

BUSYBODIES

Legendary jazz musician Cab Calloway died in 1994. People who knew him describe him as a man of dignity and humor. One night at Birdland, the legendary jazz bar, Cab was introducing a promising young saxophone player. As the sax player finished his set, a self-appointed jazz critic came over to him and said, in front of Cab, "You aren't that good, man. All you can do is play like Charlie Parker." Cab took the young man's sax and handed it over to the critic. "Here," he said, "you play it like Charlie Parker."

Isn't it true that whenever you are trying to do something significant, somebody comes around to criticize? Busybodies, the world is full of them. Well-known columnist James J. Kilpatrick bought a computer program that not only could scan his copy for errors, but could also tell him about grammar, usage, style and punctuation. In short, the computer could tell Kilpatrick the difference between good writing and bad. Just for fun he fed it some of his own copy and the machine promptly told him he was a lousy writer. Then Kilpatrick tried Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The computer informed him that Abe's writing style was very weak because he was wordy and used too much of the passive voice. It also observed that Lincoln used too many adjectives, that most of his sentences contained multiple clauses and that he should try to write more simply.

Even computers are becoming busybodies. Critics are everywhere. Anybody who tries to do anything significant in the world is going to have someone there telling him that he should have done it differently. As Yogi Berra once said: "Anyone who is popular is bound to be disliked." Jesus healed a woman with a bad back. She had been bent over for eighteen years, unable to straighten herself up. Jesus saw her, had compassion for her, and healed her. THAT'S WHAT JESUS DOES. He heals people. He heals them spiritually, he heals them emotionally and occasionally, he heals them physically.

Two thousand years ago, there were no doctors to perform radical procedures like heart transplants and back surgeries. But there was still help. Jesus was there. And Jesus heals people. He healed people then and he heals people now.

The University Of Arizona College Of Medicine in Tucson now has a program which they call "Integrative Medicine." It is a program designed to study and apply alternative forms of medicine. Among the forms of alternative medicine which the college employs is prayer. In scientific studies prayer has been shown to lower blood pressure. Even more impressively, religious folks have been found to live longer than agnostics and atheists. One recent study has shown that heart patients are

less likely to die when designated family members pray for them, even when these heart patients do not realize they are being prayed for.

We are glad that medical science is finally catching on to what you and I have known all our lives. Jesus heals people. He heals them spiritually, he heals them emotionally and occasionally, he heals them physically. That's what Jesus does. But still there are critics.

There was a critic present when Jesus healed this woman with the bad back. The leader of the synagogue where Jesus was teaching that day was "moved to indignation" because Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. "There are six days in which men ought to work," this ecclesiastical busybody said. "Come and be healed on any of those days, but not on the Sabbath."

The leader of the synagogue was upset because Jesus was breaking the rules. "We have a rule, no healing on the Sabbath." Have you ever noticed how many stupid things are done because there are rules?

Greyhound bus lines had a rule: no pets on their buses. And so late one night at a rural truck stop in Florida a Greyhound driver kicked an 80 year-old woman off his bus. Her crime? She was returning home from her birthday party with her present: a tiny puppy named Cookie. Dogs aren't allowed on greyhound buses and the driver refused to make an exception, leaving this poor elderly woman about 80 miles from home at 3 in the morning. Can't you hear the bus driver justifying his actions? "We have a rule. We have a rule." A security guard summoned by the bus driver called sheriff's deputies to escort her away adding to this poor woman's fright. "When the bus pulled away and I saw all those policemen I was scared," she said. "I thought they were going to put me in jail. I don't know, I was crazy with fear. I've never gone to jail."

What could have quickly become a terrifying ordeal for the woman, who walks with a crutch and has trouble hearing and seeing, instead became an inspiration. After getting her a sandwich and something to drink, police from five different jurisdictions teamed up to ferry her home.

I've never seen so many people so nice to an old lady, she said. They gave me love, respect, and attention. Love has a lot of names, she continued, compassion, respect, and friendliness. Greyhound apologized and gave her a refund. The unidentified driver, a 20 year veteran, was suspended. Greyhound had a rule. The religious leaders of Jesus' time also had rules.

In performing this miracle Jesus established a principle that needs to be engraved on your heart and mine: RULES AND REGULATIONS ARE IMPORTANT. BUT THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY MATTERS TO GOD IS PEOPLE. Do you hear what I am saying? It is the message of the

Gospel. The only thing God really cares about is people. Not rules. Not laws. People. The reason God gave us laws was for our benefit. This is the way to live life to the fullest, follow these rules. But what if we break one of the rules? What if we do something downright stupid? It's not the end of the world. We may pay for our misdoing. There is a law that says we shall reap what we sow. Still, it is not the end of the world. There is hope. There is forgiveness.

Psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp says that one of the greatest challenges of his profession is to help people overcome their fears. Only then can a person realize his or her true potential. Kopp cherishes a story from his father's childhood that illustrates how unreasonable fears overwhelm us at times. Kopp's father grew up in desperate poverty in the heart of New York City. As a boy, he would often hang around the docks and throw stones at the coal barges that sailed in and out of the harbor. To drive him away, the men on the barges threw pieces of coal at the boy.

By collecting these pieces of coal, the little boy helped his family to heat their home in the winter. One day, the boy's mother gave him a nickel and sent him to the day old bakery to buy some bread. The bread only cost two cents, so she expected her son to bring back exactly three cents in change. It was a cold winter day, and the boy was clad only in a threadbare sweater with six pockets. He walked the long route to the bakery and bought his two cents' worth of bread, then made the long trip back in the cold. As the boy neared home, he began to worry about those three pennies in change. If he lost even one penny, he would be in for a beating. So he reached into one of the six pockets and fished around for the change. It wasn't there.

Frantically, he reached into four of his other pockets. No pennies anywhere. He had only one other pocket to check. But he couldn't bring himself to reach into that last pocket. He just couldn't confront his awful fear that he had lost the three pennies. So Sheldon Kopp's father sat out on his front porch for hours in the cold. If he looked in his one remaining pocket, he feared discovering that the money was gone. If he went inside, he feared facing his parents and their anger. So he sat outside in the numbing cold, paralyzed by competing fears he just couldn't bring himself to face.

Somehow that young fellow didn't realize that his parents' love for him was much greater than their love for money. Their love for him was even greater than the principle of being responsible. Their love for him was greater than his tiny heart and mind could imagine. He need not sit out there in the cold regardless of his crime. There was warmth, the warmth of love and forgiveness in his parents' house.

That is a lesson that we all need to learn, isn't it? Jesus broke the rules. He healed a woman on the Sabbath. Jesus wanted us to see that God's love for his children is greater than his adherence to

rules and laws. We need no longer sit out in the cold dark night of fear. God's love is greater than all our sin. All that matters to God is that we come home to him.