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### **THE VISION BEAUTIFUL**

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Our two lessons for the morning, from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, together give us a vision beautiful. What the prophet Micah and Jesus in the Beatitudes are speaking about is a perfect view of existence, "The way life should be" for a believer. No matter what we may have thought our marching orders should be, Micah gives them to us in one simple phrase. What the lord requires of us, says the prophet, is this: "...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." That is Micah's vision beautiful.

What we have in Matthew's gospel, then, is Jesus' version of the vision. He gave it to the people at the beginning of the Sermon On The Mount and forever after it has been known as the Beatitudes. I like what Tom Long says about these rules for life which give us the true secret of happiness:

*...The Beatitudes turn the world's values upside down. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large. The Beatitudes declare that the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers are the ones who are truly blessed. We live in a world, however, that pronounces the benediction over the self-sufficient, the assertive, and the power brokers. The people whom the world would see as pitiful, the mournful, the persecuted are the very people Jesus claims are truly joyful (Thomas Long, Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion).*

The Beatitudes continually surprise us by their twists and turns. Indeed, "The Beatitudes turn the world's values upside down." The irony in those nine statements is something I thought about when I read a statement Mother Teresa once made. She said she loved Americans. The reason why is that "We are the poorest because we have so much" (Alice Anne Miller, "Coming Home," Ministry Of Money).

Many years ago a friend gave me an account written about a trip three women took to visit Mother Teresa in Calcutta. They were residents of Westlake, Texas, a suburb outside of Austin. I share it with you because it shows us one form of the "Vision Beautiful" and reminds us that even in today's fractured world, it is possible to experience a life where The Beatitudes rule:

*The idea to go and meet Mother Teresa, the world-renown humanitarian and Nobel Prize winner, came to two Westlake women during their weekly 15-mile roller blading excursion.*

*"It was just a pipe dream," said Elinor Reese. "I asked Laura Campbell if she could do anything in the world, what would she like to do." And she said she'd like to meet Mother Teresa. But, she said she'd have to wait until her*

younger daughter, Jackie, age eight, was older. I told her, "You cannot wait. Mother Teresa is in her 80's."

And so Campbell got the address for Mother Teresa from the cover of a book, wrote to her in Calcutta saying that three American women would like to come visit for two weeks and volunteer to work, and got a letter back from one of the nuns saying to come and report at 5 p.m. on any day but Thursday or Sunday.

So, at the end of July, [1994], Laura Campbell, her daughter Lark, and Elinor Reese set off on the 28-hour flight from Austin to Frankfurt to Delhi to Calcutta. They arrived many time zones later on a Saturday afternoon, showered, changed clothes (they had only their carry-on luggage; their checked bags, of course, did not make the intricate connections), and hired a driver to take them to the address they had for the Ashram, the mother's house, as it is known.

After a chaotic ride through noisy, crowded and dirty streets, with car horns blaring, the driver stopped the car, got out and pointed down the alley.

"We were like scared little sheep, and would not let our driver go back to the hotel," Elinor said. Timidly they walked down the alley and knocked on the door. A sister named Astrid came to the door. "We said we were here to volunteer. She promptly told us to dismiss the driver because we were wasting money."

...Frugality would be echoed over and over again throughout their visit. Mother Teresa, they would find out, wasted nothing. When The Pope came and visited her, he left his bulletproof limousine for Mother Teresa. She auctioned it off to raise money for the many projects she was working on.

Since the three Westlake women had arrived before the appointed time of 5 p.m., they joined the nuns in worship. They had no sooner knelt on the cement floor, when a nun rushed in and whispered, "Come, Mother's here. Hurry."

Elinor Reese, Laura and Lark Campbell scrambled to their feet and ran after the nun. Mother Teresa was sitting in a car at the end of the alley. She had been told that some people wanted to meet her and was waiting.

"We couldn't believe it. We didn't know what to say. We didn't know if this would be our one and only time to see her," Laura Campbell said. "And she simply said to us, 'I'm so glad you've come to help.' she speaks English."

The three women returned the next morning to join the 200 nuns, novices and other volunteers for worship.

"We got very used to kneeling on the cement floor," Lark Campbell said. "There was no air conditioning. It was very hot and humid as we were there during the monsoon season. The one small fan was trained on the priest. But the service was so inspiring."

During their first Sunday, only one priest was present, so Mother Teresa helped distribute the Eucharist.

"I cannot describe to you the feeling I had, kneeling on the floor, in front of this tiny, old, stooped-over woman in a sari, and being served the body of Christ from her hand," Laura Campbell said.

*"All the worshipers take off their shoes," Elinor Reese added, "and so we saw her bare toes, crippled with arthritis, walking along the floor. Touching another person's feet is a sign of respect, and we touched her feet."*

*After mass, the women joined the others for a simple meal of rice and a vegetable sauce, an egg and a banana, and then they were off to work.*

*During their stay, they worked at the House of the Dying, at the orphanage and at the House of Leprosy.*

*"We noticed the lack of, well, of everything," Elinor said, "for example, they had no paper products. We carried a roll of toilet paper with us..."*

*They also found extremely primitive conditions in these various houses. In the orphanage, they were assigned laundry duty one day. They soaked the dirty laundry in tubs of water, and then "agitated it" by pushing it around with one bare foot. Water was heated over an open flame, and then the laundry dumped in there.*

*"We did not wring it out well enough the first time," Elinor Reese said, so they had to do it again. The "clothes dryer" was the roof, where they spread out the wet laundry on the wet cement.*

*Mother Teresa's sari, they noticed, was worn so thin, it was almost gauze-like. "You could see where she had darned the holes," Elinor said.*

*The fabric for her sari, and the fabric for all the cloth, even diapers for the orphanage, is made in the House of Leprosy. Even though the lepers have been healed, they are not welcomed back into society.*

*The orphans were hungry for any bit of attention or any toy. They would cling to the women, sometimes four and five of the children to one adult. Supplies were so short that should there be a pencil for a child, there, of course, was nothing to draw on.*

*"I saw these Lego blocks one day," related Elinor. "Three children each had one Lego. I had to physically wrestle the pieces away and show them that they could be put together. Each child did not want to let go of his Lego."*

*The three women bathed the children. They also bathed the dying earlier in the week. They scrubbed and swept, and did hard physical work under conditions that they had never imagined.*

*"Mother Teresa believes that whatever you do for the poor or needy, you do for Christ," Laura Campbell said. "Likewise, whenever you give to the poor, you give to Christ."*

*After four hours of physically and emotionally draining work, they would go back to their five-star hotel and collapse.*

*"We really wanted to stay in the barracks that other volunteers stayed in, but the heat, humidity, lack of air-conditioning, and just the lack of the things like bathroom facilities and showers kept us going back to the hotel each day," Laura Campbell said.*

*The lost luggage finally arrived. Elinor Reese, Laura and Lark Campbell had gathered supplies before leaving the United States. Each could take two bags on the plane. They allowed one bag for themselves and the other for supplies. Not knowing what was needed, they took rubber gloves, soaps, toothbrushes, toothpaste, candy, bubbles, chalk, paper, toilet paper, aspirins,*

*vitamins and other supplies. They also took quite a bit of money that friends and prayer groups had donated. They gave all this to the nuns, who took it to Mother Teresa. Word came back that Mother Teresa wanted them to do the scripture reading at the next Sunday's services.*

*Lark Campbell was not feeling well. "I brushed my teeth with the local water, instead of bottled water, and I think that's what made me ill."*

*At the Sunday's service, Laura Campbell and Elinor Reese read before the nuns, including Mother Teresa.*

*"The honor of being chosen to read before all of these dedicated nuns, and especially Mother Teresa herself, was overwhelming," recalls Elinor. "I don't remember hearing the outside noise nor feeling the heat."*

*And again that Sunday, the Mother, as she was called by all, came over and gave them communion.*

*When it was time to leave, they gave Mother Teresa the extra money they had. She asked if they could take mail back to their houses in the United States, because it would save them a lot of money in postage. Elinor Reese and The Campbells were more than happy to do it....*

*"Mother Teresa sat by me and held my hand," said Lark Campbell, "and told me of a beggar offering her two coins. She knew that if she accepted them, he would go hungry, but if she refused him, she would deny him the happiness of giving. And so, she accepted his coins and his face lit up.*

*"I asked Mother Teresa if it were possible to be humble and have money. She answered, 'Yes, Just do not be too attached to things.'"*

*"It was such a learning experience for me," Laura Campbell said. "I am still trying to learn how they can do the work they do seven days a week and not get burned out. They see Christ in everything they do."*

*"I see how wasteful we are," Elinor said. "Mother Teresa uses every dollar, yet she herself lives so simply. We asked her what we should do, if we should have fundraisers. She said no to fundraisers. She simply said to find the lonely, find the poor and take care of them. Each of us can make a difference in someone's life."*

As I have read this account of the women's journey, my mind returned again and again to Mother Teresa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and died in 1997 in Calcutta at the age of 87. She was canonized in 2016 by Pope John Paul II and given the title, "Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.". Whenever I speak about this 21st Century Saint, someone always says, "but I can't be like Mother Teresa!" And yet we can, as she told Elinor Reese, in words remarkably close to the words of Micah. All she ever asked of the people around her was to "do something beautiful for God." That was her vision, which also matches the spirit of The Beatitudes. For Saint Teresa, Americans who are privileged to live in the richest country on earth are, in fact, the poorest of all. Because of that, ironically, we are blessed. Jesus said it best: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."