

Crossing over

By [Mihee Kim-Kort](#)

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It's a busy street, Walnut Street.

I have to cross it to get to the [Shalom Community Center](#). I pause, waiting for the crowd of cars to dissipate a little so I can quickly scootch across, hands in my jacket pockets. Looking across the way I see many of the clients are milling around outside. Some are laughing raucously at some joke while playfully shoving each other. Some are standing and staring off into the distance. The weather is frigid, so I can see their breath making wisps of clouds around them. It's cigarette smoke, too. Some are walking into the building hunched over carrying huge packs and old grocery bags on their backs and in their arms.

I take a deep breath and cross. Squeak out a "good morning" at some people outside and walk to the door. When I enter the building my glasses steam up. Some folks look up at me, curious and inquisitive. One of them says, "Hey, sweetheart," with a tone of voice that makes me think I'm in college again. I quickly shuffle to the kitchen and sign in where the kitchen supervisor, Ron, greets me with a huge grin and welcomes me with an apron. After I wash my hands I begin chopping lettuce and strawberries.

People start to line up long before lunch will be served. They ask what's on the menu and make jokes with one of the regular workers, Chief. Ron tells me about his new puppy and how she stands on her hind legs and is already house-trained. While I make small talk with the other volunteers, I smile at the clients and hand them their food trays. Usually this is met with a "thank you," followed by "honey" or "princess."

Other mornings I head to the desk to help field all manner of requests:

- "I need to put something in daytime storage."
- "I need to sign up for a shower."
- "I need to make a long-distance phone call."
- "I need to check my mail."

- “I need a cup of laundry detergent.”
- “I need to talk to a caseworker.”

Anything and everything, from diapers to dog food to winter coats to jobs to bus passes. I’m piled on by this lack, and if there is an abundance of anything it is urgency and stress.

One morning I watch an older black woman holding a five-month-old baby in one arm. With her other hand she clasps the hand of a little girl the age of my twins, maybe a little younger, maybe three or four. They’re sitting in chairs half falling asleep. The woman nudges the little girl and hands her the baby. The little girl scoots back in the chair to make room for the baby to sit between her legs, clutching him around the middle. They both stare quietly at the floor while the grandmother dozes off. I want so much to scoop up the baby in my arms and bounce him around. A few minutes later they approach the desk, and I coo at the five-month-old with his big brown eyes and tufts of black hair, and I compliment the little girl’s winter hat—it’s Minnie Mouse. She beams at me, twirling her two braids. I tell her she is a great big sister, and her grandmother agrees. She beams some more. I’m overcome because I want to do something. But I don’t know their story.

It’s only been a month. Three times a week in this community—at the Shalom Community Center and at the Interfaith Winter Shelter. Such a short time, and yet I have seen and felt so much.

But each time I’ve gone there’s a moment where I seize up a little. Every single time. When someone screams something obscene and it sounds like a fight is about break out. Or when someone walks up in the lunch line and is clearly drunk or high and more than a little belligerent. Or even the small things—the bad teeth, the matted hair, the mismatched and dirty clothes.

I think, Do I really want to do community with these people?

I catch myself—my feet pointed to the door and my hand on my jacket. Something in me wants to bolt and forget this whole thing. Because these needs are so foreign to me. I don’t understand; I don’t even see clearly. I see their problems, yes. Their issues, and even potential solutions in their lives. I see what I’ve been conditioned to see, and this means I see people who are homeless and jobless. Maybe this translates to faithless, too—untrustworthy or lazy or weak. In other words, I see

people I would normally ignore and avoid on a regular basis. I have trouble seeing beyond the borders of their clothing and the fringes of their unraveling shirts or Salvation Army sweatshirts.

So why am I here?

As the lunch shift closes up one day a mother and a young boy, maybe seven or eight years old, come in at the last minute. We fill up two plates heaping over with tamales, rice and cheese, and extra fruit for them. I watch her try to figure out where to go. There are tables nearby where a group of people lounge and digest their food. So, she sets down her bags but she looks uncertain. She tells the boy to use two hands to carry his plate, the same way I do with my kids when they have a glass full of milk that's swishing around in there threatening to spill out. As I make a move to run around to the other side to help her, another woman I've often seen at the shelter, named Heather, walks up to her and asks if she needs help and wants any more food. Heather says there's a family room in the back, where it's a little quieter, and she picks up her things and leads the mother and boy back.

I watch this thinking about all the ways it is difficult for me to cross over in so many scenarios. How it's hard for me to enter into this space and community even though I've served in soup kitchens and shelters in various places before. **Why does this feel so significant? Why am I making it such a big deal?** There's something more for me to see here, and it's just starting to shimmer on the surface.

For me to be in community with the people in front of me means taking in all of who they are—even as I expect people to take in all of who I am, too. The good and the bad. The ideals and judgments. The hopes and flaws.

But, it's not just about me. I see how hard it is for these people around me to cross over, too. And maybe not because it is hard for them but because of all the ways I put up blocks—mentally, socially, physically—that prevent any one of them from crossing over and shattering all my presuming and conditioning. It's those like Heather who have crossed over easily. I've watched her take care of people like this in so many ways, but I know, like any of us, she's not perfect. That's not ultimately the point, though, right? **Isn't this redeemed life about love and grace not in spite of but *through* our imperfections?**

What keeps happening now is an affirmation of not just their humanity but also mine. For now, this is why I keep showing up. I need to be regularly and blatantly

impressed with the miracle of humanity all around me. **To realize the people in front of me are *my people* and not *those people*.** Because I'm choosing it and showing up. Imperfectly, with all my judgmental thoughts that I have to squish down out of my brain. To see the possibility that I am not human because of what I wear or how I smell or what I think or see but because of the *imago dei* as I experience it, always in radical connection to those around me. To cross over again and again to that reality always just beyond my peripheral vision, where the incarnate God is present even in the people and places I least expect, and even in me.

Originally posted at [Kim-Kort's blog](#)