

CHAPTER ONE

FREEDOM IS

IT WAS A FIRST FOR ME, I HAVE TO ADMIT. I HAD ONLY BEEN A PRIEST for about nine months and was excited that I was still experiencing firsts. My rookie season had been an amazing year and it was about to get better.

I was in Florida evangelizing on the beach with about fifty students from Franciscan University. (Tough ministry, I know, but someone has to answer the call.) Laura, one of the students, approached me and asked if I would mind talking to a man she had met. I said I would be happy to meet with him. As we walked to meet him, Laura explained that she had first met the man the day before and had begun talking with him. She had learned that the man was Catholic and that he had a very checkered past. He had lived most of his life up North and was in Florida for drug rehabilitation at a facility a few blocks from the beach. Laura had told him there was a priest available if he wanted to talk, and after two offers, the man had accepted.

I can still remember when I first saw "Ron." His skin was a weathered, reddish-tan color. It looked tough, worn and

tired. It had been days since he had shaved. The little hair he did have was pulled back in a ponytail that reached the top of his shoulders. He was not wearing a shirt, and his upper body resembled a world map with different-sized tattoos calling to mind faded memories. One of his ears had several rings in it.

In contrast, I was dressed in a nice, clean, white T-shirt with a Christian symbol on the back, swim trunks and sandals. My skin was colorless and looked as if I had been hibernating for months, which was not far from the truth after a cold Ohio winter. It appeared that Ron and I had little in common. However, I too was losing my hair, so Ron and I did have one thing in common.

I was not sure what I had gotten myself into and wondered where this was going to lead. This was certainly going to be interesting. In seminary, we had been told that in the first six months of being a priest, we would hear everything. Well, in my case this was not true. For me, it took nine months.

Ron looked tired, as if he had been fighting too hard for too long. I really couldn't tell how old he was; he could have been thirty or he could have been fifty. He looked beaten. I remember his eyes—I always notice eyes. They were dark, bloodshot and distant, as if he were trying to remember something from his past.

When I first approached him, he was seated on a blanket. As Laura introduced us, Ron tried to “tidy” things up. He moved his suntan lotion bottle, his cigarettes, straightened his blanket and leveled the sand around him—anything to avoid prolonged eye contact. He

reminded me of a nervous mother picking up the newspapers in her living room before inviting an unexpected guest to be seated.

Eventually, I did sit down, and Ron and I began to talk. At first, we exchanged words about nothing: the weather, the beach and the ocean—small talk. Slowly, Ron began to relax, as did I, and we began to really talk.

Sheepishly, Ron started to share his story with me. Yes, he was in Florida for drug rehabilitation, and, yes, he'd been using drugs for "about twenty years...not sure exactly how long." He had been clean for four months, which was the longest period since he had first started using. He shared that he was beginning to believe that it may be possible to get "out from under this addiction."

Ron was born and raised Catholic, but he quit attending Mass about the same time he began using drugs. He thought he was about fifteen at that time, but he couldn't remember exactly.

Ron shared more of his story and soon he just began to talk, as I sat back and listened. At first his words were guarded, but eventually they flowed out from him as if the dam had finally been broken. Story after story gushed from his heart. It was as if they had been jammed up for years, decades, and finally he was able to let them all out.

Ron had seen it all. He had done everything. He had robbed people, beaten people and spent time in prison. He had done more drugs than he could ever remember. He was sure he had hurt people who would never be able to forgive him. As Ron spoke, I could literally see burdens being lifted from him. Tears slowly developed in the corners of his eyes.

Then the tears broke free from his eyes and gently rolled down his cheeks. At the same time, a light began to flicker in his eyes. It was faint, but it was a light.

I began to feel the presence of God as he told one story after another. At one point, he looked at me through his tears and said, “Father, you want to know how bad it got? A few years ago, I had no place to live so I moved in with my mother. I remember she had just purchased a little puppy.” Ron paused to catch his breath. “Father, I would put out my cigarettes on this little puppy.” Tears ran down his cheeks. “Father, what kind of person would do that to a little puppy?” Tears ran down *my* cheeks. I prayed and rejoiced at what I could see God doing in Ron’s life.

I began to talk to Ron about a God who loves passionately and without condition. I shared with him about a God who sent his only Son so that we may have life and about how Jesus forgives. “Ron, you really are loved. You can be forgiven.”

As I spoke, Ron’s eyes looked as if he were remembering something, something he had forgotten long ago. I shared with Ron that there was not a place in his heart that God could not shine his light and that this light would defeat the darkness.

“Light always wins. No matter how dark the darkness is, the smallest light always shatters the darkness. Ron, Jesus was raised out of darkness, he is light—and he *wins!*” I exclaimed, “You really can be new; Christ really can take things that are ugly and gross and change them.”

After talking for a long time, I asked Ron if he wanted to go to confession. He stated that it had been over twenty-

five years since he had gone to confession and wasn't sure if he remembered how. Encouragingly I said, "I can coach you." So we began. There on the sunny beach in Florida, I heard Ron's confession. My father is a physician and he probably got used to seeing people come back to life after nearly dying. But I was awed as I saw Ron literally come back to life before my very eyes. His eyes became brighter. He no longer looked so tired and worn. There was a peace about him. I began to pray with Ron, and I saw waves of grace flowing over him. I led Ron in a prayer of commitment to Jesus Christ and now he was no longer crying; he was beaming. "Jesus, come into my heart.... Forgive me.... I accept you as my Savior... Fill me with your Holy Spirit.... Make me new.... Free me...."

Then I talked to Ron about going to Mass on Sunday. "I can *do* that? I get to go back to Mass?" He looked like a kid who had found out he was going to get to go to Disney World instead of having a tooth pulled.

Ron, for the first time in over twenty-five years, was free. He *experienced* the freedom. I got to watch a man who had been dead come back to life; I watched a man who had been a slave become free. Ron had been a slave to his past, his suffering, his addictions, his sin, his fear, a slave to himself and to countless other things. In one moment of time, God had broken into Ron's heart and in that moment he had experienced God's freeing power. Jesus had become real to him. He had broken into his life and had set him free. Jesus' words, referring to himself as the Son of God, are forever true: "So if a son frees you, then you will truly be free" (John 8:36).

Ron and I parted ways that day, and I never saw him again. I have no idea what became of his life, whether or not it was permanently changed. Perhaps three months later he was struggling with his old demons again, but on that day, on a beach in Florida, Ron tasted freedom.

America: Home of the Free?

So, what is it? What is freedom? I think there are a lot of ideas out there about freedom that are not correct. Many people have a false understanding of freedom. Freedom is not simply the ability to do whatever one wants whenever one wants to do it. Freedom has to be more than the capability of a human person to pursue the next sensual pleasure without restriction. Freedom is also not merely political, being allowed to weigh in with your opinion and vote for your favorite candidate.

Freedom, of course, is a very common theme in the United States. We Americans talk a great deal about this thing called “freedom” and we will fight and die to maintain it. This ideal, New Hampshire’s state motto, is expressed directly on its license plates: “Live Free or Die.” The Founding Fathers who established this country believed in a man’s right to be free. They founded the United States of America on the fundamental principles that man should be free: free to speak, free to publish, free to bear arms, free to worship. In other words, freedom is simply a part of the American DNA. As Americans, we are oriented toward freedom and much of the world sees it as one of our greatest attributes, which it is.

However, this type of freedom, while a blessing, is only

a *political* freedom. Freedom that has God as its source goes much deeper and is the most authentic freedom of all. Sadly, most Americans do not experience this deeper freedom. They do not even know it exists.

It is such a blessing to live in a country where we are free, but even in the midst of this freedom, many people experience tremendous bondage. It is true that we experience political freedom, the freedom to choose our leaders, the freedom to come and go as we please, the freedom to live where we want. But there is much more to freedom than this.

So, What Is It?

Great question. I am reminded of what Pope John Paul II said on this topic to a group of young people gathered in St. Louis during his 1999 pastoral visit:

Do not be taken in by **false values and deceptive slogans**, especially about your freedom. True freedom is a wonderful gift from God, and it has been a cherished part of your country's history. But when freedom is separated from truth, individuals lose their moral direction and the very fabric of society begins to unravel.

Freedom is not the ability to do anything we want, whenever we want. Rather, **freedom is the ability to live responsibly the truth of our relationship with God and with one another**. Remember what Jesus said: "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32). Let no one mislead you or prevent you from seeing what really matters. Turn to Jesus, listen to him, and discover the true meaning and direction of your lives.¹

This can often be difficult to hear. Many people believe that freedom actually does mean they are able to do whatever they want, whenever they want, without limits, boundaries or responsibility. "No one is going to tell me what to do."

Too many people really do think that the sole source of freedom comes from the government that exercises authority over them. But the freedom I am speaking of is not that kind of freedom. It is much deeper than that, more precious, more sacred, more holy. True freedom comes from the very nature of God. While a person can live in the freedom offered by a government, he or she can still be a slave. And while another may live in a war-torn, oppressed region such as Bosnia, that person can be truly free.

Take Michal, for example. He was living in the shadows of a terrible war. He had nothing, could not come and go as he pleased, and by all accounts would not be considered "free." It was 1998, and I was in Bosnia with signs of the recently ended war all around me. About forty of my students and I were spending a day at a refugee center which was an old psychiatric hospital now inhabited by people who had no other place to live because their homes and villages had been destroyed. This abandoned hospital was now their "home." They had no money and no means of transportation. Because of that, they were "prisoners" to this compound.

When I walked into Michal's "apartment" (which was actually a single room in the facility) his scar-ridden face was beaming. His smile, though checkered with missing teeth, filled the room with a graced sense of joy and wel-

come. He and his wife quickly began waiting on us (me and a few students). They offered to split a couple of cookies and a single beer with us. These were precious luxuries that Michal had been saving for a time such as this. We began to talk but soon it became obvious that speech was difficult for Michal, so his wife recounted their story.

During the war, she told us, soldiers had broken into their home and forced Michal outside where they bound his hands behind his back with barbed wire. Then they proceeded to beat him, and they slit his throat and left him for dead. The soldiers went back into the house and forced Michal's wife into the back of a truck. From there, they went from house to house beating people and destroying their homes. As the soldiers and prisoners left the village, they came across a badly beaten man crawling across the road. The man was thrown into the back of the truck. He had been beaten beyond recognition; Michal's wife was unable to recognize her own husband lying at her feet.

Occasionally, as his wife recounted the story, he would lean close to her and whisper words of clarification or more details. Due to the damage from his beating, Michal was not able to speak above a whisper.

What appalling suffering they had experienced. But incredibly, they both went on to speak about how grateful they were for all God had given them, how God had blessed them. They were alive and they had one another. They had faith; they would be OK. And besides, they exclaimed, "many others were far worse off than ourselves."