Sipping his coffee, Mr. K looks across the table at the Lutheran minister. “It’s a nice thought, but I still don’t get it. Where do you draw the line? And aren’t you being a bit lenient?”

“Mr. Krankus if there is one thing we understand,” John says, “it’s that we can never discern the mind of God as to how anyone stands in His estimation.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. But from what I remember from Sunday school when I was little was, if you turn your back on God, God turns His back on you. Simple.”

Father Bob nods his head. “If it was simply that, I’d agree. But God’s mercy and compassion isn’t a reach by any stretch of the imagination. I agree, Orville ... there’s much in the Bible that supports your contention. But there’s an incident that contradicts it.”

Intrigue lights up Orville’s eyes. “And that is?”

“The story of a paralyzed man ... and his friends.”

“Go on,” he says, shifting in his seat.

“Well, in the incident I’m thinking of, a man, paralyzed from birth, is brought to Jesus by his friends. Now, obviously, the man didn’t approach Jesus on his own. Everything was initiated by, and at the request of, his friends. And, seeing the love and faith of that man’s friends, Jesus, moved with compassion, cured him of his paralysis.”

Sipping his coffee, Pastor Randall picks up the conversation. “The lesson we take from the incident is not only a miraculous cure, but also the request of a friend ... the prayer, if you will, is important. And is answered. True friendship is rooted in love, and God responds to love.”

“So, you’re saying Watkins was like the man in the story? Paralyzed? And that overrides anything else Watkins did, or thought, or felt? Again, no offense, John, but it still sounds to me like you’re reaching.”

“Well, paralysis can take many forms,” the priest says as the young waitress freshens his coffee cup. “I’m told Mr. Watkins’ first wife died when his children were little. Later, he lost his teenage son in a car crash and a stepdaughter to cancer. I imagine that much loss - that much heartache - might just paralyze anyone. And I certainly understand how it might cripple a man’s relationship with God.”

“So, you’re guessing others prayed for Watkins.”

“Not guessing, Mr. Krankus,” Pastor Randall says, leaning forward, a warm smile on his face. “When she was visiting, Mrs. Watkins attended Sunday services at our church. She always requested in our book of intentions; the congregation pray for her husband. And I know from talking with Bob, that any number of masses were said for John at Mrs. Watkins’ request.”

“...although I doubt he was aware of it,” Father Bob chuckles, half to himself. “Mrs. Watkins was very discreet. She gave me the impression that if Mr. Watkins knew, he would disapprove ... strongly.”

Mr. K again looks off in the distance as if trying to digest all he’s heard. “Well, it’s a nice idea, though I guess we’ll have to wait to find out if it worked.”

Reverend Randall again smiles, a devilish look in his eyes. “Judging from all the grey hair on our collective heads, Orville,” he laughs ...

“... maybe not as long as we think.”

**Spiritual trauma brought on by tragedies such as illness, accident, abandonment, divorce, and death often cause one to lose one’s faith. So, what is our responsibility toward those in such circumstances? Stay away; simply consider it their**

**problem? You know, mind our own business; not butt in? Or, like the friends of that paralyzed man, should we remember them before God? Should we ever cease praying for our spiritually paralyzed friends? Friends and acquaintances who, because of great personal tragedy and pain, have fallen by the wayside, living in a fog of confusion, grief, and pain? The seed that fell on rocky ground?**

**Maybe, just maybe, their salvation will be the result, not so much of their own actions, but of the faith and love of others. Of friends.**

**Does Jesus look with compassion on us and those for whom we pray, when we bring to him in our hearts and prayers our fallen away, alienated, and disenfranchised friends? The spiritually paralyzed?**

**Can our prayer work a miracle?**

**Even if we don't see it?**

**Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.**