

# Awakening to Appreciation

A sermon in the Easter-Pentecost series “Spring Awakenings”

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- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28 <sup>16</sup> Be joyful always, <sup>17</sup> pray at all times, <sup>18</sup> be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.
- Luke 6:27-31 <sup>31</sup> Do for others just what you want them to do for you.
- Romans 13:11b The hour has already come for you to awake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Remembering that our very lives are a gift from God, let us strive to show our appreciation for all the people whose lives bless our lives.

I don't know precisely where in the factory this sign was posted – perhaps scrawled on a restroom wall or taped to a breakroom refrigerator. But an employee who had felt taken for granted for far too long finally scrawled this message and posted it for others to see: "Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit. It gives you a warm feeling but nobody else notices."<sup>1</sup>

We all like to be appreciated for the contributions we make: contributions that help our families survive and flourish; contributions we make in the classroom or factory, in the office or shop; our efforts and energies given to civic organizations and churches and schools; the things we do as grateful citizens to build up wholesome communities and a resilient democracy. We all like to *feel* appreciated.

The other side of that, of course, is making the effort to *show* appreciation. Even before a toddler has shown some mastery of language, how do moms and dads try to train their children to be appreciative? When, say, the nurse gives the child a sticker for being a good little patient, parents prompt them with, "...And Aaron, what do you say? *'Thank you.'*"

This is the next-to-last installment in my “Spring Awakenings” sermon series that started on Easter and concludes next week on the Day of Pentecost. “Spring Awakenings” acknowledges that just like the flora and fauna of Earth awaken with the coming of spring, we can consider how our faith calls us to awaken to new possibilities in action and in relationships. I based this series on a verse in Romans Chapter 13. In it the apostle Paul urges us to adopt a new urgency in living into the consequences of our faith. In verse 11 Paul wrote, “The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”<sup>2</sup> In previous installments we’ve “awakened” to second chances, to boldness, to nature, and to a new commandment.

What could it mean for us to “awaken to appreciation?” I’m going to touch on three simple points:

1. We all need to know we’re appreciated;
2. Having an appreciative attitude helps us endure difficulty; and
3. Most of us can do more to show appreciation.

**First: We all need to know we’re appreciated.**

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<sup>1</sup> Uncited in eSermons.com at [http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?user\\_id=13818](http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?user_id=13818) accessed 5/3/2016

<sup>2</sup> Romans 13:11b New International Version

I imagine that if you gave it even just one minute of thought, you could come up with someone in your life who does not receive the recognition she or he deserves for the work they do, the valuable contributions they make, the relationships they foster. Your mind could settle on a *group* of people, like:

- the people who haul away all the trash you generate;
- flight attendants whose “office” is long, cramped, in motion, and filled with people;
- police and firefighters who are on stand-by “24/7” in case you were to need them.

Maybe you thought of a particular *individual* who probably isn’t appreciated as much as she or he deserves:

- the guy who fixes your car because you have no idea how to do it;
- the school crossing-guard working in the sun or rain, heat or cold to protect the children in your community from the motorists in your community;
- let’s see... who else probably isn’t appreciated as much as she deserves...? How about “mom?”

Everyone likes to feel appreciated for what they do and who they are, but sadly, we don’t have much trouble thinking of many, many people who don’t receive the strokes they deserve. This is true not just for commoners like you and me. Even famous people can feel unappreciated for what they do. For instance, there are few figures in the world of music who were as prolific and as genius as Johann Sebastian Bach. But was he appreciated by his contemporaries, or by the congregations he served as church musician? Sadly, the answer is No.

The parishioners at St. Thomas Church [in Leipzig] often complained about the strange and innovative music that Bach wrote for the choir and organ each Sunday.

They didn't know what a gifted musician was in their midst. After his death, the music of Bach was seldom performed until [about one-hundred years later when] Felix Mendelssohn began a revival of appreciation that has lasted into our own time.<sup>3</sup>

Those people had Bach in their midst, for goodness’ sake! And we have Hilary and Glen in our midst, for goodness’ sake! If we don’t make the effort to appreciate people in our lives for who they are and what they do, sadly we may overlook an immeasurable gift that’s being offered to us.

Any book on management theory and practice extolls the importance of making sure that your employees know that they are appreciated. They want to be appreciated for their contributions to the enterprise, of course; they spend more time on the job than on just about any other aspect of their lives. But employees thrive when they know that they’re *appreciated as human beings* with lives beyond the “9 to 5”, that they’re people with responsibilities and obligations, interests and passions that make them much more than mere worker-bees.

In premarital counseling I try to help couples discover the benefit of appreciating their spouse daily because the happiest marital relationship can be eroded when one partner feels unappreciated.

Everyone needs to know that they are appreciated. Mother Teresa, the woman who spent her life caring for the most impoverished and neglected of the world’s poor, observed that “There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Second: Having an appreciative attitude helps us endure difficulty.**

Earlier we heard from Paul’s first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians who were enduring persecution by their neighbors because of their belief in Jesus as God’s son. The Christians were being bullied. Being bullied is nothing to dismiss as “kids will

<sup>3</sup> “They Could Not See Him,” from *If Only...* by Wallace H. Kirby, CSS Publishing Company, cited in eSermons.com at [http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?user\\_id=13818](http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?user_id=13818), accessed 5/3/2016

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jollynotes.com/inspirational-verses/appreciating-others/>, accessed 5/3/2016

be kids." If I were to ask you to raise your hand if you ever experienced bullying as a child, I know many hands would join mine in the air. Whether in Thessalonica or suburban Cleveland, being persecuted – bullied – preoccupies your thoughts; it affects you every day; it colors your mood. But in a situation precisely like that, the apostle Paul urged those beleaguered believers to "Be joyful always," to "pray at all times," to "be thankful in all circumstances." Why? Because, he wrote, "this is what God wants from you" as one who trusts in Jesus.

Those three actions – always being joyful, prayerful, thankful – point to the same thing: being appreciative.

An appreciative life looks at life deeply. We're less rattled by the ups and downs of daily life when we embrace an appreciative view of life. You might get what I mean by thinking of the difference between "weather" and "climate." The beneficial or disruptive occurrences of *daily* life are like the daily weather that can be pleasant one day and rotten the next. But living an appreciative life lends a deeper, more long-term perspective; this is akin to climate that isn't concerned with hourly changes but with big-picture patterns over a long time. The apostle Paul suggests that when we resolve to see our lives as priceless gifts from God, we can always appreciate the gift of our lives even if our *immediate* circumstances are difficult, disappointing or painful. Having an appreciative attitude helps us endure difficulty.

**Third: Most of us can do more to express appreciation to others.**

You may have heard this piece of advice before: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." While we're most familiar with this "Golden Rule" coming from the lips of Jesus, in fact he was recalling a maxim that, in various forms, dated back centuries to philosophers in India, China, Greece, Rome, and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Applying the Golden Rule to appreciation is really simple: since we are strengthened and encouraged when we are appreciated by others, it follows that we'll contribute to the strengthening and encouragement of others when we express our appreciation to them. To give an extreme example, let me tell you the story of what Francis Gajowniczek chose to do to express appreciation to someone who had an immeasurable impact on his life.

...Every August, he made a trip – a trip to the past. Every year, he returned to Auschwitz. Why would anyone make an annual trek to a place of such suffering and pain?

Francis Gajowniczek returned because he was one of the few prisoners who survived. In July 1941, a prison break occurred at Auschwitz. The German officers always responded decisively. The remaining prisoners were called to attention. All day, they stood in the heat while the guards searched for the escapee. If he was not discovered, 10 numbers were selected. The prisoners who wore the corresponding numbers on their tattered prison uniforms immediately were taken from their places in line. The chosen 10 were led to a cell where they were locked up and left to die.

The prison break of July 1941 set in motion this grisly chain of events. As usual, each number was read with the prisoner stepping forward to receive his or her fate. However, this time when a number was read, a man cried out: "My wife and children, I shall never see them again." That man was Francis Gajowniczek.

As Gajowniczek stepped forward in tears, muffled steps were heard from the back of the line. A prisoner was breaking rank. The elderly prisoner made his way to the commandant undaunted. Inexplicably, no one struck him or shot him. More surprising than his motion was his request. The prisoner, a priest, asked if he could die in Gajowniczek's place.

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<sup>5</sup> From "Golden Rule Chronology" in [Ethics and the Golden Rule](http://www.harryhiker.com/chronology.htm) by Harry J. Gensler at <http://www.harryhiker.com/chronology.htm>, accessed 5/4/2016

Appealing to Nazi logic, the prisoner said, "I am old and not good for such hard labor, and he is a young man." Baffled, the commander nicknamed "The Butcher" consented to the request. The elderly man joined the condemned, and Gajowniczec stepped back into line....

Until his own death 53 years later, Gajowniczec returned to Auschwitz every year on Aug. 14 to say thank you to Maximilian Kolbe, the one who gave his life to take Gajowniczec's place. The annual return to Auschwitz must have been difficult. As Gajowniczec aged, the trip must have taken its toll. Still every year, he returned to say thank you.<sup>6</sup>

Yes, that's an extreme example... so compared to an annual pilgrimage to Auschwitz, Poland, showing appreciation through some simple gesture or sincere words spoken in person or by phone or Skype or written in a card or note sounds pretty doable, don't you think?

Not only is expressing appreciation doable, but sometimes we learn the hard way that when it comes to showing appreciation, time is of the essence. A few months ago a minister-friend of mine, Rick, had a brother, Herb, who was dying. While Herb was still strong enough to be in public, Herb and his family decided to have a sort of "going-away party" before a funeral was made necessary. It was basically a reception during which family and friends, colleagues and neighbors were able to express *to Herb* how much they appreciated him. Afterward, Rick wrote to me,

...Herb's celebration of life on Saturday was great. He was able to make it. Over 125 people attended, including about 30 of his "storm-chaser" friends. Afterwards, his storm group came back to our home and he was able to say good-bye privately to each one.<sup>7</sup>

Today is highlighted to show appreciation for mothers. But let's not stop with mothers and grandmothers, step-mothers and foster-mothers and others who filled that role for us. In this "spring awakening" let's strive to go beyond that, endeavoring to show our appreciation for all the people whose lives bless our lives.

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<sup>6</sup> "How Do You Say Thank You?" by Kristopher Barnett in Preaching.com August 5, 2012 at <http://www.preaching.com/common-lectionary/11675021/> accessed May 3, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence