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First UMC
Springboro, Ohio

November 15, 2015

Series: “The Gratitude Path”

Message: “What Do You Count?”

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

 During this season of giving thanks, we are looking at what it means to follow Jesus down the path of gratitude that leads to abundance rather than following the path of scarcity where there is never enough.

 Last week we found that when we trust God and give thanks over what we have, we will experience abundance. In Jesus Christ, there is always more than enough.

 The next practice that can help us to continue down that path of gratitude is counting our blessings. When we do so, the harvest is generosity.

 As we begin to think about counting our blessings, we might start by thinking about all of the things, besides our blessings that we often count. We do a lot of counting connected to our health—calories and steps. Those who run count not steps but miles. You can see the numbers for marathons and half marathons on their cars.

 We also count when it comes to time, minutes, hours, days, months, years. We count a lot when it comes to our finances. We count the cost when it comes to saving and expenses and spending.

 We count points for all sorts of incentives these days and for grades in school.

 These are all daytime sorts of counting. But as the end of the day rolls around we tend to move into a different sort of counting. We count the hurts of the day, the worries of the day, our regrets, what we didn’t get done.

 And then, of course, there are the sheep. Who came up with that? Maybe a creative farm mother, think of all of the sheep you can name. Or maybe a worried farmer…do I have them all, who am I missing?

 I’m not sure counting sheep works so well if you don’t know the sheep. I just did math in my head until it put me to sleep.

 I know it’s not Christmas yet. I’m breaking my own rule talking about it, but one of my favorite movies is *White Christmas*. There is a great scene in the movie about what to do when you can’t sleep that ends in Bing Crosby singing, “When you’re worried and you can’t sleep, count your blessings instead of sheep and you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings.”

 It’s a nice idea, but it’s actually been proven. Several studies have been done that show that when we do this, when we count our blessings it affects us in multiple positive ways. There was a study done that asked a group to keep a gratitude journal for several months. At the end of the time, the group was assessed and they had improved health, a more positive attitude, and were making progress on their life goals. They were also more alert, enthusiastic, determined, attentive, and energetic.

 The study included another group that was asked to keep a complaint journal rather than a gratitude journal. They did not make progress toward their life goals and were less likely to exercise or take care of themselves.

 Counting our blessings regularly through prayer or keeping a gratitude journal changes our perspective. We have a choice as to what we focus on in life. Charles Dickens put it this way, “Reflect on your present blessings, on which every man has many, not on your past misfortune of which all men have some.”

 When we count our blessings, it helps us to focus on and see all of the ways God is present and working in our lives. As we realize our blessings we are filled with gratitude rather than resentment or jealousy or worry.

 So there are all these reasons to count our blessings. Why do we often find ourselves counting the negative numbers and things in our lives?

 As I was pondering this, it struck me, maybe we’re just lazy. If you think of having two piles to count—one is huge, the other is small, which do you count? The small one, right? It’s easier. The big pile takes too long.

 But then that small pile is what we focus on. And if it represents the problems and the worries we know each problem and worry and grudge too well.

 But if we count the blessings, it fills our time with good things and we no longer have time to count or dwell on the negative things. They pale in comparison. We realize how blessed we are.

 When I think of someone who followed Jesus down the path of gratitude to the garden of abundance and generosity even in the midst of difficult situations in life, I think of Paul. He knew the abundant blessings that came from God and shared it as part of his powerful witness.

 Paul begins nearly every one of his letters thanking God for those he is writing to, for their faithfulness, for their care, for their good work on behalf of Jesus Christ. Even in prison Paul considers his blessings and encourages us to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” In Romans he writes, “I am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” and “All things work together for God for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

 Paul encourages us to give thanks to God in all things, trusting that God can use even the hardest and the worst moments in our life to bring about a blessing. God helps us to grow through challenges. God helps us to learn what his grace to us is when we find ourselves in a situation where we are called to share that grace with someone else. God invites us to realize how much we have to share as we count our blessings and give with a generous spirit.

 Gratitude and generosity go together. Paul describes this relationship beautifully in 2 Corinthians 9, this passage we’ve read today.

 There are lots of reasons to give, why people give—obligation, pressure, guilt, support. But Paul doesn’t suggest we give for those reasons. No, he says, we should give out of joy, out of gratitude for all that God has given us. We should give because we trust that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work.”

 Give because you have counted your blessings and in doing so have realized that you have such an abundance that it fills you with a spirit of generosity and joy at the realization that you have the opportunity to be a part of God’s blessings to others. As Paul says, “Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”

 Kent Millard puts it this way, “When we are generous, it somehow opens us up to the possibilities of receiving greater blessings from God and life.” We have those experiences where we step out in faith, thinking we’re doing the giving out of our resources, of our time and what we find is that in response to our generosity, because it opens our hearts in a new way, God has even more opportunity to fill us and our blessings grow. When we are open to giving we also become more open to receiving.

 And we find that we can’t out give God. He has given us his all in Jesus Christ. And even as we begin to realize that we owe everything we have and are to him, we are humbled as he says 10% is enough.

 It goes back to how we count. As some count their giving, they count the 10% and say, “That’s so much to give away.” But others count the 90% and say, “Wow, that’s a lot to get to keep.”

 Even as he has designed the tithe, God is generous with us, showering us with blessings.

 So this week, I encourage you to follow Jesus and Paul down the path of gratitude, to count your blessings, to realize that God has and will fill you with abundance in every way, so that you can be joyfully generous in every way, so that your generosity will result in others giving thanks to God.