

A BEAUTIFUL **BROKEN** GIFT:

reflecting on 25 years of ministry in Honduras

"I can promise you a piece of land. I can't promise you a home, or electricity, or running water, but I can promise a piece of land for each of your families. If you decide to say yes, are you willing to trust God with the rest?"

I was standing on a battered retaining wall in an urban park that had been destroyed by Hurricane Mitch just weeks before. The hundreds of eyes looking back at me belonged to survivors who had lost their homes in that same storm. The river that flowed just a hundred feet or so from this park is the same one that raged into their neighborhood on the night of October 31, 1998. It took everything they owned.



Meeting with the Hurricane Mitch survivors in Parque Concordia in downtown Tegucigalpa. February 28, 1999.

armed with hundreds of machetes to clear away the scrub, we all wondered if we were crazy to believe that this would one day be their new home. But just owning that land, after so many people donated sacrificially to help them rebuild their lives, seemed like a promise that we couldn't ignore. So, we started chopping.

The community members took daily steps of obedience, arriving at the land every morning to prepare it for the homes that they may or may not ever have funds to build. God provided. He provided roads and electricity and water and sewage and yes, even homes. He raised a beautiful community out of that scrubby cow pasture, one that they would decide to name after my mom: Villa Linda Miller.

One of the leaders of the community repeated the question to the nearly two hundred families standing there. "What do you think? Do you want to go with Michael?"

With one voice, the survivors shouted, "¡Sí, vamos!" "Yes, we'll go!"

From that one decision—choosing to believe that God had something greater in store for them—we began to see miracle after miracle. The first day we took over the hilly acreage that was an extinct cow pasture,



Building Villa Linda Miller. These houses are a physical sign of God's love for the survivors of Hurricane Mitch.

In the years since Villa Linda Miller became a vibrant, flourishing village, the abuelas of the community—the grandmas—often come up to me to tell me that Hurricane Mitch was the best thing that ever happened to them. God used the storm, they explain, to take them out of a squatter community at the edge of a polluted river to give them a literal city on a hill.

A year before addressing that crowd of hurricane survivors, I was finishing my fourth year as an elementary school teacher in Houston. I had a great job, great friends—a nice, rewarding life. But I had spent six months in Honduras as a senior in college in 1993 doing an internship with an organization that worked with street kids. God had planted a disquieting call in my heart that would not go away. I resigned my teaching job in June and, on August 12, 1998, at the age of 26, I moved to Honduras. Two months later, Hurricane Mitch became the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane on record.

In the midst of tragedy, I saw God move mountains. I saw Him defend the cause of widows and orphans. I literally saw Him take 165 families out of the miry pit and place them on high ground. I saw God's mighty care for His people with my own eyes.

You don't witness miracles and remain unchanged. With a sure sense of God's active, guiding, loving hand, we founded the Micah Project, and we opened the doors of the Micah House in January, 2000. Our first motto was "Yesterday's Street Children, Tomorrow's Kingdom Builders." God would surely show His same almighty love to these kids that he showed to the families that built Villa Linda Miller! Right?

The short answer is yes. Absolutely. God moves powerfully in the lives of the kids who are part of the Micah Project, who once lived on the streets. But it has taken me twenty-five years of ministry to understand that the way He chooses to do that is not at all in the ways that I had imagined when I first moved to Honduras.

My understanding of how God moves was too linear. God calls us to do something for Him, we obey, God moves mightily through us. It's strength-to-strength: our all-powerful God makes us strong so that we can do strong things for Him. That's how I saw God work to create the Villa Linda Miller community and I assumed that He only worked that way. But that assumption runs the risk of putting Him in a box and creating Him in our own image.

There is a dividing line in my time in Honduras, one that represents a "before" and "after" in my thinking about how God uses us. And that line was created by Axel.

Axel had just turned twelve when he joined the Micah House in 2008. He was already living on the streets, addicted to drugs, and had watched at least one person die a violent death at the hands of another. That's a lot for any kid to carry on his shoulders.

Axel spent some time in juvenile detention prior to joining Micah and one of their reports about him cautioned that he was aggressive and prone to violence. There are some kids you just automatically connect with, though, and I found Axel to be kind and empathetic, with a dry sense of humor and goofy grin. If there is one quality that makes Micah unique, it is our ability to see the best in kids who have only ever been defined by their defects.



*Michael and Axel,
who was killed in March, 2015.*

In 2010, Axel left Micah and went back to the streets. One afternoon a few weeks later, I decided to walk to Tegucigalpa's sprawling outdoor market district to look for him. I just couldn't accept that after so much growth at Micah, he would give it all up again and resume his life on the streets. Finding someone who doesn't want to be found in that chaotic sector of the city is a true needle-in-a-haystack endeavor. I walked into the seedy part of the market district where the shoe cobblers work—and where some of them sell shoe glue to street kids as their drug of choice. As I stood there, watching hundreds of people flow back and forth, I prayed over and over again: "Lord, bring Axel down this street."

Sure enough, after about an hour I saw Axel turn the corner and head in my direction. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks. We greeted each other with an awkward hug, and I could sense the palpable shame he felt for having crashed out of Micah. The main reason I went to find him, though, was not to shame him into returning to Micah, but to show him how much we loved him, no matter what he was going through. I was hoping that our love would break through the cycle of shame and despair that street kids get trapped in. Even if that meant spending an afternoon in the market district just to give him a hug.

(To see a video of Axel giving a tour of the market area, follow this link: <https://bit.ly/Axels-house>).

Axel did come back to Micah for a time. But he struggled and, in 2012, he left back to the streets once again. We did not give up on him, but, as the years went by, we saw him less and less. In early March of 2015, I got a call I was not prepared for. Axel had been gunned down in that same market area where I had encountered him that day. The next 24 hours were an out-of-body blur: retrieving Axel's body from the morgue, setting up the all-night wake, consoling his brothers and friends, and struggling to find words of hope as I preached at his graveside the following day.

It took some time for that numbness to wear off and for the reality of loss to set in. Traumatic grief is a jumbled mix of sadness, anger, helplessness, doubt, regret, and fear. In the midst of those contrary emotions, I had one intrusive thought that I couldn't shake: I did not come to Honduras to bury kids I love. What happened to the all-powerful God who moved heaven and earth for the people of Villa Linda Miller? Why did He not do the same for Axel? Why was my love and strength not enough to save this kid who had known so much suffering?



*Michael and Jeferson,
who was killed by a street gang in January, 2017.*

Axel's death was only the first of many. The following year, in 2016, Marvincito and Charlie died just three days apart. A few months after that, in early 2017, 14-year-old Jeferson lost his life as well. In 2020, Elvin was killed. That's too much loss. In our photo albums, we have thousands of photos of each of these fallen boys. We see smiles as they celebrate birthdays and graduations, play soccer, have fun outings in parks and on beaches, and generally enjoy doing things that boys are supposed to do. All the smiles in those photos have been blurred by grief. Their deaths are hard to accept.

How do we move forward after such devastating loss? How do we continue to love and serve the boys in our homes while dealing with a broken heart? There is a temptation to just stay numb and do this ministry like robots, shielding our hearts from more pain. It is easy to go into survivor mode, just trying to get through each day while desperately hoping that no more tragedy strikes.

But in these moments of deepest grief, God revealed His Father-heart to us. He showed us that, while He is a God who reveals Himself through mighty deeds, He also shows His love by dwelling with the brokenhearted in their brokenness. Yes, our God split the Red Sea in two to save His people from slavery. But he also broke down and wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. Is it possible that God wants to use our broken heart as much—or more—than He uses our strength to draw others to Himself?

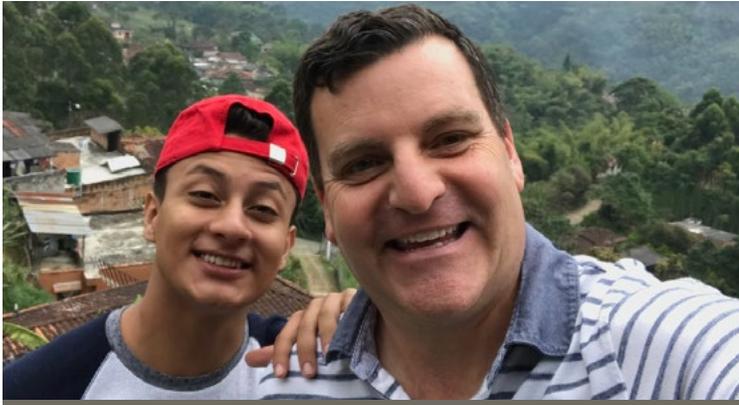
In his groundbreaking book *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Greg Boyle writes, “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a covenant between equals” (*Tattoos*, 77). When we connect to these kids through a broken heart, we are more clearly reflecting our Father’s heart to them. We realize that, in our service to them, we are not looking down at them from above; rather, we are engaged with them eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart. We are the same. Our brokenness connects with their brokenness, and somehow, God uses that to move both of us closer to wholeness. That sounds crazy, but isn’t that the power of the cross? A God who healed a broken world by choosing to become broken Himself?

Every day at Micah is a mix of joy and sorrow. We see guys achieving goals and celebrating successes who eat dinner every night next to guys who are one tiny jostle of the tightrope away from crashing back down into a dark pit. That’s just the reality of working with this population. Engaging them with a broken heart has made me better at what I do. It helps me to love more deeply and to hope more fearlessly. Even those moments of joy and triumph are made sweeter by a broken heart. It reminds us how precious life is and how each sweet moment with these guys is a gift from the Lord.



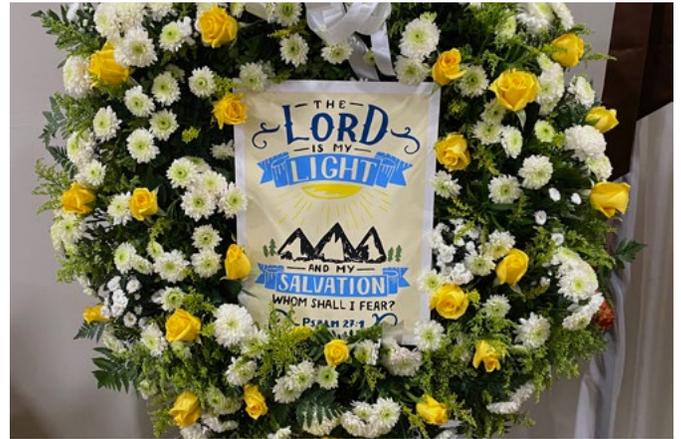
Smiling with some of the boys in the Micah House in 2022.

In the end, Axel's younger brother Julio reminded me of what is most important. I have written about Julio extensively since he died in a traffic accident last January (read that update here: <https://bit.ly/MicahStopGivingUp>). His loss was made even more devastating by the knowledge of how far he had come; despite his own struggles, he was a daily, inspiring light to our community, even at the age of 21. The night before his accident, he knocked on the door of my cabin at Micah to give me his newest painting. It was a colorful rendering of Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" Six hours later, he was gone.



Julio and I in Colombia in 2019.

We are still in the process of grieving Julio's death, but Julio and his painting reminded us that having a broken heart is not an end unto itself. The brokenness has a purpose and a direction. God's broken heart bought us new and everlasting life at an agonizing price; our broken heart reminds us to keep our gaze directed at that beautiful truth.



When I moved to Honduras in my twenties, I was able to see God provide 165 homes to hurricane survivors in a miraculous way. One day, He will recreate that miracle on a grand scale. He will raise us up from the dead into a new and eternal home. We will live side-by-side with Axel, Charlie, Marvincito, Jeferson, Elvin, and Julio in a place that will be so searingly beautiful that it will need no sun. It will be lit by His glory. A place where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21: 4b).

I am grateful for my broken heart. It sounds strange to admit, but it's true. It is my most cherished gift after 25 years of ministry in Honduras. It reminds me every day to wait with eager expectation for RESURRECTION. It reminds me to love the kids that God brings into the Micah Project in their entirety, even their broken parts. It reminds me that God did not choose me because of any strength I might have, but because He loves me enough to remind me that His strength is perfect in my weakness.



Some of the faithful men and women who have served with the Micah Project over the years.

I am also grateful for my many co-laborers over the years who have had their hearts broken as well. This has not been a lonely journey, but rather one filled with faithful brothers and sisters who have reminded me when the pain becomes too overwhelming that our brokenness is not in vain.

I am grateful for each one of you who continues to believe that God is completing His perfect will through the ministry of the Micah Project, even when His victories seem like defeats in the world's eyes. Thank you for lifting our arms up in prayer and for keeping us pointed towards eternity.

Thank you for allowing us to discover how God uses broken and battered hearts to draw his lost sheep back to His heart—his perfect, loving, broken heart.

Your broken-hearted brother in Christ,

Michael Miller