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He walked toward us with a steady gait. Confident. Calm. Content. But certainly not carefree. How could he be?

His sun-faded orange jumpsuit stood out sharply against the stark backdrop of white prison walls. In the background, a football match flowed across a dusty, compressed pitch, the thump of the ball punctuated by shouts from the men. Nervous inmates paced along the inner fence as an eclectic mixture of rhythmic dance music and melodic traditional tunes drifted over the wall from the military housing surrounding the prison.

As he approached, his scars became apparent. Freckles traveled down his face onto his lips, rising in a soft grin, a dramatic contrast with the razor wire fencing behind him.

He stooped to enter the shade of the billowing tent where Taryn and I sat with a group of sixty prisoners and church youth leaders. He took his place at the front and began to speak.

In the tradition of the Apostle Paul, Milton, Bonhoeffer, and Solzhenitzyn, he testified

from prison about the overwhelming love of God. Acceptance. Restoration. Purpose. His eyes brightened as he spoke.

He spoke of a system that promised power and control. He took what he wanted. He ended lives when it suited him. And when the blood settled and society pronounced its judgment he was faced with the consequences of his choices. He found that he imprisoned himself long before his country had done so.

But freedom may be found in unlikely places.

With the clock ticking against him he chose to wisely spend what time remained. He recognized a deep, compelling bond among a few of his fellow inmates. They wrestled together with their anger, supported one another in their distress. They struggled to seek and give forgiveness. He jealously wanted what they had. Not with the old, familiar desire for control, but with a submissive thirst. The brothers understood his longing, and they shared their discoveries with him. They understood the truth that brings life, and their small community put

flesh to it. His days numbered, he began to study the Word for himself.

He expressed deep compassion for his fellow death row inmates. Some had come to find their place in relationship with God. Others had not. He felt a great burden to share the grace of God with those who had yet to know him.

He spoke of his beautiful freedom in Jesus, clearly still to be completed, and yet now complete. Razor wire twisted overhead. Brick towers all around. Bolts secured heavy doors. And yet...

"...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

This story comes from Nathan Dirks. He and his wife Taryn are Mennonite Church Canada Witness Workers in Botswana, engaging with local church youth on a prison visitation ministry. For more information about the Dirks, visit:

donate.mennonitechurch.ca/dirks

Mennonite Church Canada invites you to share with your congregation this Celebration Story. It should take no more than 2 minutes to read aloud. You might also consider sharing it through your church newsletter, bulletin board, website or other communication venue.

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11