

At a certain point in time, cute doesn't work any more; something the pastor is learning the hard way.

UNCLE BUDDY

“Can I get you something else, Father?”

“No, thanks, Sam. I’m just waiting for Father John ... should be along any minute.”

As if on cue, the door opens and in steps Father John, St. Kates’ associate pastor. “Hey Bob, look who I found wandering the streets.”

Rabbi Josh Green peeks out from a big black parka. “Hi, Bob,” he says with a wink

Grinning, Father Bob looks at his associate. “Aye John ... ye be pickin’ up strays again now, arrr ye?” he says in his best mock Irish brogue.

Hanging up his parka, Josh takes a seat across from the priest, laughter and a puzzled look on his face. “Let me guess, that’s either the best Blackbeard the Pirate or the worst St. Patrick I’ve ever heard. I’m stumped, which one?”

Shaking his head, the priest chuckles ...

... and Sam, Rabbi Josh, and Father John all roll their eyes.

... Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. It's mid-morning here at Sam's Bistro. Today it's just the two priests and our friend Rabbi Green. Seems the gang is busy elsewhere.

It's always an interesting morning when just the men of the cloth get together. They enjoy each other's counsel and to a man they'll probably admit they solve more problems in the time they spend together than they do the rest of the day. And their congregations are the better for it. This morning it's Fr. Bob who's working on a problem of his own. And the smile on his face says that he's glad to see his friend the rabbi.

Let's listen in ...

"... me Irish is that bad, huh, Josh, me laddie?" says the older priest with an impish grin.

Josh laughs. "... and your Scottish too ... but don't give up; a little more practice, you'll be coaching 'the Fighting Irish'."

Chuckling, Father Bob motions to Sam. "How about another pot of coffee and a basket of rolls ... or blintzes. You decide, Sam."

"Sure thing fells, coming right up," she says, disappearing into the kitchen.

Rabbi Green leans back in his chair. "Problem, Bob?"

"Yea, kid named Ramsey."

Sam reappears with the coffee and pastries. "Thought you boys looked hungry this morning. And one cup isn't

going to take the chill off. It's gotta be in the teens out there."

"Thanks Sam," Josh says, winking playfully at the tall strawberry blonde. "Anyone tell you that you look like an angel this morning."

"Anyone tell you you're an incorrigible flirt, Rabbi?" Sam says, laughing and returning the wink.

The two priests chuckle. Mornings wouldn't be the same without that harmless bit of flirting.

Sam heads back to the kitchen, and Rabbi Green turns to the priest.

"Ramsey? He the kid on the news last night. Eighteen years old ... stolen cars?"

"One and the same."

"So, what's his prospects?"

"Well, Judge Benson has the case. 'Maximum Bob' they call him ... man's a straight razor totin`judge ... doesn't coddle anyone."

"Tough break," Josh says, breaking a cinnamon roll in half. "Tell me, where do you fit into all this?"

"His mom's a parishioner. Seems the boy's dad died a few years back and she had nowhere else to turn. She asked me if I could be a character witness."

"And you said yes."

“Yea ... felt maybe I could help.” Pausing, the pastor shakes his head. “Actually, he was a good kid till high school. Then his dad died, and he started hanging out with a bad crowd. You can see where it got him.”

“... spending seven to ten with a worse crowd?”

“Yea, you got that right. I talked to Judge Zaleski last night. Benson will take into account character witnesses, and he’ll consider probation for first-time offenders. Especially teenagers. So there is some hope for the kid.”

Sipping his coffee, and looking out the window, Father Bob pauses, an almost faraway look crosses his face. “I figure we can help the kid in the courtroom. But that isn’t my only concern.”

“What is?”

“Why we keep losing these kids? Josh. I mean, this kid, the Barnett girl’s suicide, the kids last year that broke into the drug store. All seemed like good kids. Bored ... a bit rebellious, maybe ... but good kids ... where’d we go wrong?”

Setting his coffee cup down, Rabbi Green gently nods his head. “You might have just hit on part of the problem.”

“How so?”

“You said, ‘bored.’”

“Sure, Josh, but what teenager isn’t bored at some time or another?”

“Well, Bob, bored kids are restless kids, drifting, often without an anchor. And while we think we’re helping, we really aren’t. And we don’t realize it till we turn on the tube and see the Ramsey kid on the six o’clock news.”

“If I’m hearing right, Bob,” Father John says, joining the conversation. “Josh’s saying, we fail in the way we teach these kids. They lose the early foundation we give them, and we don’t replace it. They’re drifting and we just hope they find their own way. I mean, look how we teach kids about Jesus.”

Laughing softly, Josh shakes his head. “Well, not all of us” ...

“Touché,” Father Bob chuckles as Josh winks, an impish grin on his face.

“Go on, John, I’m not sure I follow,” the pastor says, still laughing at the look on his friend’s face.

“Well, when they’re little we give them the children’s picture books. Jesus is tall and handsome and everyone’s smiling and happy, Jesus, the animals, the birds, heck, even the caterpillars. The sky’s blue, the clouds are white and puffy, and Jesus is ‘Uncle Buddy.’”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, for a five-year-old. But, do we ever change that image?”

“Go on,” the pastor says, a nascent look of understanding rising in his eyes.

“Well, there’s a big difference between five and eight. Life today is so much faster, and the Disney version quickly fades. ‘Uncle Buddy’s’ okay for the little ones but that image does nothing for a twelve-year-old whose best friend is pregnant, or her peers are into drugs and stealing.”

“So, what, you saying is we need to rethink how we teach sixth grade?” Father Bob asks.

“Sixth, heck, probably third. Half the eight-year-olds today know a lot of what we were learning as teenagers. And if we don’t start confronting those issues at an earlier age, two things will happen. One, they’ll learn from their peers, who are as ignorant as they are. And two, they’ll tune us out as ... bogus, as my son Matt would say.”

Sipping his coffee, Josh nods in Father John’s direction. “He’s right, Bob. We have the same problem in the synagogue, and I dare say Mike, Martin, ‘Jake’ and the others would probably tell you the same thing. We often don’t talk to our kids, we talk past them.”

“Or behind them,” the pastor adds. “So, what does work?”

“Not feeding them platitudes and sending them off to fend for themselves. The Ramsey kid’s proof of that. We need to stop taking the safe route, pretending the saccharine images of childhood still work. They don’t.

We can't side step the hard issues. We can't talk around sex, divorce, death, loneliness, bullying, rejection; real issues these kids increasingly face."

"And another thing," Josh says, sipping his coffee. "While we disagree on "Who" your 'Carpenter' was, you know I agree on what he was. A man with vision, dedication, and purpose who had enormous respect for himself and others. A strong man, one to be emulated. Maybe you need to emphasize those qualities more in teaching boys and young men. Give them a role model you see from scripture. I try to do it with Moses and the great figures in our faith."

"Good point," Bob says quietly, his brow furrowed in thought.

Smiling, Josh refreshes his cup. "I'd say one thing is for certain ...

"... it can't be done with what John calls, 'Uncle Buddy'."

Pouring old wine into new wineskins doesn't work well. And neither does confronting new challenges with outdated notions. No matter how much we may want our children to remain the little knights and princesses of childhood, to teach them in childish ways is a mistake; often one with tragic consequences. We can't teach the children of the modern world with the elementary notions of the innocent days of yesterday.

We must put away 'Uncle Buddy' and show them an image of strength, self-respect, and self-esteem. And that the evil people inflict on others, and on themselves, is a

result of not living up to that image. We must anchor their hopes, desires, and dreams in the image of the strength and goodness the Creator instilled in them; an image we must constantly reinforce as children grow through their formative years. For their sakes

... and for ours.

Thinkaboutit.... I'm Tony Baggz.

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