

Erica Lloyd: Living for Impossibilities

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Living for Impossibilities

I remember a sermon that the pastor down at my church at the University of Virginia once gave, and he said, "Jesus came to comfort the shaken, and shake up the comfortable." I have always lived a very comfortable life, but this summer, Jesus shook me up – Big Time.

Let me begin by explaining how I ended up spending five weeks of my summer in rural Mississippi. My journey to Mendenhall, Mississippi actually began two and a half years ago. I went on a spring break trip to Jackson, Mississippi, working with John Perkins, a man whom many Seekers have a connection with through Faith at Work. I was captivated by his vision of how God's Kingdom was moving in West Jackson. Then this past year, I decided, rather last minute, to go on the trip again. As the Lord would have it, thirty of us were diverted to Mendenhall, a rural town about 40 minutes away. We spent the week running a Vacation Bible School for 150 children that live in the town's poorest areas. That week was an experience in and of itself.

As soon as I got back from spring break, I could hear God calling me back for the summer. This is not a call I was particularly thrilled to hear and I did my best to ignore it. Thanks to a few faithful friends, though, I stopped resisting and packed my bags. I was terrified, and rightly so, I think. At the Vacation Bible School Day Camp, I was put in charge of

eight and nine year olds, a group of about 30 to 40 kids, with five high school students as my helpers.

Let me begin by saying this was one of the hardest things I have ever done. The children were out of control. Resources were few. My high school helpers, were, not unexpectedly, more interested in each other than the kids. The scheduled activities turned out to be nonexistent. Actually, structure or organization of any kind was noticeably lacking. I knew that I could not love these children with the kind of love they needed. I did not have enough patience to deal with them for five minutes. They seemed incapable of following directions or getting along with each other. It was maddening for me to watch. I thought to myself, I have come a thousand miles to be with these children. I am trying to love them and care for them. The least they could do is to sit down so that we can serve lunch.

I learned so much down there. I learned about myself, in particularly my own shortcomings and faults. I learned hard lessons about race. I learned so much about Christian community development – part of my time that was so amazing was actually getting out of Mendenhall and traveling to visit other ministries around the South over a few weekends. Moreover, since I have been home, over the past six months I have been trying to piece this all together and really discern what this has all meant.

Big Dreams Honor God

The first thing I learned is that big dreams honor God. I have heard this said before, and when I took a tour of a ministry in New Orleans, I experienced it. This guy named Mo felt God calling him to the projects in New Orleans, so he moved into the neighborhood with his whole family and started a church. Nearly 10 years after he began, this neighborhood is being transformed – and God is getting all of the glory. Jeff Taylor, a man who has been a mentor of sorts in my fellowship,

once said, "You need to have a dream so big that it is absolutely doomed to fail – unless God takes hold of it." All through the Bible, we see stories of this. One man, Nehemiah, has a vision to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, which has been destroyed. And this one man decides just to get up and do it. He prays, plans, and prays more. The Lord blesses his faithfulness, people come together and it is done! When they are finished, the people stand back and cry, "Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever!" Think of Christ himself. He welcomes the twelve disciples after they have been out preaching and ministering – I imagine all they want to do is sit back, eat a nice meal and talk with Christ. Instead, Jesus begins preaching and the crowd gathers. Then Jesus says to his disciples, "Let's give them dinner." Now if I were a disciple, I would have reacted exactly as they did, "**What?** We've got a couple of loaves and some fish and there are five thousand people out there!" Nevertheless, the disciples got up, and started passing out food – and with Christ's touch, great things happened. We need to look at the world around us with that kind of vision – a friend of mine calls it wearing God Goggles. How does God look at this person, this community, this situation? Put on His goggles and see it the same way. We cannot be timid. Our God is a God of Love, which we know. However, He is also a God of Power! If you want a God of baby steps, you have come to the wrong place. My point is this – you need to have a vision for whatever it is you are doing in your life, and it needs to be a crazy one.

Suffering Draws us Near to Him

The second thing I learned is this: Suffering draws us near to him. Now when I say suffering, I am not really talking about the kind of suffering that we have experienced over the past few months. I do not mean grief, or pain, or the kind of suffering you feel when bad things happen to you. I mean suffering in the sense of consciously laying down your life. I mean the kind of suffering when you choose to die to yourself

and live in Christ. He tells us, "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it," (Matt 16:24-26). To be honest, I think being in Mendenhall was the first time I really experienced that in the way Christ meant it – laying in bed each morning and saying, not my will, but yours, Lord, be done.

Everyday I was angry, confused, frustrated, and exhausted. The first three days I was so homesick I started imagining ways that I could get sent home – if I got in serious car accident, say, and broke both my legs. Nevertheless, God used this to draw me to Him. I prayed all the time. I literally could not get ready in the morning before I prayed. I needed God's power to get out of bed, brush my teeth, get dressed and walk out of our apartment. All throughout the day, I would take a minute to myself to pray for patience. When I got home in the afternoon, I read my Bible again, seeking forgiveness for the thousands of ways I had fallen short in one afternoon, and reassurance that I could get out of bed and do it again tomorrow. I read this every morning: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Romans 8:16-18.

I needed God in a way that I have never known before. It was particularly clear to me because I got home from Mississippi and a week later went to work at Camp Pecometh, a place that has been my home away from home for most of my life. It was my fifth year on staff. I can be a good counselor there without really blinking an eye. Practically overnight, I was not coming before God in prayer; I stopped reading the Bible every day. My pride swelled. I could live by my own will and be just

fine, and I forgot what I knew so clearly in Mississippi: that my life is not my own.

So I learned these two lessons: Big dreams honor God, and suffering draws us near to Him). In addition, these two things come together and I find that I am called to do something bold with my life. There is a story that Henry Thoreau, during his protests against slavery, was thrown into jail. His good friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to visit him, and said, "My dear good friend, whatever are you doing in there?" Thoreau responded: "The real question is, 'Whatever are you doing out there?'" There is the question: what are we doing if not living radically for Christ?

I am getting ready to graduate from college this May. As I am starting to make decisions about where I want to be next year, I know that whatever I am going to be doing, I want it to be crazy. I want people to look at my life and be puzzled.

Now, my parents are not thrilled about this, because they love me and want the best for me. They would love nothing more than for me to come home to Montgomery County, teach in a nice school, with nice kids and have a nice home in a nice neighborhood. However, if I have all of these nice things, I wonder where I will put my faith. If I am going to teach, maybe I should be in the schools that no one else wants to work for with the kids that no one else wants. Maybe it will be so hard that I will know that I need Christ. Maybe God is calling you to bring health care to all of those who cannot afford it. Maybe He wants you to protect those who do not know their rights. Maybe God wants to transform your whole high school for Christ. Does it sound impossible? That is exactly where He wants us to begin.