blessings and instead constructed a culture of complaint and a church of self-absorbed people spewing outrage and offense?

This may be overstating the case, but still, to speak of one’s blessings is so…1950s…so Norman Rockwell…so *Leave it to Beaver*. Counting our blessings is considered retro and nostalgic. Perhaps we *used to feel blessed*, but the thrill is gone. Blessings? What blessings?

The simple truth is this: WE ARE BLESSED!Our reading from Ephesians 1 is a much-needed attitude adjustment. Grammatically, the word “blessing” can be both a noun and a verb. Used as a noun, we might say: “She is such a blessing.” “He said a blessing before dinner.” “Dad gave our marriage his blessing.” “We received so may blessings from others.” But the word can also be a verb, conveying *action*. “The pastor blessed the couple.” To cite today’s reading: “…God…who has *blessed* us in Christ with every spiritual *blessing*” (v. 3).

A blessing is something that we can both *receive* (noun) and *bestow* (verb)*.* We can receive a blessing, and we can bless others. Broadly speaking, a blessing *received* is a prayer for God’s favor and protection, for all the benefits and positive things that might make for one’s happiness. A blessing *given* is much the same, but the recipient is someone else.

In the Old Testament, blessings generally refer to material possessions: children, good crops, good health, and long life.When God blessed Job after his horrifying ordeal, the Bible says that “the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters.…In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters…After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years.…And Job died, old and full of days” (Job 42:12-17).

Perhaps the most famous blessing in the Hebrew Bible is the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

In the New Testament, however, blessings generally refer to *spiritual benefits.* Ephesians is an example of this. Perhaps the most famous series of blessings is the Beatitudes of Jesus. In the Beatitudes, traditional notions of what it means to be blessed are turned upside down. Exposed to the Scriptures through the teachings of the Scribes and Pharisees, people generally believed that: The rich were blessed, but Jesus said the poor were blessed; Those who mourned labored under a curse or punishment for their sins, but Jesus said the grieving were blessed and would be comforted; The strong and mighty are the blessed ones, but Jesus said the meek would inherit the earth; You are blessed if you have plenty to eat and drink, but Jesus said that those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” are truly blessed.

The apostle James speaks of the blessing that comes to the person who “endures temptation” because “Such a one…will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). But we are not in Matthew 5 or James 1. We are in Ephesians 1, and here we have blessings galore. How can we not see how blessed we are? We are “chosen” before the natural world came into being! God thinks of us as God’s own children. Our sins and transgressions are forgiven through the blood of Christ. And there is an “inheritance” awaiting each of us!

Debie Thomas, writing in her weekly blog, says, “The Beatitudes are blessings. Are we listening? Blessing comes first. We begin with blessing. Blessing, not judgment. Blessing, not terms and conditions. Blessing, not penance. Blessing, not altar calls. Jesus starts his ministry by telling the disciples who and what they already are: they are blessed. Blessed, fortunate, privileged, favored. Why? Because they are near and dear to God’s heart. Whatever else Jesus’ first followers go on to learn or accomplish in the future is merely the outgrowth of what is already their ground-of-being, their identity, their solid-as-a-rock foundation. God gifts their identities to them, without condition or measure. They are freely blessed, and so they’re freed to bless others.”

We are not God’s nine-to-five employees, working for God’s blessing as our compensation. We do not attempt to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly to earn God’s blessings. We do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly because we are always and already blessed. Starting life from a position of blessed-ness can really change your perspective!

Now, switch to the part where you bless others. To bless, to be a blessing, is the verb form of the word. Followers of Jesus try to live in a way that blesses others. Paul says, we received “every *spiritual* blessing”, so now we offer others every *tangible* and *emotional* blessing that we can. Our lives become blessings in action. People who are blessed do not curse others; they help others (see James 3:9-10). People who are blessed do not listen to complainers and naysayers; they speak truth and love (see Psalm 1). People who are blessed do not feel entitled; they feel grateful. People who are blessed tend to pay their blessings forward; they are generous. People who are blessed are vividly aware of their blessed-ness and are humbled by it. People who are blessed see the sacred and holy in every aspect of their lives.

This last idea is particularly significant. Paul had some incredible misadventures: shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, misunderstandings, and illness. But Paul always regarded himself as blessed. He was not just blessed on some days and not on others. He considered himself blessed *every* day, and he lived and breathed in the blessing of God!

Perhaps this awareness of the providence of God came from his upbringing and education as a Jew. This cannot be understated because, as Rabbi Jennifer Singer notes, “Judaism is chock-full of blessings.” She references Rabbi Fred Dobb, who said, “We’ve got blessings for seeing heads of state, Torah scholars, and ugly people. Blessings over sunsets, meteors, rainbows, reunions, and bad news. Blessings for bread and baked goods and fruit and vegetables, all different.” A blessed person notices blessings when others are oblivious. In turn, a blessed person blesses everything!

In the Talmud, Rabbi Meir suggests “reciting 100 blessings each day…one every 10 minutes of our waking lives.” Which is to say that we “should be constantly aware of the world around us, and should respond through gratitude and prayer.” Rabbi Singer again: “A few years ago I was the Jewish educator at a JCC day camp, and when I told the kids that we’re expected to say 100 blessings a day, they were shocked. How could anyone come up with so many things to bless? So I sent them on a blessing hunt. Each group was armed with pen and paper, and told to write down everything they saw that they considered worthy of blessing. Not one group came back with fewer than a hundred blessings. Several reached 150.”

If we were challenged to join Paul in reciting the blessings that rain upon our heads every day, drenching us in the mercies and favor of God, what would be on our list? I encourage you to go on a blessing hunt. Count your blessings received and your blessings bestowed*.* Can you come up with 100 today? Absolutely! And let us pray that it happens! Amen.

Prayer: Lord, you know the desires of our hearts. You also know what we deserve. Bless us with what you know is best for us. Thank you or those blessings bestowed upon us that we take for granted and for the numerous blessings on the way. Help us all to remember that we are blessed to be a blessing to others. We pray in Jesus’ Blessed Name. Amen.

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**What Blessings?**

Sunday, July 11, 2021 Ephesians 1:3-14

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What is something you consider to be a blessing in your life! Is it family? Friends? A good job? Good health? The first verse of today’s reading (v. 3) mentions a form of the word “blessed” three times! And as I keep telling you: when scripture repeats itself, it is probably important! Our reading today is filled with blessings. As you read it, you uncover one blessing, only to find another…like Russian nesting dolls.

There is an old maxim: Count your blessings! It means we should make a special effort to appreciate the good things in life. I tried to count the blessings in Ephesians 1:3-14, but I lost track after 20 blessings! This reminded me of the old hymn (which we will sing in a few minutes), “Count Your Blessings”: *When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings name them one by one, It will surprise you what the Lord hath done. Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God hath done.*

Some days it may be tough to see the blessings, but in Ephesians 1, it is pretty easy to spot the big ones: God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (v. 4); God destined us for adoption as God’s children (v. 5); In Jesus we have redemption through his blood (v. 7); In Jesus we have…the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (v. 7); In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance (v. 11); In him we are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit (v. 13). We can count on these blessings from God!

But perhaps blessings are not supposed to be counted. It seems absurd on the face of it. Counting our blessings makes about as much sense as trying to count grains of sand at the beach or the number of hairs on your head. It is impossible! Yet, counting and keeping track is what we humans do. We not only count our own blessings, but we count the blessings of other people, and wonder why they are blessed, and we are not. We keep track of successes and failures, insults and awards, good things and bad things. We like to have a balance sheet that shows just where we stand. So, it is natural to itemize our blessings, and we get the feeling that the apostle Paul is just getting started; that he feels blessed in countless ways.

But we don’t often feel blessed these days, do we? 2020 and 2021 have not been easy. The three-headed hydra of Politics, Racism, and Pandemic is a fire-breathing monster that has kept the country on edge for a long time. Is it possible that we have lost sight of our