Crossing the Road

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As it's already been stated this week, tens of thousands of people are affected by the wildfires and what's going on right now in the greater Spokane area. But far beyond that, there are fires. My wife and I looked at a map of our country right now, and even in Canada, and the whole thing is just red. It looks like everything's on fire. So it's not just our neighbors that have lost things. It's some of us. It's some people that we know well. And families have nothing to go back to.

Here's something strange about this that came into my mind. We've talked about this ad nauseam for quite a while—that we've never been more divided as a country, and we're continuing to push in opposite directions. And I'm actually kind of sick of hearing it, mostly because a lot of the hostility has actually come from within people that are self-professed Christians, followers of Jesus. And we fight and we justify and we argue over things that really don't matter at all—and the things that we were never supposed to fight about in the first place. It gets into our families and it gets into our communities and it creates division.

And I think we have a beautiful way forward, and it's right on our doorstep right now—a way to tear down the wall of hostility that sometimes gets built up. We've been asking in our church what it means to be a people of presence. This is our vision statement. What it means to be present with God, present with each other—which is what we just finished last week—and now we are starting what it means to be present in a community. And no better time than now to actually start this conversation.

It raises a question, though. What is our community?

It wasn't a rhetorical question. Is it Post Falls? We're in Post Falls right now. That's our community, right?

[Audience response]

Part of it. I like that. Coeur d'Alene, Kootenai County. But we draw the line at the state. We went over this last week. This is very serious, right? That's where our community for sure ends. And if you live on that side—welcome to the side with salvation on our side, right?

[Laughter]

We laugh. We laugh because why? Because it's true. This is how we act. These are things that we subconsciously—we laugh about it, but we kind of believe it. At least it's part of the culture, even if it isn't our individual beliefs. Who exactly is our community?

Jesus was asked a version of that question once. It's a religious man who wanted to know exactly how much love was required of him—where he could draw the line. It wasn't just a state line.

Whether or not you've spent much time in church, you've at least heard the term Good Samaritan. Well, we're well aware of this term because people have taken it and made names of hospitals and charities—or in some unfortunate cases, lawyers' offices. And we take it and we put this name on things, and we have this belief of what it actually is in the first place. And I think we're set at a huge disadvantage of what actually is taking place in this story. This is the danger: that we think we understand what it means to be a good Samaritan. We understand what it means to give and to help somebody out.

And we're going to read this story today. We're going to spend our whole time in this text today. It's found in Luke chapter 10. I'll have the ending verses up here, but we're going to start in verse 25. And it says this:

> *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.*

First off—huge mistake. Right? This never ends well for the people that are coming up to test him. This is like a welterweight stepping in the ring with Mike Tyson. You're just like, I don't think I want to watch this. Right? It's about to get real messy.

And he comes in here and he says, "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And I want to say, first off, that the text indicates that he's not actually asking that question. He's not actually really wanting to know what that is. What he's wanting to know is he's testing Jesus on something, right? This expert in the law was wanting to know how to get an A. He was wanting to know how to achieve something. But he's testing Jesus. I was more of a C student, so I don't like him already. But he wants to check off this list.

Okay, so for a minute here—what would we say to this? What must I do to inherit eternal life? What's our response to that?

[Audience response]

Believe in Jesus and everything is going to be okay, right? That's the perfect response. And follow him. Thank you, Mom. We say this. We say, believe in Jesus, everything else—blah, blah, blah. You know, it doesn't really matter.

> *"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

The expert of the law says this. He answered:

> *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Believe in Jesus right there. Kind of. He's quoting two different sections here. He quotes from another section of the Torah, and he says a second thing: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Those are the two things you need to do.

Jesus goes, "Perfect." He does exactly—we said exactly what we needed to say. He goes, "Perfect. Go and do this and you will live."

And I can see this moment—Jesus just turning to walk away. He's such a setup. Why do you do this, Jesus? Because we have the same response, right? We love God, we love our neighbors—even the stinky ones, right? Maybe. We say that, and we actually believe it about ourselves, and then we move on with our day.

But the religious leader—I think he's better than me, by the way. I think he's better than this—but he says, the text says this: he wanted to justify himself, because he realizes that that's such a cheap cop-out. You say you believe Jesus, and you want him for eternal life—you want that—but let's show some action to that, right? There needs to be something behind that. You can't just say that. He recognizes this. Probably better than I do.

He wanted to justify himself, and so he asked Jesus. He says the question. He goes, "And who is my neighbor?"

It's a really quick question, and it's a fair question. Because here's the reality that you and I both know: we all have limits, right? There's only a certain amount of time in the day. There's only a certain amount of energy that you have before you're out. You've got nothing left to give. And so we've got to draw the line somewhere. This is what this man is asking. Where do I draw the line? You can't help everybody. There's seven billion people on the planet. You can't be responsible for all of them. That's not selfish. If you try to do that, that math isn't right. It doesn't work like that. And not even Jesus helped everybody. People were disappointed in him because he didn't help them. We don't like that, Jesus.

But what Luke says here is critical about what the expert in the law is after. He doesn't say that he asked for clarification, like, "Oh, what does that mean?" He says, no—he wanted to justify himself. That term justify—it literally means I want to make myself feel better or feel in the right, okay? Because something is making me feel like that's not the case right now. He's not looking for clarity. He's looking for permission to draw a line. And we all do this.

It's like when your guilty conscience rises up. It's when you know you should be doing something, and what do we do? We go to our bedside, and we take the chloroform, and we just want to put that thing to bed, right? Because our conscience—it can nag at you, and it can be overwhelming, and it doesn't feel good, does it? To feel guilty.

[Audience response]

One person agrees. Yeah, that's good.

We know what our version of this line actually looks like. Everybody has it. We have to draw the line somewhere. But we typically do this. We typically try to quell that guilty conscience by adding things to our life. We look busy for Jesus, right? We go to church, we pay our tithes, we do all those things—please keep doing those. They're helping, okay? Not knocking them. We read our Bible. But we want some sort of moralistic virtue list that can make ourselves feel better and silence that guilty conscience.

And he wants a straightforward answer. He wants Jesus to draw the line, and he knows what the law looks like. He knows what the law looks like far better than you and I ever will. He knows it like the back of his hand, okay? This is an expert in that thing. That means they probably had it memorized word for word. Anybody have the Torah memorized? No? Okay. Weird. But Jesus is the maker of that hand and the law, and he's about to prove to him that that's the case.

Jesus doesn't respond with a straightforward answer like he wants. He responds with a story.

Now, this story—scholars kind of argue about this or have different interpretations of this—but many of them believe that the parable of the Good Samaritan, or what we call a parable, is actually a true story that's been told over and over and over again within their culture. But whether or not that's true or not, the point that Jesus is making does not change either way. And he tells this story.

Jesus replied to him and said:

> *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.*

Now, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is a 3,500-foot elevation drop. Okay? Changes. It's through 18 miles of winding roads, and it goes around a corner really fast. My wife and I went backpacking in Glacier National Park, and we went up to this—second highest bear density in North America, by the way. It has super windy trails, and we kept thinking we should probably just turn back because we're going to come around a corner and there's going to be a bear right there. And it zigzags. But this is the reality that they're going. It zigzags through the hills, and this is where robbers would actually sit and pounce on victims. They would rob them, they would beat them, and most of the time they would kill them. It actually earned the nickname "the Way of Blood" because it was incredibly dangerous.

So this man is there bleeding beside this road, and then Jesus continues the story, and he says:

> *A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

But perfect situation, right? A religious person who believes in God, who wants to help people, by the way, is coming down this road and they're here to save the day. They walk on the other side of the road.

And I want to say this: it's super easy to criticize the priest and the Levite. It's super easy to look at that—how could you do this? Before we go there, here's a little bit of a backstory. Here's a little bit of the history actually behind a priest and a Levite, and they're walking on that.

They would work for one to two weeks. Most people think it was a one-week stint at Jerusalem at the temple, and then they would go home to Jericho, 18 miles away. They worked on a one-week rotation, and they came home with their pay at the end of their rotation. But it wasn't a check deposited to their bank. Do you know what the priests and Levites were paid with?

[Audience response]

They're paid with animals—that's right—and grain offerings, right? A lot of times they had this through the sacrifices, and these were considered clean to them, okay, after the sacrifice.

Now, if anything were to come into contact with their food—this is food for their family, by the way. This is not like money for the weekend, right? In Leviticus 21—now we know Leviticus 21 as a denomination better than any other denomination. It's where certain foods are clean and unclean, but we only like to follow part of that, you know, the kosher diet. But there's additional things in there: that if anything dead were to come into contact with that food, or anything dead were to come into contact with you, you would become unclean. And for them, this meant that they would have to go through a ritualistic cleansing process—super inconvenient—and they would have to throw all that food out. What does your family eat? Food? What food? It's gone.

So if we look at their lives—and it's super easy to criticize—but this is not a ruined grocery store trip. This is an entire week setback for them. They're coming off a stint at work. They're probably exhausted. They're on a super dangerous road. And by the way, sometimes they would set up traps like that. If somebody is wounded, and when the people come to help the wounded person, they rob the next person. They would leave them alive for that purpose. Super dangerous.

And there's another guy on the side of this road that's dying. And you could imagine what goes through this person's head—and it's the same thing that other people do, not us. This guy is basically dead already, right? Right? If you stop, our food for our family is going to be spoiled. And so at best, what do we do? We say a prayer for them, right? It's important. Should pray for them. We look the other way and mutter something about "God be with that person," and we say it under our breath because we've got things to do. We've got people that are relying on us, right?

Or at worst—we watch the news or a story about other people, and we vampirically feed on the benevolence of another person. We see somebody else doing the thing that we know that we should, and we actually feel good over that.

Now I want to ask us for a moment: was it wrong that the priest and Levite left that man?

[Audience response]

Thank you. Yes. Yes, of course it's wrong. Right? But why did that take so long to answer for us? They were wrong, but we can identify with the priest and Levite a little bit, right? I know I identify with them—far more than the Good Samaritan, by the way.

Jonathan Edwards, in a sermon on this—he was a pastor in the 1700s—and he writes this. He says:

> *The Christian spirit will make us apt to sympathize with our neighbor when we see him under any difficulty. We ought to have such a spirit of love to him that we should be afflicted with his afflictions.*

That means we feel when somebody else is going through something—even a stranger. We actually go into that, adopting that person's pain and suffering into our own lives. He then says that if we aren't willing to do this, we reveal where our heart is—that Jesus has got some work to do in my heart.

There are some unhelpful situations. It's true. But sometimes—what are we really saying when we say we can't help someone? I think it's the same thing as the priest and the Levite. Jonathan Edwards kind of summarizes it. He says: if I can't help someone without burdening myself or affecting a small or large part of my way of life—that's what I really mean—is that I can't help this person without it affecting me. And so I walk away. I walk to the other side of the road.

I had a professor at Walla Walla University. And some of his parting words with us when we were seniors—he made us all be quiet and sit there, and he looked at us with these eyes of wisdom. And he goes, "I look at you all not as my students but my colleagues now. I want you to hear something: ministry is seldom convenient."

And I have never forgotten those words. And more true things have not come true in my own life—that it's the worst time when you have to go do something at your own expense to help somebody else.

Jesus goes on in the story and he says:

> *But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."*

And then he says this. Now, this is the end of the story.

Now, Jews and Samaritans—if you aren't familiar—did not have a good relationship with each other. In fact, Samaritans were like these other people. They hated each other, okay? There were wars even between them, and the hostility was—they didn't even look at Samaritans as real people. And so when Jesus is telling the story, you can imagine the expert in the law—I almost imagine him like gritting his teeth—when Jesus asked this question. He goes:

> *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

He makes him answer that. Why you got to be like that, Jesus?

And the expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Do you know what nationality the man in the road was in the story?

[Audience response]

My new friend—thank you. He was a Jew. Who is he telling the story to? He's telling it to Jews. As if to say: put yourself in the shoes of that person on the road. Do you care about all the afflictions and the hardship and the divisions between your country—the Samaritans and the Jew? At some point, you're just like, won't anybody help me? You don't care if they are unclean people or even one of "those" people, right?

Tim Keller in his book—he talks about this, Generous Justice—and he says:

> *We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. We do it for people like us and for people whom we like. And Jesus will have none of that.*

I tend to go to people of my social class, of my whatever it is, and that's the people I really want to help out in life because that's the people I relate with best, right? And Jesus is making the point that we can't have this anymore. This is not how the world works, and this is not how we should work. This is not how my kingdom worked. Jesus came and he died for every single human soul that has ever walked this planet.

Now, I know some of you are feeling this right now. I can feel it in the room. Some of you are thinking, well, I didn't come here for a guilt trip, Pastor Jake, right? And here's the thing—well, first off, if you're feeling guilty, well, praise God, all right. People have used guilt, I think, to manipulate and to coerce us to do something that we don't want to do. But guilt sometimes is what pain is to our body. It's telling us that something's wrong. Guilt isn't always bad. Shame is. Shame tells you, "I'm a bad person." Guilt tells you something is wrong in my life, and maybe I need to look at that. Jesus did this a lot to people, by the way.

But he's not trying to manipulate anybody. You know what Jesus is trying to do? He's trying to set you free. We think that this is about helping somebody else, but Jesus is, in fact, trying to set the very teacher of the law that's coming to him with the question free. He's trying to do it for him. He's trying to do that for me. As if to say that we think

that by going on our normal route and our normal work week and doing our thing and building our little kingdom and even providing for our family—all those are important things—but that is not what is going to give you the life that you're looking for. But to sacrifice yourself at your own cost for the cost of somebody else who truly needs it? Because that's what life is. That's what I came here for. That's what my whole purpose in living and coming to this world was—to sacrifice—because I realized that this is actually what gives me life as God himself.

You really want life? Go and lay it down for someone else. Give it away.

In 2005, there was Operation Red Wings, and Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell was severely wounded. His whole squad was already killed, and he was crawling and walking more than seven miles through the mountains of Afghanistan. He was found by a villager, and the villager actually ended up taking him to his home and rescuing him from the Taliban. He claimed a 2,000-year-old code that they lived by and required protection for anyone that was in need—including their enemies.

This man—his name was Gulab—and he took Luttrell into his home at an intense personal risk to himself. The Taliban knew he was in there. They threatened Gulab repeatedly, but he stood his ground, and the community came to Gulab's aid. They defended this American that was in their country, and they saved him even from death threats. And the death threats—after the American left—the death threats continued, and his life was almost taken multiple times until he moved to the U.S.

And I remember watching this movie right when it came out with a friend of mine. He was in the military, and we're sitting there watching it, and I remember looking over at him—and we were trying to be like tough guys in the moment watching a tough guy movie—and I remember looking over at him and both of us are just sobbing. There's one moment in the movie where Marcus Luttrell looks at this man and he goes, "Why are you doing this for me?" I think the movie took some liberties that weren't actually there, but I still think the story remains the same. A man took on great risk to save somebody else.

You know what that's like. In the sense of—you know when someone is helping you with an ulterior motive? You ever been helped by someone who's just trying to help you to get at something else? We all know that. What happens when somebody helps you and you know it came at a great cost to them to do so? That's a totally different feeling. Your soul doesn't question their motive. Were they doing it publicly or for monetary gain? No—they were doing this because they believe in something, and they were doing this to help me, and that alone was enough for them.

Martin Luther King Jr., on the night before his assassination, gave a sermon on the Good Samaritan. And he delivered this message, and he walked through the fact that the priest and Levite—just what we discovered—were not lazy. It wasn't a matter of laziness. It's that they were concerned for their own safety. And then he told everybody this. He rephrased it. The priest and the Levite had this in their mind:

> *If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?*

This is what the priest and the Levite continue asking. What will happen to my family? What will happen—all these things. And that was the focus of their mind. But the Samaritan—Jesus through the story—actually flips those words around, and he goes:

> *If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?*

I know we joke about state lines, but this couldn't come at an easier time for us. We have people less than 40 miles away. We don't have those emotional barriers to get over like the Good Samaritan did, like the Jews had. We have people who have lost everything.

And my fear is this with myself: that if we don't show up in moments like this, and if we don't show up long-term—notice he paid for it and was coming back around to it. This wasn't just like, "Here you go, I'm moving on with my life." My fear is that if it doesn't happen now with me and in this church—is that it doesn't get easier than this, that it might not happen at all.

I'm not asking us to not have a boundary with certain things. I'm asking us to reframe what that boundary means. I've used boundaries as an excuse not to meet the legitimate needs of people. Not because it wasn't true, but because behind the truth is that I'm more like the priest and Levite than I'd ever like to admit.

Tim Keller says this in the same book:

> *Those who will not help others until they are destitute reveal that Christ's love has not yet turned them into the sympathetic persons the gospel should make them.*

And this is my prayer today, starting with me: is that I want to be that. We all want to be like the Good Samaritan, don't we? We want that. Who doesn't read this story and isn't moved by compassion and want to go help people? And at the end of the day, it costs something. And sometimes it costs a lot.

Here's what I want this week moving forward: look for opportunities. I know that there hasn't been a lot of coordination as far as publicly of what we're doing as a church. Let me just tell you—people are working very hard at doing this, and I'm thankful for those

people. There will be a time we'll need all hands on deck. Right now, the biggest way we can give is helping them financially. We have that up there. We'll put that up there at the end—of helping people that are in need.

And I just want to say this one more time: I think people will show up for the next three months. They'll do their thing. They'll be in the limelight. And then what I've heard over and over again from people that have done this for years is that people walk away after three months, and those people are going, "Where is the help?" Let's be there. Let's do this as a church. This is what means being present in a community—in a greater community. Not just Post Falls, not just Kootenai County, but people who are in need of the love and the hands and feet of Jesus Christ.

I believe that that is within this church. That is within the hearts of this church. And specifically—because when I got here, I heard about how giving this church is. I heard about how much that we want to do that. And one of the main emphases since I've been here—and even why I came here in the first place—was our desire to get back to service. Let's do it together. We will be posting and we'll be keeping updates. We don't have that right now, but we'll have a way to sign up to get looped in with the proper agencies so that we can volunteer, we can help out, and we can rebuild this community.

We're thankful because the story of the Good Samaritan actually points way forward. And this is the story: Jesus is the actual Good Samaritan. That he came to this earth and he died for you and me at his own cost. And he says, this is the way of actual life. And he wants to break us of our idols, break us of our false way of living because it's hurting us. And he wants to give us true life. And that is here before us today.

Let's pray with each other.

Jesus, thank you that we are part of a community—not just in our church, but a greater one that is in need. Lord, help us to know what that actually looks like. I know there are a lot of people that have a lot of energy that are going into this right now, and we all have different opinions on how to fix things. Help us to know what that is. Help us to move properly, and help us to not give up at that three-month mark and give up when the emotion wears off—because people are truly in need. And Lord, this is greater than even the wildfires. This needs to be a part of our church, a part of our culture. Heal our hearts. Convince us, Lord. Convict us and move us forward in a way that actually pertains to life, Lord. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.