

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Counting Blessings”

July 24, 2011

Steve Pearson, Guest Preacher

Ephesians 1: 3-14

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Colossians 3: 12-17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the second in a series of “Steve” sermons offered at Meadowbrook this summer. The first was a sermon given a few weeks ago by Steve Keller, as guest preacher, entitled “God’s Math.” The sermon today picks up on Steve Keller’s math concept, focusing on counting, and more specifically on counting blessings.

During his sermon Steve Keller highlighted a quote by Eric Hoffer that caught my attention. Eric Hoffer was a self-educated longshoreman who came to fame in the 1950's as an American social writer and philosopher. The quote attributed to Hoffer during Steve Keller’s sermon was: “The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings.”

The words bless, blessed, or blessing are most commonly understood to mean approval, or a favor or gift bestowed by God. A word search for the word bless in the Bible using the

internet site BibleGateway.com brings up 389 search results. It appears in 27 books in the Old Testament, beginning with the Book of Genesis, and in 15 books in the New Testament, ending in the Book of Revelation. The ease with which I was able to count blessing words in the Bible using a computer search engine made me think about the rationale behind Eric Hoffer's quote. And after thinking about it for a while and preparing an outline for this sermon, I came up with three reasons that make sense and seem valid.

The first reason we have we have difficulty with blessing-counting arithmetic is because blessings aren't always obvious. They come at unexpected times, in unexpected places. Sometimes they sneak up on us by disguise. What may seem like a blessing to some may feel like a fearful event to others. And sometimes blessings even look like a curse at first. Hence the expression, "mixed blessing"!

In February of 1985, I was scheduled to take the Michigan Bar examination, which is a two-day test that law school graduates need to pass to get a license to practice law. That winter was fairly cold. There was a lot of snow on the ground. And I planned to go skiing up north after the Bar exam was over. However, the Thursday before the exam we had a heat wave, it started raining, the snow started melting, and on Friday night the basement of the house where I lived flooded. I discovered the basement flooded, because I lived in the basement. When I got out of bed on Saturday morning, I stepped into about three inches of water. All of my study notes, which I had organized in neat piles on the basement floor, were floating around. And instead of studying I ended up spending much of the weekend before the Bar exam, which began the following Tuesday, cleaning up the basement.

I missed going skiing, because by Wednesday all the snow had melted. So the Thursday after the Bar exam, I was actually home sitting around, thinking about the sad state of affairs that had transpired and how bad the basement smelled. But what appeared to me to be misfortune turned out to be a blessing, because I was home that Thursday to receive a phone call from the U.S. Court of Appeals in New Orleans, where I had sent a job application several months earlier. The Director of the Office of Staff Counsel was calling to see if I was interested in a research attorney position. He ended up interviewing me, speaking with my references, and offering me a job over the telephone. I accepted the position and headed down to New Orleans a few weeks later. Had the heat-wave rainstorm that cursed my weekend and ski plans not occurred, I would not have been home to take that phone call. And back then, I didn't have an answering machine.

In Matthew's Gospel, beginning his Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, Jesus outlines a new math – counting the blessings: "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"

The distressed circumstances of the people Jesus refers to in the Beatitudes aren't circumstances most people aspire to. Nevertheless, the blessings Jesus recounts each bear a promise:

“ ... theirs is the kingdom of heaven,
... they will be comforted,
... they will inherit the earth,
... they will be filled,
... they will receive mercy,
... they will see God,

... they will be called the children of God,

With the Beatitudes Jesus places Christian discipleship squarely in the midst of blessing. In addition to being spiritual and sobering, the Sermon on the Mount is significant, because as Jesus speaks, he introduces himself the one blessing, and the one blessed. He also focuses on blessings in terms of people – not money, property or other material wealth.

The Sermon on the Mount is not the first blessing referenced in the Bible in terms of a person. A much earlier reference occurs in the Book of Genesis (12:1-3), with God's call to Abraham to take a great leap of faith . . . to leave the only home he has ever known, and to venture to someplace he has never heard of. In return, God offers Abraham so that he will be a blessing to others, more specifically so that Abraham will be a blessing "to all the families of the earth."

Our first scripture reading today is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It's addressed to a group of believers who are rich beyond measure in Jesus Christ, yet living as beggars, but only because they are ignorant of their wealth. Paul begins his letter by describing the Christian's heavenly "bank account"; adoption, acceptance, redemption, forgiveness, wisdom, inheritance, the seal of the Holy Spirit, life grace, citizenship – in short every spiritual blessing.

Our second reading is from Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul's purpose in writing this letter is to show that Christ is preeminent – first and foremost in everything – and the Christian's life should reflect that priority. Because believers are rooted in Christ, alive in Christ, hidden in Christ, and complete in Christ, it is inconsistent for them to live life without Him. Clothed with the love of Christ, with His peace ruling in their hearts, they are equipped to make Christ first in every area of life. Among other things, Paul's letter teaches that as Christians we need to be compassionate, kind, humble, patient, forgiving, and thankful to God through Jesus.

Together, a fair interpretation of our readings today teaches that as Christians we are all rich in the spiritual blessings we have received from God. It also teaches that we need to be thankful to God for those many blessings. But to be thankful for our blessings, we first need to think about them. We need to be thinking thankers, if you will. And this leads to a second reason why, as Eric Hoffer observed, mastering the arithmetic of blessing counting is so difficult. The second reason is because we simply don't think about and count blessings as often as we should.

My mother's mother, Grandma Jessie, was born in the early 1900's and at one time taught school in a one-room country school house. Two of the many bits of advice she offered her grandchildren over many years on multiple occasions were: (1) "count your blessings," and (2) "practice makes perfect." So, as Grandma Jessie would say if she were here today: "you're failing your blessing-counting arithmetic, because you haven't practiced counting enough."

This is probably because we cram so much into our every day lives and tend to schedule our headaches and deal with problems and difficulties as a priority. Most of the time we're just trying to get through the day. So we never get around to thinking about blessings at all. And if we're not thinking about blessings, we certainly aren't counting them.

Rick Warren, author of Purpose Driven Life and pastor of Saddleback Church in California, has observed that "[l]ife is a series of problems: Either you're in one now, you're just coming out of one, or you're getting ready to go into another one. . . .

[I]t's kind of like two rails on a railroad track, and at all times you have something good and something bad in your life. No matter how good things are in your life, there is always something bad that needs to be worked on. And no matter how bad things are in your life, there is always something good you can thank God for. You can focus on your purposes, or you can focus on your problems.

If you focus on your problems, you're going into self-centeredness, which is 'my problem, my issues, my pain.' But one of the easiest ways to get rid of pain is to get your focus off yourself and onto God and others.

You have to learn to deal with both the good and the bad of life. Actually, sometimes learning to deal with the good is harder."

As it turns out, there's credence in Rick Warren's observations, because there apparently is a correlation between gratitude, which involves counting blessings, and physical and emotional health. Professors at the University of California, explored this notion by developing a study that involved asking 200 students in a health psychology class to respond to a weekly questionnaire. Everyone rated their well-being, was tested on a measure of gratefulness, and reported on their physical health and level of exercise. The key to the study was a division into three groups. The first group listed five things they were grateful for each week. The second group listed five hassles or irritants from the past week. The final group simply wrote down five "events or circumstances" from the past week. This continued for ten weeks.

Some students said they were grateful for "waking up this morning," or "for wonderful parents," or "the Lord for just another day." Hassles were things like "hard to find parking," "messy kitchen," or "having a horrible test in health psychology." Not surprising, the students in the gratefulness group scored significantly higher than the hassles group on the gratefulness measure. They also were more positive about the upcoming week and their life as a whole. They were even healthier than both the hassles and events groups, and they reported significantly more hours of exercise than the hassles group. In short, the study suggested that students who focused on positive experiences and expressed gratitude about it were more physically and emotionally healthy than those who didn't. The thinking thankers fared the best. That's what the Bible tells us too.

Recently, after I started planning out this sermon, I happened to stop in to a Dollar Store and just walk around, because I happen to be a Dollar Store kind of guy. One of my favorite sections in the Dollar Store is the toy section. And as I wandered through the toy section, I spotted a pair of big black Groucho Marx glasses, complete with nose, eyebrows and moustache. The Groucho glasses came in a package labeled "Joking Around Gag Glasses." As I looked at the glasses and packaging label, I began to wonder whether those glasses just might be more than Groucho Marx Joking Around Gag Glasses. It struck me that those glasses may also actually be thinking-thanking glasses, and that I might be able wear and use them to identify and count blessings. So I bought a pair of the glasses - cost me a dollar (actually \$1.06). Took them home, removed them from the package, put them on, and started thinking.

Initially I thought about how I spend too much time at work at Wayne County, and that it isn't such a great thing to have to take unpaid furlough days because of budget reductions that won't likely end any time soon. But then I also thought that I still have a job. It's a good job. Furlough days are necessary to avoid further layoffs, which allow other people to keep their jobs.

And my job helps us support our family and pay for our house and college tuition. Then I thought that our family is fortunate to have a house, especially in this economy where so many people have lost theirs. Our house is not a Mc Mansion, but it's a comfortable home in a safe community. We also have a snow shovel and a lawn mower. And it's so wonderfully amazing to see how well the shovel and lawn mower work when David and Eric are home and actually try to use them.

I thought about family, Denise, David, Eric, my parents, my grandparents, my sister and her family, Denise's brothers and their families; how we all have been truly blessed for the things that we have and the time we've been able to share together; how much all of the kids have grown and developed over the years; and how they all seem to be preparing for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

I then thought about many of those challenges – the mortgage crisis; high unemployment rates; the under-funding of Social Security, Medicare and Obamacare; and on-going wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. But with all the daunting problems, the United States is still a great nation. We have so many things citizens of other countries all over the world want but don't have. We have vast resources and educational opportunities. We have a constitution that enables us to speak freely and elect and un-elect our president and representatives. And we have the right to attend church wherever and whenever we want.

I also thought a lot about people here at church, and it was a whole lot of people. People who I have attended services with; shared meals with; experienced happy and sad occasions with; served on boards with; cooked chicken with; painted rooms with; pulled weeds with; and even shared the same semi-trailer sleeping accommodations with. The many people that I thought about weren't just people who attend the same church I attend - they're all people I view to be friends.

And I thought that it's such a blessing to be associated with Meadowbrook. We're so fortunate to have the Meetinghouse where we gather; to have Art Ritter leading the congregation; to have Colleen Foster, who does such an amazing job with our children; to have Jeannette Faber, who does such a wonderful job with our music program and choirs; to have Nancy Ryder serving as our administrative assistance; to have Thelma Kubitskey volunteer so much of her time as Treasurer while at the same being married to Norm; to have people like Don Faber and Steve Keller, who volunteer to fill in for Art when he's gone and in Steve's case also fill in for Jeannette; and to have so many other people volunteer time serving on boards and committees, working on special projects, or simply doing so many little things that get done to make Meadowbrook the special place that it is.

I also thought about Don Gains, who merits special acknowledgment given the focus of this sermon. Every week, Don Gains seems to be thinking about something. And when he's not thinking, he's thanking. Many Sundays Don's right up front with Art, thanking somebody at the beginning of the service. He also runs around Fellowship Hall thinking out loud, talking to visitors, and thanking many of the friends and members who have stayed around after service. But with Don sometimes it's difficult to realize that he's thanking you, because the ties he wears are so distracting. In my view, Don Gains is the master thinking thanker here at Meadowbrook. When it comes to thinking and thanking, Don Gains is a combination of the Energizer Bunny and Yoda from Star Wars. And if Meadowbrook ever has a thinking-thanking Hall of Fame, I intend to nominate Don Gains to be the first inductee, along with all of his ties.

By the time I finished thinking about Don and everything else, I realized that I had been sitting there in my thinking-thanking glasses for quite a while. Then it dawned on me that there's a third reason why, as Eric Hoffer observed, mastering the arithmetic of counting blessings is so difficult. I had spent a whole lot of time counting all of those blessings but didn't come close to finishing. In fact, when I stopped I immediately knew that there were many blessings that I never got around to count.

And it struck me that a third reason we have difficulty mastering the arithmetic of counting blessings is that when we actually do get around to thinking about blessings, there's just too many for anyone to count. It also struck me that I probably needed to return to the Dollar Store to buy another pair of glasses with a stronger prescription.

Life has a way of accelerating as we get older. The days get shorter, and the list of promises we make to ourselves gets longer. In the midst of the hectic pace of daily affairs, we live on a sparse diet of promises we make to ourselves to fulfill when all the conditions are perfect. Then one morning, we wake up and all we have to show for our lives is a litany of 'I'm going to,' 'I plan on,' and 'Someday, when things are settled down a bit.' As Christians, notwithstanding the pace of our lives and the many difficulties we all encounter, there are still so many blessings to be thankful for. We are blessed by God so we may be a blessing to others. And by the grace of God, the blessings bestowed upon us are infinite.

However difficult it may be, it's important to realize the significance of taking time each day to count blessings, even if you can only count one or two at time. It may involve just a few moments of silent reflection, to stop what you're doing, notice the world around you, think and thank. If you try counting and feel a bit uncomfortable at first, just remember what Grandma Jessie said: "practice makes perfect."

And if you think you might need a pair of thinking-thanking glasses like mine to sharpen your focus, just let me know after the service. It will be my pleasure to pick up a pair of glasses for you the next time I stop by the Dollar Store.