

MORE GOOD NEWS FROM GRACE VALLEY: *The Spirit's Prayers*

Well, *Grace Valley* is beautiful at this time of year! It's that tiny village of 300 that sits on the map where Massachusetts, Vermont and New Hampshire all CONVERGE into a single DOT. Spring has sprung in *Grace Valley*, and EVERYONE is planting flowers this weekend. You never DARE plant much before Memorial Day, just in CASE you get a killing FROST.

Well, on MONDAY of this week, young Jimmy McKnight came to see Pastor Peters. Jimmy's the eldest SON of Deacon, Tom McKnight. He lives with his wife, Gretchen, down near the state park. And Jimmy said: *Pastor Peters, I have to tell you something I LEARNED yesterday. As you KNOW, Gretchen is VERY emotional. And of course, YOU know how it was growing up in MY house. We didn't SHOW emotions. But Gretchen never STOPS. We hadn't been married 2 weeks when SCREAMING woke me UP in the middle of the night. I thought I was going to have a HEART attack. Jimmy, Jimmy! Come QUICK! So I JUMPED out of bed and DASHED for the living room! And THERE she was, holding a PLANT! She said: LOOK at this PLANT, Jimmy! LOOK at it! I rubbed my eyes and LOOKED at it. I didn't see ANYTHING. So I said: It looks NORMAL to ME, Gretchen! What's the PROBLEM? Well, she got SO upset with me! She said: Jimmy, THIS is our WEDDING plant, and it has a BUD on it! Don't you SEE it! And sure enough, HIDDEN down there in the leaves was a TINY, almost microscopic bud. I said: Gretchen, YOU woke me UP, out of the DEAD sleep, for THIS? I can hardly SEE it! And she said: Jimmy, YOU don't understand. THIS is our WEDDING plant! It has a BUD on it! That's a BLESSING! It's GOOD luck! And she got SO mad at me. And Pastor, for 5 years, I been LIVING with this! And that's the POSITIVE side of it, because I have to ADMIT that she HAS helped me APPRECIATE some of those LITTLE miracles of life.*

But the DOWN side of it IS that she CRIES at the drop of a HAT. SHE cries at TV COMMERCIALS! She CRIES when somebody ELSE gets hurt! She even CRIES when she hears certain MUSIC at CHURCH! She CRIES at EVERYTHING! And for ME, who grew up in a home where you might not see a TEAR in a DECADE, all these EMOTIONS just feel so FOREIGN. And I'm JUST not COMFORTABLE with them. In fact, I find it EMBARRASSING!

But Pastor, YESTERDAY in church you SAID something that helped me UNDERSTAND. Do you remember? Gretchen was walking up to receive COMMUNION. The choir was singing that song that we ALL love so much: It is WELL... It is WELL... it is WELL with my SOUL. And Gretchen's TEARS were WORSE than ever! They were RUNNING down her FACE! And I was SO embarrassed. But THEN, I heard what you SAID to her. You said what you ALWAYS say: PEACE be with you, Gretchen. But THEN you added: And may God HEAR your PRAYERS, Gretchen.

Well, Pastor, I never THOUGHT of it that way before! But you're RIGHT: those TEARS are her PRAYERS. When she's happy and at PEACE, they're her prayers of PRAISE and THANKSGIVING! When she's feeling GUILTY, they're her prayers of CONFESSION, as well as JOY at knowing that God is so LOVING and forgiving. When someone ELSE is HURT -- whether it's someone she LOVES, or a hungry CHILD on TV -- her TEARS are her prayers of INTERCESSION on their BEHALF. And when SHE is hurting or confused or afraid, her TEARS are her prayers of PETITION for herself. They're HER way of asking God for HELP, and HEALING. And I know she doesn't WANT to cry. It's not a CONSCIOUS thing! It's just that

she FEELS so DEEPLY that ALL she can DO is cry. It HAS to come OUT! But YOU knew all the TIME that her TEARS were her PRAYERS, didn't you, Pastor Peters?

Pastor Peters said: YES, Jimmy, I DID. You see: St. Paul talks about the Spirit of God WITHIN us, praying to God in God's OWN way: in SIGHS too DEEP for WORDS. And those TEARS are PART of what he MEANS. It's like the WOMAN who came to JESUS and washed His FEET with her TEARS and DRIED them with her HAIR. HER tears were her PRAYERS: her PRAYERS for compassion and MERCY, for LOVE and forgiveness. But Jimmy, it's OK that you didn't UNDERSTAND. It took ME a LONG time to learn it. And I have a COLLEAGUE, another PASTOR who's OLDER than you, who JUST learned it LAST week. I meet EACH week with a Clergy SUPPORT Group. 6 ministers from around the area get together to talk about issues and struggles in our ministries, and to SUPPORT each other. Well, JUST last week, a young minister came to our group and said: I just had the WORST, BEST day I'll probably ever HAVE as a pastor. He's an ASSOCIATE minister at LARGE church nearby, and his Senior Minister went on a MISSION trip, so ED was left in CHARGE. Well, on the second day after his Senior Minister LEFT, a young couple from church, who had just adopted a little boy from El Salvador, had a TERRIBLE tragedy. The father, who is a DOCTOR in town, was backing his car out of the driveway, and he ran over the little boy. By the time they got him to the hospital, the boy was DEAD.

Well, when I entered the EMERGENCY room, I could HEAR the parents WEEPING and WAILING. I KNEW how MUCH they had WANTED this child, and how LONG they had WAITED. Well, as SOON as she SAW me, the boy's mother reached OUT to me, and I just lost it. I just CRIED with them for the LONGEST time. Eventually, I asked them: Would you like me to say a PRAYER? They nodded, so I began to PRAY. But AGAIN, my voice cracked and I just broke down. The MOTHER put her arms around me and tried to comfort me, but I COULDN'T stop CRYING! I'll tell you: it was a TERRIBLE piece of ministry! I went HOME that day feeling like the biggest FAILURE as a pastor! Well, 2 days later, we had the boy's FUNERAL, and WHEN it was over, the mother said to me: Your ministry at the hospital the other day was such a COMFORT! You'll NEVER know what it MEANT to us. I said to her: WHAT do you MEAN? I felt just TERRIBLE about it! She said: OH no! When we saw that YOU were JUST as heartbroken as WE were, it really HELPED. WE felt like WE could go ON, because WE had someone who really UNDERSTOOD how TERRIBLE we felt.

And Jimmy, I said to him: Ed, I think YOU just experienced what St. Paul MEANS when he says that, in sighs too DEEP for words, the Spirit HELPS us. The Spirit INTERCEDES for us. The Spirit PRAYS to GOD for us in GOD'S own WAY.

Jimmy said: But Pastor, I almost NEVER cry! WHAT about people who AREN'T criers? And Pastor Peters replied: Don't WORRY, Jimmy, the Spirit speaks in LOTS of languages! In fact, I'll never FORGET the TIME I went to the hospital to visit a man named, BOB. Bob was the Head DEACON at my LAST church. And I was SO apprehensive as I entered his HOSPITAL room. HE'D just received word that he had CANCER, and the prognosis was NOT good. So, I just said: Bob, how are you DOING? He said: I'm GLAD you're HERE, Pastor. I need help.

HOW can I help you? I asked. He said: Well, I just CAN'T figure out what to PRAY for. Do I pray for HEALING? God MUST know I really WANT to be healed. On the OTHER hand, why should I be healed, and not everybody ELSE in this hospital? What makes ME so special? A LOT of people get CANCER. WHY is MY cancer is any different? And WHY should God heal ME? Who am I? On the OTHER hand, I really DO want to be HEALED. Think of all the GOOD things I can DO if I get HEALED. I can CONTINUE all the WORK I've been doing at

CHURCH; and it's ALL work to help OTHERS! But then again, MAYBE I'm just like a frightened KID, who will promise God ANYTHING, if ONLY God will do it HER way. And BESIDES, WHO am I to be asking GOD for ANYTHING? I have a LOUSY prayer life! On MOST days, I don't even give GOD the time of day! And SO, here I SIT like some babbling FOOL, begging and BARGAINING with God. But, WHO am I even to PRAY such prayers? WHO am I to be asking God to heal ME? So, WHAT should I PRAY for, Pastor?

Well, Jimmy, I DIDN'T know what to TELL him. SO, for the LONGEST time, Bob and I just SAT there in SILENCE. But somehow, in the SILENCE that passed BETWEEN us, God's Spirit MUST been praying on our BEHALF, because BOTH of us found a sense of PEACE that day. And even though Bob did not SURVIVE his cancer, he WAS healed. You see: one thing I've LEARNED during my MANY years of ministry is that HEALING doesn't necessarily mean SURVIVAL. There's a DEEPER kind of healing than PHYSICAL healing, and it's a SPIRITUAL kind of healing. And how BLESSED are those who FIND it. Well, IN the SILENCE that Bob and I SHARED that day, I believe that the SPIRIT was praying FOR us *in SIGHS too DEEP for WORDS*, because BOTH of us found that SPIRITUAL kind of healing, and it was JUST what we NEEDED. We BOTH said so later.

And you know, Jimmy: I REALIZED that day that THOSE are the prayers that matter MOST, the PRAYERS that the SPIRIT prays for us -- in our SIGHS and in our TEARS. It's NOT that MY prayers in a hospital or at a funeral, in COUNSELING or in WORSHIP, don't MATTER. They DO matter! And so do YOURS! But what REALLY brings people the STRENGTH and COURAGE, HEALING and HOPE, that they NEED, are the SPIRIT'S prayers, the *TOO deep for WORDS* prayers that the SPIRIT prays IN and through our SIGHS, IN and through our GROANS, and IN and through our TEARS. So, Jimmy, WHEN I see someone like Gretchen, FEELING her prayers so DEEPLY that TEARS pour forth from her eyes, I DO understand. And ALL I can say to her at such a time – and maybe all YOU need to SAY to her at such a time as WELL – is: *may God HEAR your prayers, Gretchen. May God HEAR your prayers!* And then I give THANKS to GOD that the Spirit is at WORK so POWERFULLY in the life of someone I CARE about.

As Pastor Peters SPOKE, he noticed TEARS welling up in Jimmy's eyes. NO, there weren't MANY of them, but ENOUGH to make Pastor Peters put his HAND on Jimmy's shoulder and say: *May God HEAR your prayers, Jimmy. May God HEAR your prayers!*

Well, that's the GOOD news from Grace Valley, where raindrops when they fall hear the soil singing love songs to the sky. Amen.