

An interesting theological debate ... and at the ballpark no less ...

SAME PROBLEM – DIFFERENT SAINTS

“Nooooooo ... that one’s outta here ... a three-run homer ... six to nothing and it’s only the top of the second.”

“Take it easy Billy ... there’s still time,” chuckles the man in black.

“... time for what, Bob?” Billy Swanson asks, exasperation in his voice. “That’s the second gopher ball Krieger’s served up in two innings and still no outs ... this is starting to look like Custer at Little Big Horn.”

“Well, if it gets worse, I can always call on St. Jude,” the priest says, winking at the evangelical minister, a mischievous smile creasing his face. “You know, the patron saint of hopeless causes.”

Chuckling, Billy shakes his head. “Call on St. Jude if you must, Bob. As for me ...

... well, my patron saint of hopeless causes is a bit different than yours.”

Hey ... Tony here. It’s a beautiful summer day, perfect for a ball game. We’re here at The Park with the “Southside Bleacher Bums” as the guys call themselves. The “Boys in Black” are playing the “Red Birds.” Billy is Billy Swanson, Pastor of the Liberty Street Assembly of God and Bob is Father Bob Scanlon, pastor at St. Katherine’s Catholic Church. Today they’ve been joined by Vinnie “Bullets”, “Uncle” Joey, Bobby “Pretzels,” “Hammer” Robinson, Pastor Paul Jacobson of First Presbyterian, and John Randall of Christ the Redeemer Lutheran. And, Samantha Bates and her little girl Emily Ann have made a day of it, too. Uncle Joey’s treat.

Known among the local clergymen by his nickname, “Walk off,” Billy loves baseball. It comes from his days in Triple A ball with one of the Big Apple’s minor league clubs. His love of the game is intense; he takes his baseball almost as seriously as his Bible. Just don’t tell him I said that.

Father Bob and Pastor Swanson have an interesting relationship. After all, traditionally there's been some tension between the Evangelical Christian churches and the Catholic Church when it comes to matters of belief. But these two, as with all the clergymen here on the Southside, have a respect for each other that even extends to kidding about their differences. And looking at the amusement in their eyes, I think this afternoon might provide an interesting take on the theological side of rooting for the home team.

What do you say we listen in?

“So, Bob, it's only the second inning and you're thinking it's time to ring up good ole St. Jude? Where's your faith?” Billy chuckles.

“Not in Krieger's fast ball,” laughs the priest.

“I don't know Father,” “Hammer” says. “The way Krieger's pitching, I think St. Anthony might be more like it.”

“I agree, Walt, but which St. Anthony?”

“You know; the patron saint of finding lost things ... this kid can't find home plate with a GPS and a seeing eye dog.”

A groan goes up from the crowd as Morrison, the Red Bird's right fielder, hits a triple into the gap in left center.

“That does it,” Bob laughs, “it's St. Jude right now, Billy; this is definitely looking like a lost cause. Rothschild's up and he's leading the majors in homers. This could get ugly.”

“Could?” laughs Bullets, “Father, we're way past, ‘could’...”

Courson, the Boys' manager, walks to the pitcher's mound. “Just curious, Billy, but come to think of it, who's your patron saint of lost causes,” the priest asks?

An impish grin crosses the evangelical minister's face. “The man who was a walking lost cause, himself.”

“And that would be?”

“Well, answer me this, who are the only two people we know are in Heaven other than God and His angels?”

Silence ensues as the group ponders Billy’s question.

Little Emily Ann’s head pops up. “Jesus,” she says, spoken with all the authority a seven-year-old can muster.

Turning to the little girl, Billy laughs at the ear-to-ear smile on the freckle-faced little lady ... a smile missing two front teeth.

“Right you are,” Billy says, tousling her hair. “I think that’s worth an ice cream bar,” he says, waving to the ice cream vendor.

“Billy, you’re going to spoil her,” Sam chuckles.

“You can never spoil a budding scripture scholar, right Emily?” Billy says.

“Right,” she says; her enthusiasm bringing chuckles all around.

The gang continues to ponder Billy’s question.

“Moses,” comes one answer after a moment. “Elijah,” another ... “the Apostles,” “Peter,” “Paul” ... “John the Baptist.”

“Mary, Jesus’ mother,” Samantha says quietly.

Billy smiles. “All good answers. But you can’t prove it from Scripture. No, I’m thinking of two distinct people and Emily here has come up with the first and most important.”

Beaming, Emily takes a bite out of her strawberry shortcake bar.

Again, silence as the gang returns to watching the action. On the field, Krieger strikes out Rothchild on a curve ball, picks Morrison off third, and gets Densmore to foul out to the first baseman.

“You were praying to Jude, weren’t you, Bob?” Billy laughs.

Smiling, the priest just winks.

“... the Good Thief,” Reverend Jacobson says.

“Saint Dismas,” Father Bob says softly.

“Exactly, Paul,” Billy says. “‘this day you will be with me in paradise.’ Scripture tells us it’s the Good Thief. Forget Moses, the Apostles, John the Baptist, all your saints, Elijah and the fiery chariot for a minute. Sure, we believe they are there. And yes, Sam, Mary too. I know your Church believes the mother of Jesus is in heaven. And I certainly agree. But belief isn’t knowledge. From Scripture, that thief is the only person we know is there besides Jesus.”

Reverend Jacobson chuckles. “He’s got a point Bob.”

“Agreed, Jake” says the priest.

“But ... the patron of hopeless causes...?” Bobby Pretzels asks, his words trailing off.

“Because his life was a walking lost cause,” Reverend Jacobson says, softly.

Billy nods slowly. “Exactly, Paul.”

“How so?” Bullets asks.

“Because, Vince, look at the man’s life. Your Church holds that saints in heaven are those who led holy lives; lives that pointed to Jesus. Yet this man didn’t in any way. And the only way he points to Jesus is; he’s the poster boy for the incredible mercy of God.”

Heads nod all around.

“And consider this, First, this man had to know Jesus, what he stood for, the kind of man he was. And that Jesus was innocent; otherwise, he wouldn’t have berated the other thief. And he had to believe that Jesus had a kingdom beyond this life; ‘remember me when you come into your kingdom,’... the thief’s own words. And I can’t believe all that just came to him in an instant’s revelation while on the cross. No, I contend Dismas knew Jesus, who and what He was.”

An appreciative smile creases John Randall’s face. “Good point.”

“And yet, that didn’t stop him from doing whatever put him on his cross,” Billy continues. “Then, when there was no hope left, he offered the only thing he could ... a heartfelt plea for a simple remembrance. Luke’s story is that hope and trust in Jesus exists right up until one’s last breath.”

“So, you’re saying if anyone exemplifies the mercy of God it’s Dismas ... the name the church gives to the good thief,” Father Bob asks.

“Yes ... and ...?”

... and you have an excellent point. I gotta agree; not that I’m speaking for the Church and removing the venerable Jude from his station, but your point’s well taken.”

The Boys in Black score four runs in the bottom of the second. The key hit is third baseman Manzarek’s home run with two on board. Down by two with seven innings to play.

Krieger retires the side in order in the top of the third.

“Seems St. Jude’s working overtime,” Sam laughs as Billy turns to Bob with a twinkle in his eye. The priest just smiles and winks.

John Randall lifts his soft drink in toast. “So, Billy, next time the Boys are down by five in the bottom of the ninth, I should call on good ole Dismas and they’ll rally” he asks, an impish smile in his eyes.

You never know, John” Billy chuckles ...

“... you never know.”

Two men were crucified with Christ; one perished, don’t assume; one saved, don’t despair.

“This day, you will be with me in paradise.” words someday I want to hear. Pastor Swanson makes a very good point. Dismas, the Good Thief, or ‘the thief who stole heaven,’ is a powerful example that, if only one breath is left in your life, the ability to make one final heartfelt and honest plea for mercy and forgiveness remains. There is always hope ... that’s the nature of God’s infinite mercy.

There is no such thing as a lost cause, at least ...

... not in the heart of God.

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.