

ACTS 19:1-7  
MARK 1:4-11

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January 11, 2009

### **BAPTIZED IN AN OLD MAN'S TEARS**

It was early on in my ministry. I was MAYBE 30 years old. I'd been a SOLO pastor for just a couple of years, and I was pretty GREEN behind the ears. The experience happened on a COLD and dismal Wednesday in January, just 3 days after we had celebrated the baptism of Jesus in CHURCH, and read the STORY of His baptism from MARK'S gospel. It was a day that was brightened up ONLY by the LARGE variety of BIRDS feeding on the bird feeders just outside the big BAY window in the family room of a small house in Randolph, Massachusetts. The room was no longer a FAMILY room, however. All the USUAL furnishings had been REMOVED to make room for a HOSPITAL bed. And ON that bed LAY a man whom I, at age 30, thought was a very OLD man. He was 82. And even though BONE cancer had crept up his spine, CONFINING him to BED since well before Christmas, his MIND was still ACTIVE and ALERT. And the TEARS in his eyes told a story that was PRECIOUS and SPECIAL, a story that NEEDS to be TOLD, and a story he told me I could SHARE with whomever I wished.

IN his tears, first of all, was a story of GUILT. At 82, he NOW lay HELPLESS in the home of his DAUGHTER, relying on HER to meet his EVERY need. And ONLY now, after ALL these years, was this 60-year old woman FINALLY getting to KNOW her father. You see: he'd NEVER really had TIME for her before. He OWNED his own business and worked CONSTANTLY, even as HER children, his grandchildren, were growing UP. And THAT'S why he just COULDN'T understand HOW she could NOW give ALL of HER time and energy to caring for HIM. And the guilt just PLAGUED him! EVERY day, in fact, he would BEG her to just PUT him in a NURSING home, but she REFUSED.

His TEARS also told a story of REGRET. He regretted that he'd NEVER taken the time to get to know his DAUGHTER, and to find out what an extremely BEAUTIFUL person she WAS. He just couldn't BELIEVE that he'd never really KNOWN that about her before, and that he was just NOW seeing it for the FIRST time -- on his DEATHBED

In his tears, there was ALSO a story of GRIEF. Early that fall, he'd LOST his BELOVED wife, ANITA, early. Oh, he KNEW that it was for the BEST. She'd suffered LONG and HARD, and she hadn't known HIM -- or anyone ELSE -- for several YEARS. But EVERY time he thought about Anita -- and their LIFE together and all their DREAMS -- and EVEN the last few years of visiting her EVERY day in the nursing home -- he just couldn't help but CRY. It just HURT him MORE than he could express.

His tears told a story of SADNESS as well. ALL his life, he'd been an INDEPENDENT man, a very CAPABLE man, a businessman with a GREAT reputation. In fact, until just 2 months prior to this January morning, he'd kept up his own HOME, driven his own CAR, made his own MEALS, hosted his own FRIENDS, and even prepared his own TAXES. But NOW, he suddenly HAD to depend upon his DAUGHTER, and her very PATIENT husband, for EVERYTHING! In the last couple of days, they'd EVEN had to change his DIAPERS, because he could no longer get to the COMMUNE that still SAT next to his BED. And it ALL made him very SAD -- and NOT just to lose his independence, but ALSO to know that this HOSPITAL bed would be his LAST home, and that he'd HAVE to say good-bye to EVERYTHING else that he'd known and loved: his FAMILY and FRIENDS, his HOME, and even his CAT.

And FINALLY, his TEARS told ONE more story on that COLD January morning. As STRANGE as it may sound, they ALSO told a story of JOY. You see: THIS was a very

SPECIAL morning for old Harold Arnold, because standing NEXT to his daughter, and ENCIRCLING his BED, were 6 of Harold's FAVORITE people in ALL the world. They were 6 people whom he LOVED very much. They were 6 of his NEIGHBORS from back HOME. And they'd driven ALL the way from Seekonk, nearly an HOUR, to SHARE this very special DAY with him, SOME of them even taking a day off from WORK in order to DO so. And most of THEM had tears of joy in THEIR eyes as well! You see: TODAY, they came not JUST as friends and neighbors, as MOST had done BEFORE. TODAY, they ALSO came representing over 300 people back home. TODAY, they came AS *The Seekonk Congregational CHURCH*.

And AS he STARED at them through his TEARS, Harold REMEMBERED all the JOY and MEANING and FRIENDSHIP that his WIFE seemed to FIND by being PART of their church family. AND he remembered ALL the acts of kindness, LOVE and compassion that THESE people, and so many MORE from that church, had SHOWERED upon Anita -- AS well as upon HIM -- during those LONG, difficult years when Anita was CONFINED to a nursing home. Harold ALSO remembered his many THEOLOGICAL discussions with the church's young PASTOR, who seemed to LIKE him and would often visit HIM at home, even though Anita was the one who was REALLY a part of his "FLOCK." And THAT made him remember his many intellectual struggles with HIMSELF through the years, and how EASY it was to CONVINCED himself of how FOOLISH it IS to believe that a MAN, even a great TEACHER, who had lived 2000 years ago, could POSSIBLY be DIVINE, could possibly be GOD in the flesh. AND he remembered the ANGUISH that he felt on all those lonely nights when he sat on his PORCH, staring at the lighted STEEPLE of *The Seekonk Congregational Church*, and WISHED that he could BRING himself to become a PART of it, and yet not ABLE to utter the words, "I BELIEVE." Yes, it ALL came back to him as he LOOKED at them through his tears.

But MOST of all, on this January morning, Harold remembered that WONDERFUL feeling of CALM, that SOOTHING sense of PEACE, that had WASHED over him just DAYS earlier when suddenly he REALIZED that UNDERNEATH all of his intellectual and theological MIND GAMES, he DID, in fact, BELIEVE that which he thought that he could NOT. And all of a SUDDEN, after 82 YEARS of arguing with himself, he REALIZED that he could NOW say, in GOOD conscience: *Jesus Christ is my LORD and Savior*. And as SOON as he REALIZED that he really DID believe, he experienced a PEACE of heart and mind that he had NEVER known before. And WITH that PEACE came a realization of WHAT he had to do NEXT. Before his death, he HAD to be baptized a CHRISTIAN and JOIN that little church that seemed to MEAN so much to his friends and neighbors, not to mention his beloved, Anita.

Now, when he asked his daughter to contact the MINISTER from back home, he never DREAMT that, within 36 hours, SIX people would PILE into a MINI-VAN and drive up to RANDOLPH. But THERE they were, FILING into his room, giving him a HUG and ENCIRCLING his BED. And THAT'S why his tears POURED forth as they chatted with him and transformed his rolling hospital tray into a little ALTAR and his room into a SANCTUARY. And he cried even MORE tears when the pastor touched his HEAD with water from the Jordan River, the site of Jesus' OWN baptism, and then made the sign of the CROSS on his forehead. His tears CONTINUED as they ALL shook his hand and WELCOMED him into their CHURCH family, and then lined up on either side of his BED to share with him his FIRST communion -- and as it turned out, his LAST. And finally, his WEEPING increased when, during the pastor's closing prayer, the SUN suddenly broke THROUGH the clouds to shine BRIGHTLY through his bay window and ONTO his tear-filled face, as if GOD were actually SMILING upon him and giving him his own SPECIAL blessing, as if HE, like Jesus, was God's BELOVED son! Yes,

Harold's TEARS were tears of JOY on that January morning, for he felt SO blessed and SO loved, and not JUST by his friends and pastor, but MORE importantly, he felt GOD's love and GOD'S blessing as well. And he just couldn't CONTAIN all his JOY!

LATER, as his friends shared coffee and donuts in the den, Harold spent some QUIET moments with his PASTOR. He said: *Gordon, NEVER in my life have I felt so BLESSED -- and so CALM -- and so at PEACE. I always felt like something was MISSING in my life, but NOW I feel like I can die PEACEFULLY. I can now understand how old SIMEONE felt in the Temple, that OLD man who had waited so LONG to see God's MESSIAH, as he'd been promised. And finally, AS he GAZED into the face of the infant, JESUS, he could say: **And NOW I can die CONTENTED, Lord, for my EYES have SEEN Your SALVATION.***

AS Harold spoke, I ALSO thought of PETER, when a REJECTED Jesus in John, chapter 6, asked His disciples if they TOO wanted to LEAVE Him as so many OTHERS had done because His teachings were HARD, and what He ASKED them to DO was DIFFICULT. And Peter replied: *Lord, to WHOM shall we GO? YOU have the words of eternal LIFE!* And I ALSO thought of Jesus at His LAST Supper with His disciples, on the night before His DEATH, when He said to them: *Set your troubled hearts at REST. Trust in God ALWAYS. Trust ALSO in ME... I am the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE... I have TOLD all this so that, in ME, you may find PEACE.* As Harold and I sat there in silence, looking at each other and holding hands, TEARS filled the eyes of BOTH of us -- tears of JOY, tears of FAITH, and tears of PEACE!

I only saw Harold Arnold ONE more time after that SPECIAL morning. It was about 10 days later at *Cardinal Cushing Hospital*. He was very WEAK and, AS it turned out, DEATH was just HOURS away. But when I walked into his ROOM, his eyes LIT up and a SMILE crossed his lips! Immediately he pointed to a gold CROSS around his NECK, and said: *I asked my daughter to BUY this for me after you LEFT the other day. The NURSES told me I had to take it OFF, but I told them NO. I told them that I planned to WEAR it to my GRAVE, and that they BEST not TOUCH it. And Gordon, I just CANNOT believe how much PEACE wearing this cross BRINGS me!* And TEARS began welling up in his EYES again, as he continued to speak: *And THAT'S why I asked my daughter to get YOU a gold cross TOO.* He wiped his eyes and then opened the drawer of his tray table. And with hands still WET from his TEARS, he picked up a gold cross and motioned for me to LEAN forward so that he could slowly place it around my NECK. And AS he did, he said to me: *Gordon, you are TRULY one of God's CHOSEN. And if you ever DOUBT your calling, OR your EFFECTIVENESS, just put on this CROSS and remember old Harold Arnold. And you can be SURE that I'll be WATCHING you from the other side. Blessings on you, Gordon! Now go along home, because I'm getting VERY tired.*

And that's the last I ever SAW of Harold Arnold. He DIED very PEACEFULLY, just a couple of hours later, in the arms of his daughter. But I have to tell you that I felt like I was BAPTIZED that day TOO, baptized by an old man's TEARS. And it felt GOOD, precious!

Such LIFE-GIVING moments HAPPEN sometimes in ministry, you know -- and NOT just ORDAINED ministry. WHENEVER we strive to minister to one another -- AND to the world -- more compassionately and more lovingly, God's Spirit comes ALIVE and MIRACLES begin to happen. Our Stephen Ministers KNOW that to be TRUE (which is why I'm GLAD that we have such a LARGE class of Stephen Minister TRAINEES), but it's something that we ALL can and should be experiencing. SO, I would URGE us to work hard that we might INCREASINGLY become THAT kind of congregation, more and MORE of a congregation where love, compassion and MINISTRY are a WAY of life; where people go the extra mile for one another; and where God's Spirit is ALIVE and MIRACLES are ALWAYS happening. Amen.