

DEFINITION

“Hey, John, you really outdid yourself ... spread looks great tonight.”

Pastor Martin Williams and Father John are in the kitchen manning the food table that accompanies every movie night.

“Thanks Martin, but I can’t take credit. Stephanie did this. She knew I had three important meetings this afternoon, so she said she’d take care of everything.”

“Generous and responsible; admirable young lady, your daughter.”

Yes, I’m blessed, and proud of her. It’s funny ... at times it’s like pulling teeth to get her to so much as clean up her room. Then just when you figure they don’t listen at all; they go and do something like this. Shaking his head, Father John chuckles, “teenagers ... it’s a roller coaster ride.”

“And then some,” Martin laughs. “But honestly John, it doesn’t surprise me. Stephanie’s always struck me as a very responsible young lady.”

“Yea, and it’s moments like this that make me understand how right you are. I even asked her if she’d like to join us.”

“Let me guess ...” Martin chuckles, “she looked at you and rolled her eyes at the idea of spending the evening with a bunch of old men watching an old movie.”

Nodding his head, again the priest chuckles. “Yea, I thought so too ...

... until she said yes.”

Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. It's movie night and we're here in the family room of Father John's house. His teenage daughter, Stephanie, prepared the spread the guys brought. For those of you who might not know, or remember, Father John is a late arrival to the priesthood. He was married for almost fifteen years until he lost his wife to a heart ailment. A former Deacon at St. Kate's, he has two teenage kids, Matt and Stephanie, and the local bishop rents this house so the kids can live in a traditional family environment.

Unlike the weekly Council financial meeting, aka the nickel-dime poker game, the guys share in the costs of this evening's fare. And once again, Carmine Spinelli brought a big pan of my favorite, sausage lasagna. Joey brought some of Samantha's homemade bread, Ace brought a big pan of his wife's brownies, “Mike the Russian” furnished the salads, and Bobby Pretzels bought a plate of his wife's famous walnut fudge. Yours truly will be a happy camper tonight.

Tonight's movie is *The Last Castle*, starring Robert Redford and James Gandolfini. It's about a military prison and in it there is a scene that seems to have resonated with Father John, and he wanted to share it. Hence, tonight's feature film.

Movie's over, the lights are back up, everyone is getting a drink or refreshing their plate.

What do you say we grab another piece of fudge, sit back, and listen? I think tonight's conversation should be interesting.

“Gandolfini, didn’t he pass away?”

Carmine nods. “Yea ... several years ago. Rest in peace, Tony Soprano.”

“John, you said the movie had a meaning we might want to take to heart,” Reverend Jacobson asks, sipping his coffee. How do you see that?”

A subtle smile crosses the priest’s face. “... right Jake. It was that scene where the General attempts to make the young corporal realize that although he chose a noble and honorable profession – the life of a soldier, a life defending freedom and liberty - he’s now defined himself, not by that life of honor and dignity, but by the worst two minutes of his life. The ones that got him sent to prison.”

Jake smiles. “I think I know what you’re getting at.”

“Father Bob and I were talking about how various influences in the church wrongfully define people,” Father John says. “Especially the kids.”

“Interesting,” the Presbyterian minister muses.

“You know, Father, you have a point,” Ace Martinson says.

“How so?”

Well, last week, I picked up my youngest boy at pre-school. He evidently did something that annoyed his teacher, and he was in tears. Bobby's four and in pre-school at St. Kate's and when I asked what was the matter, he said 'Mrs. Davis told me I was a bad boy.' Then he looked up at me and said, 'I don't mean to be a bad boy, daddy.'"

"Well, the look on his face touched me. I sat him down, wiped his tears, and explained to him that, no, he was a good boy, but in this case, he did a bad thing."

"Did it work?"

"I think so."

"And I think I need to have a word with Mrs. Davis," Father John says, half to himself.

Ace smiles. "Thanks Father. All I know is Kristi and I'll be more careful with our words. Making sure the kids understand the difference between acting bad and identifying as bad."

"The bigger question," the priest says, shifting in his chair, "is how much that idea extends to how we frame our teaching to our congregations."

Setting his coffee cup down, Reverend Williams looks across the table. "How do you mean, John?"

"Well, we teach man is made in God's image and likeness, but do those words lose their meaning because we don't reinforce them enough?"

"Or maybe don't give them enough emphasis?" Joey adds, a question in his tone.

“... because we dwell too much on sin and people’s moral failings?” Reverend Jacobson adds.

The presbyterian minister sips his drink and continues.

“Take teens for example. As they grow, the opportunities to make bad choices in difficult situations, increases. That’s the time we need to emphasize the good they are, and they do. Sure, we need to recognize their failing, but not in the overly heavy-handed manner we too often do.”

“Thank you, Reverend Jacobson,” Stephanie says. I know most of my friends think adults automatically assume because some kids make mistakes and bad decisions, we all do. That somehow, we can’t help ourselves. It’s like their ‘default’ position.”

“Good point,” John Randall says after a moment’s pause. “We tell our children to ‘be true to yourself.’ But what does that mean when all they’ve heard is years of ‘instruction’ telling them they’re wicked in God’s eyes? Stephanie’s spot on. Doesn’t that kind of attitude, not to mention, teaching, cause people, and not just teenagers, to define themselves by their faults and their sins?”

“And leave,” Father John says.

“Exactly. When all people hear is their own worthlessness or sinfulness, many turn their backs and walk away,” Mike Daniels adds.

“And don’t return,” Reverend Jacobson, says.

Taking a brownie from a tray, ‘Pretzels’, shakes his head. “But can’t that be taken too far? The idea that no matter what we do, we are inherently good, and will ultimately be rewarded regardless of the evil we commit?”

“On one level I agree,” Martin says. “If that realization isn’t grounded in a proper understanding of God’s expectation of us, it becomes simply a glib rationalization for doing whatever we want.”

“The old, ‘I don’t need religion; I’m a good person,’ justification?” Carmine asks, sipping his coffee.

“Precisely.”

“But, if one has a firm understanding of the goodness inherent in how we are seen by God, wouldn’t it make a person desire not to live in opposition to God’s desire for us,” Ace adds.

“Exactly,” Stephanie says, a look of intensity in her eyes. “I was at my friend Olivia’s the other day. Liv adores her dad and he was upset with her for something she did. He didn’t really say anything, but it was the disappointment in his eyes that Liv said hurt the most. ‘I’d rather he ground me for a month than look at me like that,’” she said. “I know how she felt.”

She pauses, as the men say nothing, simply listening.

“Wouldn’t it then be the same with God? Shouldn’t we be more reluctant to do those things that disappoint Him when we understand and believe He sees us as good, and doesn’t define us by our sins?”

Father Bob smiles; John Randall shakes his head. “Out of the mouths of babes,” the Lutheran pastor says softly, turning to the priest. Then realizing he might have insulted Stephanie; he looks back at her and starts to apologize.

“Stephanie, I’m ... I’m sorry I didn’t mean...”

“Forget it Reverend, Randall,” Stephanie chuckles. “I know what you mean.”

Then, twirling her long auburn hair, a mischievous look lights in her eyes. “Besides, she says ...

...I am a babe.”

And playful laughter rebounds throughout the room.

One must not define others, nor allow oneself to be defined, by one’s mistakes, one’s failures, one’s sins. It is not the way God envisioned us at our creation; it is not the way God sees each of us now.

Yes, God sees the evil, the sin, we commit. He sees it, but he doesn’t define us by it. God defines us as made in His image and likeness. As a loving father sees his child.

Shouldn’t we do the same?

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.

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