

Merci Beaucoup May 20, 2007

As I was working on today's message, I "googled" the word "appreciation," just to see what I'd find. Boy! Was I surprised! There were thousands of entries, and most of them had to do with having this day or that one in appreciation for something or someone or some category of someone. I even found that there was a "Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day." It happened on January 29, 2007. Having just helped our daughter move into her new home, I learned the value of bubble wrap, and can fully understand why there's a day to celebrate it.

Now, that's a pretty trivial example of what appreciation is all about, but it does indicate the importance of being aware of and grateful for the pluses that are part of our lives. In fact, dictionary.com states the definition of appreciation as follows: **gratitude, thankful recognition, the act of estimating the qualities of things and giving them their proper value.** I suppose the pragmatic business types among us think of the appreciation of our property or real estate, and understand that it has to do with an increase in its value.

At any rate, I found myself wondering why we have had to set up all these dates on the calendar to appreciate one thing or another. Might it have to do with the fact that our society may have lost the capacity to value and appreciate even the simplest things in life? Is it possible that we take so much for granted that we just plain don't think of ourselves as having any reason to be grateful or appreciative?

I suspect many of us can name all kinds of reasons that we're disgruntled or unhappy, or that things just aren't the way they're "supposed" to be. You and I talk with folks all the time who are negative and constantly complaining about what's not right with the world or with their lives.

And I'm well aware, as you probably are, that there are times when things are especially tough in life, and it seems as though the whole world is against us. We struggle just to catch a breath and keep our heads above water. It's hard to see any positives when we're in that place, and yet, it seems to me that life would go a whole lot better if we could somehow shift the way we see what's happening.

I have a friend whom I've mentioned before. She barely gets by on what she makes, and holds down two or three jobs at a time just to survive. She is a single mother who has raised two daughters alone, and quite successfully. She literally lives hand to mouth most of the time, and she does worry about that. Nonetheless, she is one of the most grateful and appreciative persons I know. She's quick to say how thankful she is for everything that comes her way, and she is appreciative of

everything anyone does for her. It's a joy to be around her, because that grateful spirit is really contagious.

We probably all know people on both sides of the coin—those who seem to have little and yet are appreciative of what they do have, and those who have a great deal, who don't seem to be able to value and appreciate what is on their doorstep. What makes the difference, and how can we become more like the former than the latter?

There's a reason I chose the Bible passage I did for this morning. It's part of the first creation story in Genesis, and even though it was probably an amalgamation of some of the ancient near east myths about how the world came to be, and I think it gives us a hint of the capacity for appreciation. Our passage from The Message says this:

God looked over everything that had been made;

It was good, so very good!

**It was evening, it was morning—
Day Six.**

I would submit to you that when God is seen as saying "it was good, so very good," that's appreciation. If appreciation is the capacity for recognizing and valuing something, this is an example of God doing that very thing—valuing the creation that was coming into being.

My point is that, if God can show appreciation for simple things, why can't we? I wonder if a sense of gratitude and appreciation aren't imbedded within us somewhere, and we simply allow the world to knock it out of us. If that's true, how do we reclaim the ability to be grateful and to appreciate our lives and the people who are part of them?

In some ways, this seems a little bit like the chicken and the egg...what comes first? For instance, someone has said, **"Appreciation is a powerful tool to shift perspective. Finding something to appreciate during a difficult situation quickly moves the perspective to the big picture from the little picture."**

I can see how that's true. I recall reading a story that I think Elie Wiesel wrote about being a prisoner in one of the concentration camps during World War II. He talked about the bleakness of each day, and watching hordes of prisoners dying around him, but he also talked about the little things and how they gave them joy in the most surprising of moments. One that I remember was how, in the midst of all the death and torment, they would rejoice when they saw a spring flower breaking through a crack in the concrete that surrounded them. Even in that darkest of situations, they found something to appreciate, and that changed their entire outlook about what they were enduring.

I have to admit that I'm not always very good at this. Like many of you, I tend to take too much for granted, and it's only when we come close to losing something, or have to do without it for a while that

we begin to understand the real value. In the times when I have been able to travel abroad, I have seen people in places of extreme deprivation, and yet they are filled with joy. They are lacking what many of us consider the basic necessities of life, and yet they are able to be appreciative of what they do have and what they experience of one another and of life.

That has caused me to ask myself how much more I would value and appreciate someone or something if I just was more aware of how much I'm blessed, or if I knew I might lose them? You see, the reality is that all of us will—with the passing of time—lose that which is of value to us. Harper Lee wrote, **“Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read.”** His statement really captures the essence of what many of us experience.

One of you gave me an article out of *People* magazine about Scott Hamilton. You may recall that he was a Gold Medal skater in the 1984 Winter Olympics. In 1997, he fought testicular cancer, and was considered cured. However, a couple of years ago after complaining of extreme fatigue and lack of energy, he was diagnosed with a rare, noncancerous tumor near his pituitary gland. If left untreated, it could leave him blind, but even if treated, there was great risk of brain damage, or death. He elected to try a risky procedure that appears to have been successful, although a 100% recovery is not expected.

The main reason that he is doing as well as he is, according to those who know him well, is his upbeat attitude. Scott Hamilton was quoted as saying, **“I can honestly say this has been one of the most positive experiences of my life. You think you love your life, but you're just scratching the surface. Now I look at my son and I realize I may not be able to spend much time with him. So my level of appreciation for what I've got now has gone to a whole other level.”**

It seems to me that most of us would be a lot more grateful for and appreciative of the people in our lives and the life we have if we accepted the fact that all this can and will some day go away. Just realizing that can change the way we look at things.

An 83-year-old woman shared her perspective on things when she wrote to a friend, **“I'm not sure what others would have done had they known they wouldn't be here for the tomorrow that we all take for granted. I think they would have called family members and a few close friends. They might have called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles. I like to think they would have gone out for a Chinese dinner or for whatever their favorite food was...I'm trying very hard not to hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to our lives.”**

You see, all we have, you and I, is the right here and the right now. We can't count on anything other than this present moment. Knowing that makes all the difference in the world, because we won't put off saying things we need to say; we won't

forget to say “thank you” for life and its blessings. We won't leave out of our daily routine the opportunity to tell someone how much we value and appreciate them. We just might not get another chance.

On your tables, you will find some paper, and some envelopes, I would encourage each of us to take the opportunity now to express our appreciation for someone and for the ways in which they enrich our lives, or just to jot down a list of that for which we are grateful. Let's start right now to open our eyes and see the wonderful world in which we live, and value and appreciate it. OK?

Closing:

In his book *Lucky Man*, Michael J. Fox writes, **“This was the lesson: it wasn't for me to fret about time or loss but to appreciate each day...”** The same is true for you and me.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us can begin to appreciate and express our appreciation for each and every day.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.