

# “Getting Out of the Boat” by Erica Lloyd

August 6, 2017



## Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 14:13-21

*I want to start with a little disclaimer. In this sermon I mostly talk about very difficult things in Haiti, but I want to be clear that Haiti is also a place of incredible joy – majestic mountains and beautiful beaches, the music of the creole language, luscious pineapple and little tangy bananas that have ruined all other bananas for me, brilliant blue skies and starry nights and thunderous rain storms, strong and generous friends, not to mention winter temperatures in the 80s – there are a thousand reasons I love Haiti. I’m sensitive to the fact that Haiti gets a pretty bad rap, so during coffee hour I’d be happy to show pictures and talk more about my life in Haiti, as well as SOIL’s work, which Seekers helps support.*

So: “Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand.” It’s a story we know

well: huge audience, just a handful of provisions, fretting disciples, Jesus' blessing, and \*Presto!\* there's a fat and happy crowd with plenty of leftovers for the disciples.

Whether you believe the crowd contributed to the bounty or whether the truly miraculous happened that day, it's a gentle rebuke to those of us who, like the disciples, only see **scarcity** where God sees **abundance**. To those of us who worry that there are not enough resources to go around, God invites us to share anyway and trust that we will still be okay. It's a lesson that I need to hear over and over, but there's so much more richness to this story that I had always missed out on. Because this is also a story about suffering and grief and love – and it's this side of the story that has been a life raft for me over the past year.

But first, a bit of background: I have lived in Haiti for nearly four years, but I've only recently started to understand that grieving is a part-time job there – one that you're not allowed to quit – **even if** you weren't really aware that it was a job you had applied for; **even if** you're not properly qualified or equipped for it; **even if** you really don't want to be in that particular line of work anymore.

A trip to the grocery store requires navigating a maze of suffering: street kids jumping into traffic to earn spare change washing car windows; amputees, who lost legs and arms in the 2010 earthquake, hobbling through the intersection on crutches; women carrying buckets of water because they have no indoor plumbing. One of the things that is hardest about Haiti is also what I appreciate about it most: you can't NOT see the suffering; you cannot pretend the world is okay. It's honest – **brutally** honest – about the human condition.

And after three years, that brutality was starting to take its toll on me last year – after a fall when Hurricane Matthew destroyed the childhood homes of a dozen of my co-workers in southern Haiti, and a month later, torrential rains in

Northern Haiti displaced another dozen in flooding that didn't make international news. The Haitian presidential election made America's look almost functional in comparison. I was stressed by a huge project at work. I felt like my emotional bank account was overdrawn.

That's where I was this past winter when I reread the story of the feeding of the five thousand for probably the five thousandth time, when the Holy Spirit took out her highlighter and said: Look at this. Look at where Jesus was at the start of this story: *"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."*

*"When Jesus heard what had happened."* It's so easy to skim right over that little phrase in verse 13.

But what Jesus had heard about was the murder of John the Baptist. John was Jesus' relative, and the person who had baptized him just before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And he had just been killed.

Jesus, in response, "withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

I find such deep comfort in this response. Could Jesus be any more human in this moment? And I **need** that. I mean, it's great that Jesus is the Son of God, but sometimes that can be a little... intimidating. We always hear of Jesus as our Wounded Healer – but I always associated that wounding with the crucifixion, which even in a metaphorical sense can be hard to relate to. But Jesus' reaction here reminds me that long before the cross, Jesus was wounded in a very ordinary human way, the way **we** are wounded – by suffering and loss.

So Jesus withdraws, climbs into that boat and disappears into his grief. And then another terrible thing happens. *"Hearing*

*of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns."* Reading this sentence makes me just want to weep – or maybe scream – every single time. I can only imagine that Jesus is shocked and heartbroken and just needs ONE QUIET MINUTE TO HIMSELF.

Have you experienced that feeling? When you have nothing left to give and just need the world to leave you alone for a second? I imagine those of you who were once parents of small children might know what I'm talking about. That's where I was last winter.

I had nothing to give when Richenel needed to practice for his English class, or Rosie needed to see a doctor about her foot, or Frantzcy was calling with a computer question. The constant withdrawals of my emotional energy for months had drained me. I was sad and tired and I just wanted them to go away. But Jesus, on the other hand:

*"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."* And he healed all day – and when it was finally evening and the disciples were ready to call it quits, Jesus says, but we need to feed them, too.

I mean, that is an *incredible* reaction. If verse 13 shows me Jesus's full humanity, these subsequent verses look like straight divinity to me. He moves through his own pain, into love – love for these strangers who have come running to interrupt him in his lonely grief.

Reading this passage, Jesus' decision, to NOT retreat yet further and faster, but to turn and face the crowds and lavish love on them, seems just as miraculous as multiplying the loaves and fishes. There are times when I feel no more of capable of being a healing presence for others than I am of magically multiplying seafood.

But Jesus didn't give us the Holy Spirit for nothing. And as I read this story over and over, the Spirit asked: what does it

mean to love others when you just want to sit alone in that boat and grieve?

Well, the Holy Spirit has a real sense of timing. If I felt worn down by the end of 2016, the beginning of 2017 positively knocked me off my feet.

In a stunningly horrible February, 7 of my co-workers were victims in vehicle accidents (1 of which was fatal, 2 others were serious enough to require lengthy hospital stays), another co-worker was severely burned in a house fire and also hospitalized for weeks. Yet another was robbed at gunpoint.

In the beginning of March, a co-worker who had been sick succumbed to cancer.

The final kick in the face came early Easter morning, when my co-Director lost his little baby boy.

Apparently, I'd been in Grief 101, and this was one hell of a final exam. Like Jesus, I wanted to be alone. I felt as if my heart had been actually consumed by grief, and I was desperate to hang on to the scraps of it that remained.

But the Spirit said, Won't you get up out of that boat, like Jesus did?

Spoiler alert: I did not go on to heal any diseases, cast out any demons, or feed even a modest-sized gathering.

But I knew I couldn't (and shouldn't) outrun the brokenness around me. I pored over this passage again and again, seeing a brokenhearted Jesus somehow get out of that boat and start loving that crowd.

And slowly, I saw that the **physical** miracle of the loaves and fishes in this story is a mirror of the **emotional** one. It's the same lesson I'd always seen in this story: Where I see scarcity, God sees abundance. Loaves or love, it's all the same. When I look within my heart and see the reserves of love

and care and attention worn down to nothing, and like the disciples, shrug and say, "Lord, I do not have the resources to respond to this situation. I simply do not have it in me to love any one right now," Jesus says, "What **do** you have? Where are your 5 loaves and 2 fish?"

He says, "That teeny tiny corner left of your heart that cares about Rosie's health, and Richenel's education, and Frantzcy's future – you have that. Give it to me and I will bless it and multiply it. Let me show you what I can do."

A few days before I left Haiti in May to come to DC for the summer, a friend fell ill at church, and tentatively, I got up and joined a few other women to sit with her for a while until she felt well enough to go home. And as we told jokes and stories and laughed and prayed, I thought, Who knows? Maybe if I trust Jesus, if I can get out of that boat, if I will give him these battered bits of my heart, maybe, *just maybe*, He can start to work some miracles.

Amen.