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September 3, 2006
10th after Pentecost
Romans 13: 8 – 10
Luke 10: 25 – 37

Life Changing Questions: “What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal Life?”

A little girl was distraught that her cat had been hit by a car and killed. Her mother, seeking to console her, said, “Well, honey, at least you know that your cat is now with God.”

The girl screwed up her face, thought for a second, and said, “I don't think so. What would God want with a dead cat?”¹ (Here's a girl who isn't going to blame God for a dead cat!)²

Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe* tells the story of how the carefree college life of 19-year old Ian Bedloe is suddenly transformed by the deaths of his brother and sister-in-law.

Struggling with the guilt he feels about these two deaths, Ian wanders into a little storefront church called “The Church of the Second Chance.”

After the folksy Wednesday night prayer meeting is over, Ian confronts the minister and explains the reasons for his guilt and anguish. He then confidently asks the Reverend Emmett, “Don't you think I'm forgiven?” “Goodness, no,” Reverend Emmett says briskly.

When Ian protests that “God forgives everything,” the Reverend Emmett gives this counsel:

“God does,” Reverend Emmett says. “But you can't just say ‘I'm sorry, God.’ Why anyone could do that much! You have to offer reparation - concrete, practical reparation, according to the rules of our church.”

“But what if there isn't any reparation. What if it's something nothing will fix?” “Well, that's where Jesus comes in; of course...Jesus remembers how difficult life on earth can be...He helps with what you can't undo. But only after

you've tried to undo it.” Ian protests against this idea and especially against the Reverend Emmett's specific suggestion that he should take it upon himself to raise his brother's three orphaned children.

Panicked, Ian asks, “What kind of a cockeyed religion is this?”

“It's the religion of atonement and complete forgiveness,” Reverend Emmett says. “It's the religion of the Second Chance.”²

Ian doesn't realize it, but the real question he is asking is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Eternal Life is God's Second Chance!

A very faithful man asks of Jesus this very same question because he too is on the same quest. He's looking for a second chance.

A young lawyer who has the economic means and stability to adhere to the letter of the law still feels there is something missing, that there must be something more to life.

He is able to recite to Jesus what is written, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul. And your neighbor as yourself.*” “Right answer!” says Jesus, “Do this and you shall live.” End of story. Not quite. I imagine he was accustomed to opening up his checkbook and writing out donations for charitable causes, for projects around the Temple in Jerusalem or the home synagogue.

He most likely sat on the board of one or more community agencies; and undoubtedly belonged to a professional association or business club—all of which furthered the general civic welfare through support of worthy causes.

He'd be a busy man. In a law practice, time is most certainly money. But because he was busy attending to business, he could in turn make sizeable charitable donations.

He had a life. A very nice self-contained, orderly, serene, and largely untroubled existence walled off from the troubles that plague folks of lesser means.

Only something clearly nagged at him. Nagged at him enough that he had to try and shake it off—he felt a keen need to *justify*

¹ -- Kiester, Minnesota, *Courier Sentinel*

² -Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 122-24.

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himself. Why does he feel the need to justify himself?

Generally we feel the need to justify ourselves because of a guilty conscience. He feels guilty. Because he is a conscientious person he knows he's skating. And so seeking to rationalize he asks Jesus, in essence, "What does it mean for me to be a neighbor?"

And Jesus tells him the story of a guy who is considered by the religious and cultural norms of the day to be anything but a righteous man—actually a heretic and a foreigner, BUT a man who does the will of God even as those who proclaim to be good God fearing folks—even pastors—pass by the poor man on the road.

That much we know by heart. But there's more. He's a man of some means. Like us. The fact that he is riding on a donkey instead of walking tells us that. Only the well off could afford his own transportation or would be so well supplied with oil and wine. A man not unlike the lawyer: a man with a comfortable and affluent lifestyle, a schedule, a business. Only this man isn't just making out checks, is he?

No he's stopping in the middle of a hostile country to help someone who would just as surely spit on him as look at him. He not only stops, he himself bandages the man's wounds, lifts him onto his own mount and takes him to an inn. An inn where he would probably not be an appreciated guest except for the silver he'd spend there.

At the inn he not only provides funds to cover the expense of caring for the beaten man; he basically gives the inn keeper a blank check saying, "Whatever more you spend I will repay you." That kind of offer doesn't come with one eye on the check book or credit card statement, does it?

What's the difference between the lawyer and the Samaritan? Not economic status. Not the importance of a busy schedule or a comfortable lifestyle. Not a desire to help others. Not a lack of a generosity.

The big difference lies between thinking one must achieve something in order to have it and *being* something.

The lawyer was doing all the right things but not being the right thing: a doer of the law. While the Samaritan who was not any of these things, nevertheless embodied the law. He lived it. He WAS it.

If the answer to the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life is "Love your neighbor as yourself," then this labor of love is an example of what it means to inherit eternal life—not earn it—inherit it.

And inheritance, remember, is a gift.

This is an article from Sports Illustrated, by Rick Reilly, titled, *Strongest Dad in the World*.

The journalist writes, "I try to be a good father. Give my kids mulligans. Work nights to pay for their text messaging. Take them to swimsuit shoots. But compared with Dick Hoyt, I suck.

Eighty-five times he's pushed his disabled son, Rick, 26.2 miles in marathons. Eight times he's not only pushed him 26.2 miles in a wheelchair but also towed him 2.4 miles in a dingy while swimming and pedaled him 112 miles in a seat on the handlebars—all in the same day.

Dick's also pulled him cross-country skiing, taken him on his back mountain climbing. Makes taking your son bowling look a little lame, right? And what has Rick done for his father? Not much—except save his life.

This love story began in Winchester, Massachusetts, 43 years ago, when Rick was strangled by the umbilical cord during birth, leaving him brain-damaged and unable to control his limbs. "He'll be a vegetable the rest of his life," doctors told Dick and his wife Judy, when Rick was nine months old. "Put him in an institution." But the Hoyts weren't buying that. They noticed the way Rick's eyes followed them around the room.

When Rick was 11 they took him to an engineering department at Tufts University and asked if there was anything to help the boy

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communicate. "No way," Dick says he was told, "There's nothing going on in his brain." "Tell him a joke," Dick countered. They did. Rick laughed.

Turns out a lot was going on in his brain. Rigged up with a computer that allowed him to control the cursor by touching a switch with the side of his head, Rick was finally able to communicate. His first words? Not "Hi Mom!" or "Hi Dad!" but "Go Bruins!"

And after a high school classmate was paralyzed in an accident and the school organized a charity run for him, Rick pecked out on his computer, "Dad, I want to do that."

"Yeah, right." How was Dick, a self-described 'porker' who never ran more than a mile at a time, going to push his son five miles? Still, he tried. "Then it was me who was handicapped," Dick says. "I was sore for two weeks."

That day changed Rick's life. "Dad," he typed, "when we were running, it felt like I wasn't disabled anymore!"

And that sentence changed Dick's life. He became committed to giving Rick that feeling as often as he could. He got into such hard-belly shape that he and Rick were ready to try the 1979 Boston Marathon.

"No way!" Dick was told by a race official. The Hoyts weren't quite a single runner, and they weren't quite a wheelchair competitor. For a few years Dick and Rick just joined the massive field and ran anyway. Then they found a way to get into the race officially: In 1983 they ran another marathon so fast they made the qualifying time for the Boston Marathon the following year.

Then somebody said, "Hey, Dick why not a triathlon?" How's a guy who never learned to swim and hadn't ridden a bike since he was six going to haul his 110 pound kid through a triathlon? Still, Dick tried.

Now they've done 212 triathlons, including four grueling 15 Ironmans in Hawaii. It must be a buzz kill to be a 25 year old stud getting passed by an old guy towing a grown man in a dinghy, don't you think?

Hey, Dick, why not see how you'd do on your own? "No way," he says. Dick does it purely for "the awesome feeling" he gets seeing Rick with a cantaloupe smile as they run, swim and ride together.

This year, at ages 65 and 43, Dick and Rick finished their 24th Boston Marathon, in 5,083rd place out of more than 20,000 starters. Their best time? Two hours, 40 minutes in 1993—only 35 minutes off the world record, which, in case you don't keep track of these things, happens to be held by a guy who was not pushing another man in a wheelchair at the time. "No question about it," Rick types, "My Dad is the Father of the Century."

And Dick got something else out of all this too. Two years ago he had a mild heart attack—his arteries were 95% clogged. "If you hadn't been in such great shape," one doctor told him, "you probably would've died 15 years ago."

So in a way, Dick and Rick saved each other's lives. Rick says, "The thing I'd most like, is that my dad sit in the chair and I push him once."

Dick wasn't aware of it at the time but his son Rick was his second chance—his opportunity to be born again and enter into the new life of living out God's love in the world--at its deepest level—by laying down ones life for another. In the process of "losing his life," he found abundant life—physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally. Just as Jesus teaches us. What must one do to inherit eternal life? Enter into it. It's free for the taking!