

# Them is Us, Part Two

## *The Glory of the Burden*



***Above: Eduardo (black shirt) and some other neighborhood youth hold Claudio's casket in our pick-up as we drive to the cemetery.***

I had already felt burdened that weekend in September when I found out on Sunday that Claudio had been killed. The day before, we had taken the Micah boys to a park in the mountains outside Tegucigalpa for a day of swimming and horse-back riding. Along with the boys in our group homes, we also took a couple of street kids, two boys with whom we have been developing a relationship through our street ministry. I had gotten used to seeing kids like Jose Daniel and Axel in the market area, dousing their reality in yellow glue and living every day on the edge of survival. After ten years of working with street kids, my normal encounters with them leave me saddened, but not devastated.

But something changed on this sunny Saturday in September. Seeing Jose Daniel and Axel splashing around in the pool, riding horses into the mountains, and doing all the other things that little boys *should* be able to do; in other words, seeing them removed from their daily nightmare on the streets, reminded me how utterly and totally *wrong* it is that they have to grow up on the streets. "Wrong" in the sense of contrary to God's original plan for His children. When Axel and Jose Daniel went back to the streets after their Saturday with us, I was left with an incredible heaviness in my heart.

I was carrying that heaviness around with me on Sunday throughout our church service and lunch afterwards with our guys at the Micah House. It was just after lunch that a young man from our neighborhood came by the door of the Micah House to let us know that Claudio had been murdered the night before.

Twenty-one year old Claudio and I had just been getting to know each other. Well, that's not exactly true: I'd known him for years as *Caño* (*Con-yo*), a dangerous gang member in our

neighborhood whom we usually tried to avoid as much as possible. He often came by the Micah House to ask for food, although he was an expert at asking in a way that made it clear that we should give him what he asked for *or else*.

If you've read my past blogs about Laje and Ole, you know that God has been trying to get me to see young men like Claudio through His eyes. Claudio and his equally notorious older brother Eduardo (who goes by the street name Chifin... *Chee-feen*) noticed that change in me, and for a couple of months had been coming by the Micah House almost daily to talk. Claudio had just been released after doing two years in the national penitentiary. Shortly after his release, a rival gang member saw him walking through the market and took a shot at him; the bullet lodged in his arm, but his life was spared.

As I began to have my nightly chats with Claudio, I realized that both the jail time and the close encounter with a bullet had shaken him, and, as a result, he was at a crossroads. I agreed to help him pay for his surgery; it would cost about \$400 to remove the bullet from his arm and to get his shattered bone set. For some reason, the fact that I was willing to help gave him great hope. In his mind, the surgery would be his new lease on life.

One night, the week before the surgery, Claudio came to our door but refused to come in. He was standing on the street corner, waving me to come out. When I walked over to him, he said that he didn't want anyone else to hear what he was going to say. "Uh-oh", I thought to myself, "what has he done now?" "Michael", he said, "when this surgery is all over, I really want to change my life. I don't want to stay in the same hole I have been in for so long." Surprisingly soft-spoken for a gangster, Claudio was at this moment taking the biggest risk of his life by exposing the hurt of his soul to me.

I responded by urging him to give his life to God... to let the past be the past and to trust God with his future. Claudio nodded reflectively, and I asked him to come back so that we could keep talking about these things.

That was the last time I ever saw him. A few days later, in the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, a police pick-up truck dumped Claudio's body off at the morgue. No explanation was given as to how he died. In society's eyes, he was just another nameless casualty of the savagery of street life.

That Sunday night, my heart was burdened to the breaking point. I was still thinking about the great day that Jose Daniel and Axel had with us the day before, feeling an enormous burden to provide them with something more than a day away from the streets. At 8:30 in the evening, the whole Micah Project gathered together for our weekly time of worship and prayer. I knew that as soon as I started the meeting, the sorrow in my heart would overwhelm the dikes of propriety and come spilling out of my lips.

As soon as I began to explain to the boys why I felt so burdened, though, there was a pounding on the door of the Micah House. It was Claudio's brother Eduardo. He had come to ask for some clothes that they could use so that they could dress Claudio for his burial. We brought Eduardo into our meeting, and I asked if I could pray for him. The Micah boys and I surrounded him and placed our hands on him. As I began to pray, I also began to weep—not just a tearing up of the eyes, but a welling over of the soul. When we finished praying for Eduardo, a couple of our boys ran off to get him a nice shirt and a pair of pants to dress Claudio. Then, I turned to face our boys again.

"What will stay with me the rest of my life," I said to them with a voice so full of tears that I could only get the words out one-at-a-time, "is that for four years, I shut the door in Claudio's face instead of

helping him find his way to hope in his life. I want you all to know that I will never, ever shut the door in anyone's face again."

I know that sounds like guilt, which, according to modern thought, isn't a proper emotion to have. But when we have a burden placed on our heart, a God-given burden that should move us to action, and we choose not to act, what better emotion than guilt than to remind us of what we need to do? I'll take guilt over complacency any day.

The next day, which was supposed to have been the day of Claudio's surgery, was the day of his funeral instead. We had offered to help Eduardo with the details, not realizing how necessary that help would be. When I walked up the hill to Claudio's grandmother's house, where the visitation was being held, I immediately had a better understanding of the chaos in which Claudio had lived his life. Both his mom and his dad, who had been separated for many years, were too drunk to make any funeral arrangements. His grandmother had the presence of mind to pay a couple of guys to go to the cemetery to prepare the plot for burial, but, beyond that, no one knew how to proceed. Most of the down-and-outers of our neighborhood were gathered around the small house; and the majority of them had been drinking since the night before.

We went back and got all three Micah Project cars and returned with them down the narrow path that led to the house. A few men from the neighborhood wrestled the casket down the steep embankment on which the house is set on and into the back of our pick-up. Claudio's dad began to scream and curse that he wouldn't let anyone bury his boy. He went after the casket to try to get it out of the pick-up. Once I went over and put my arm around him, though, he calmed down long enough to get in the car. On the way to the cemetery, his mom was nearly hysterical in the back seat. At one point, she cried, *"My poor Claudio, at least he knew that he could always get something to eat at the Micah Project; at least he never went hungry."*

We got as many people as we could from the neighborhood to the cemetery, but, once we arrived, we realized that there was still a long way to go before the grave was ready for burial. As we sat there with thirty or forty people from our neighborhood, Becca leaned over to me at one point and said, *"this is the most hopeless group of people that I have ever seen in my entire life."* I looked around at them, many of whom had already lost friends and family members to violence, and I knew she was right. No funeral service was planned, no prayers or scripture reading; they were just viewing death as the last hopeless event in their sad and drifting lives. While the grave was dug, Claudio's casket sat waiting in the back of our pick-up truck.

When the grave was finally done, almost three hours after we arrived at the cemetery, I asked the gathered group if I could say a prayer. We all bowed our heads, and I said a short prayer for Claudio's family and friends. When I finished, everyone sat around in silence for a few minutes. Finally, a few men lifted the casket into the grave. When they got it in place, Claudio's brother Eduardo took a handful of rocks and threw them at the casket. "Claudio, you son of a ----! You should have taken me with you!" With that, he turned and walked away and people began to drift off.

I write about these events in such detail not out of a sense of voyeurism... of taking too much interest in the misery of others. I guess that I write all of this to try to communicate to you all--and to process in my own heart--what it means to have a burden in our hearts for the lost of this world. I am coming to understand that this sense of heaviness... of grief, even... at what evil is still capable of doing is not a bad thing, depending on what we choose to do with it. Whether it is seeing Axel and Jose Daniel waste their lives in a fog of yellow glue, or trying to come to grips with Claudio's death, I think that

there are three responses to the lost of this world. One, we can be so over-burdened by the tragedy of this world that it can keep us in a state of helpless inertia. . . *what difference can I possibly make?* Two, we can keep the world far enough away from our own reality that the tragedy of the lost is nothing more than a thirty-second news story on the evening broadcast. Or, three, we can let the God-given burden for the lost *move us to action*.

That last place is where I want to be. I want to be like Jesus, who spent most of his time with the hopeless and helpless. . . with the dregs of His society. I want to have the same passion that He did when he cried out, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. . . !*" (Luke 13:34). Jesus knew the violence that reigned in the hearts of men, yet he still desired to make us His children.

I am a long way away from having that kind of compassion. But that is why I have begun to thank God that He has chosen to disquiet my heart for people like Claudio. I *want* to be burdened by the lost. . . if I don't feel the weight of their hopelessness in my soul, then what else will spur me to action?

Even now, He is putting my commitment to the test. If there is one redeeming aspect to Claudio's death, it is pushing his brother Eduardo ever closer to the arms of Christ. Eduardo comes by the Micah House almost every day. On some days, Becca's fiancée John Bell, or one of our boys or I get to spend a few minutes encouraging him. I began to understand that Eduardo had begun seeking God when he hopefully, yet somewhat desperately, asked me last week if Claudio had accepted Christ before he died. Eduardo feels a sense of burden and deep regret for his slain brother; indeed, not too different from the burden that I now feel for Eduardo. While I used to give Claudio a few morsels of food when he came to our door, I now long to share with Eduardo the bread of life, so that he will never hunger again.

As long as God continues to show His hand at work, taking these hopeless lives and bringing them to Him, then I will see the burden for the lost as a glorious thing rather than something to be avoided. Sure, it comes with a heaviness of heart and soul, but often, it leads to rapturous joy when one of the lost ones comes back into the fold.

For us as Christians, the temporary burden that we feel for the lost pales in comparison to knowing that, one day, they may run into His arms and hear Him say, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" (Matthew 11:28-29).

I pray that one day, Axel, Jose Daniel and Eduardo, and many like them, will find rest for their souls. Until that time, I will pray that my own soul remains burdened for them, and that this burden will roil around within me until it moves me to action.

Your brother in Christ,  
Michael Miller

**P.S.** One of the street boys that we took to the park that day, 12 year old Axel, joined the Micah Project a few days later. He has now been with us for three weeks. There is another example of a burden turning into a great joy! More about Axel later!

**P.P.S** If you read my first blog called "Them is Us", you will be glad to know that we were able to get Ole into a Christian rehabilitation center two weeks ago. We saw him last Sunday, and he is very excited about what God is teaching him there.