

Luke 10:25-37
Arms Length, or Arms Embrace
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Back in 2015 the Toronto Blue Jays were playing the Texas Rangers in the divisional playoff series. The game was tied 2-2 in the 7th inning, and Texas had a runner on third. The pitcher had just thrown a pitch which the batter watched go by. When the catcher threw the ball back to the pitcher, he actually threw the ball into the batter's bat, causing the ball to bounce into the field of play. The runner on third knew what this meant, the ball was in play, and wisely ran home to score the go-ahead run. Only the keenest of baseball experts would know Rule 6.03 that states that this was in fact a live play.

But there are always rules experts around.

Today Jesus encounters a real rules expert. Now this man was not a lawyer in the way we use the word. This was a religious man, schooled in the traditions of Jewish legal code (Torah, Talmud, Mishnah). This is a man with a bright mind, a keen observer, and he has some questions for Jesus. So, while Jesus is among his disciples he stands up with this question: what must **I do** to inherit eternal life?

There are two types of people who ask this question. First are the honest questioners, those who struggle with doubt and curiosity about faith. This person would love nothing more than to have their minds be changed because, after all, doubt is just the other side of faith.

The other type is the category this lawyer falls into, the spiritually certain. This guy is not really searching, he's actually not even really all that concerned with the question itself. He is someone who likes to engage in arguments about the rules for the sake of arguments. This guy knows the answer, it doesn't take him but a moment to rattle off the answer to Jesus' question. And for the onlookers, he must have appeared as someone who took this stuff seriously.

Those who are devoted followers of Jesus who want to live our lives of faith publicly, need to be cautious about a very slippery slope that can lead to a precipitous pitfall. Knowing about faith is not the same as living with faith. Knowing about God, is not the same as placing about trust in God and letting Christ shape our lives.

This man likes to engage in endless arguments because this was the best way to keep the Lord Jesus at arm's length. But all the arguments do is become more like an alibi he uses to keep Jesus from seeing the woundedness and fear living in his own soul. So he keeps Jesus at a comfortable distance.

What shall **I do** to inherit eternal life?

I think this young lawyer is experiencing much more of an existential crisis that we may realize. Here is this man Jesus who he has observed from afar, probably for some time now. The people flock to him, he speaks about this totally revolutionary concept called the Kingdom of God—and how it's not far off but right here. This man, Jesus has the ability to captivate people with his eyes and his word. What if he is right?

If he's right, then I can't keep up as a self-confident theologian who can talk a big scripture game, but ignores the needs of others. Nor can I continue to be like my buddy the rich young ruler who uses his wealth to insulate himself from the needs of the poor and outcast. If he's right, if this is true, and if he is who people say he is, and who he says he is, my little act is over.

But if I can muddy the waters, or confuse the conversation in such a way with philosophical and rhetorical tricks, so as to distract him from what's really going on, then perhaps I can get him to drop the issue and concede: this is a thoughtful religious person.

There's this wonderful song by Emmylou Harris, Amy introduced it to me, called Jerusalem Tomorrow. In a slightly different way it brings the audience to this crossroads with Jesus. Listen.

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

What is written in the Law?

I envision the lawyer in a moment remembering all of those memory verses from his youth, immediately flooding back to his consciousness. The Lord is my Shepherd; Hear O Israel the Lord is God, the Lord is one; God is our refuge and strength. And in an instant this young man is able to give the right answer.

And Jesus said: "do this and you will live."

But do was not the verb he was looking for. What he was hoping for was something that required a little less. *Believe* maybe, or "know this and you will live." But not "do." "Do" seems too easy, too simple. After all, I'm a man who has studied the scriptures backwards and forward, it can't be that simple can it? Everyday life, neighbors, friends, co-workers, teachers, the insignificant, the overlooked, alien, undocumented? Do this? It can't be so cut and dry can it? Jesus, I don't think you don't realize how complex and multi-layered these relationships are. I don't think you realize the economic burden or political risk "do this" carries with it.

Parsing what Jesus says down to the microscopic level is a great way to push God away and keep him at a distance. But the savior who was outstretched for you on the cross was not pushing you away, but opening his arms of love to draw us in closer, the ultimate "do this" moment.

This lawyer is disappointed by the simplicity and straightforwardness of Jesus' response to him. Spiritual things can't be this simple that they should have to do with everyday life. But he still has one more rhetorical trick in his bag. Even as the penetrating Word of God gets closer and closer to his heart, he sidesteps by asking: "And who is my neighbor?" As long as it is unclear who exactly his neighbor is he will not be obliged to practice love. How can I love when I don't know whom I am supposed to love.

Jesus tells a story of a man going down to Jericho who is robbed and beaten and left for dead. Literally helpless, entirely dependent upon neighbor. He continues with verse 31: **Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.**

Here two religious men, the Priest who held the highest place in the Temple, and the Levite, who was his assistant, pass by this man...on the other side of the road.

Now it's possible that these men were on the road up to Jerusalem for their two-week duty, before returning home to Jericho—where many first century priests lived. One commentator by the name of Kenneth Bailey, suggests this that it may not have been a callous lack of sympathy that caused them to pass by.

The Priest had a special problem. The wounded man beside the road was unconscious and stripped. If the victim was a fellow Jew, and especially a law-abiding Jew, the priest would have been responsible to reach out and help him. But the victim was unconscious so there was no way to know. The wounded man might also have been dead. If so the priest who approached him would become ceremonially defiled, and if defiled he would need to return to Jerusalem to undergo a week-long process of ceremonial purification. It would take time to arrange such things. Meanwhile, he could not eat from the tithes or even collect them. The same ban would apply to his family and servants. Distribution to the poor would also have been impossible. What's more the victim on the road might have been Egyptian, Greek, Syrian, or Phoenician, in which case the Priest was not responsible under the law to do anything. If the priest approached the beaten man and touched him and the man later died, the priest would have been obliged to rend his robes, and in so doing would have violated laws against the destruction of valuable property. The poor priest did not have an easy time determining what was his duty.

The Levite also passed by. He may have been on his way to give a lecture on brotherly love that evening in Jericho. Thinking to himself for a moment he may have calculated the cost benefit of stopping to help this one man, over the training of a society of Good Samaritans. Ergo, the math proves the case. One writer puts it this way: "the devil is always a good mathematician."

The third man who passes by is the Samaritan, the despised, half-breed, traitor, cousin of the Jews. And we all know that the hero of this parable is this Samaritan. But I want to make a careful distinction here as to why he is a hero. You see we're tempted to think that what Jesus is saying is that the Samaritan is a hero because he correctly identified who the neighbor is, it's the man in the ditch. Now if I help him and provide for his care, I will have sufficiently kept the law.

But this is not what Jesus says.

Instead, Jesus turns things around and asks, "Now, which of the three passersby acted as a neighbor *to* the mugging victim?" This is a subtle shift in emphasis, but it makes all the difference! You see, we tend to think like this lawyer: we think that what we need to do is scan the society around us to see who out there counts as my neighbor. But here Jesus says that figuring that out is less important than making sure that you yourself act as a neighbor to everyone you meet. Who those other folks out in society are, how they treat you, what they look like, whether or not they seem like folks with whom you have some stuff in common is not nearly so important as making sure that whoever *they* are, *you* are *their* neighbor.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. In the end Jesus says, "Nevermind that: are you a neighbor?"

We love Mr. Rogers in our family, especially me. And at the end of his song, as he's tossing his tennis shoes up in the air he says: "Won't you please, please won't you please, please won't you be my neighbor."

I think that's what Jesus is saying as well, please won't you be a neighbor.