One of the dangers one faces if he or she doesn’t engage in serious, critical study of the Bible is that one may develop a faith based on what our popular culture thinks the Bible says—or wants it to say—and miss the good news of Jesus Christ. Few passages are more subject to such misinterpretation than the Beatitudes of Jesus that we just heard.

Beatitudes are a type of wisdom sayings often found in the Old Testament books of Psalms and Proverbs. Psalm 1 begins, “Blessed are those who walk not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners,…, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they meditate day and night.” The intent of the Beatitudes is to offer formulas for what it means to be blessed by God. Lest we be mistaken, the Beatitudes in scripture are not a guarantee of good fortune or prosperity or personal achievement, but happiness that comes from living in a right relationship with God. In contrast, a less than careful student of the Bible risks making Beatitudes into proverbs for the good life that one might find in Poor Richard’s Almanac.

Biblical scholar Alyce McKenzie offers some secular beatitudes based on prevailing cultural definitions of the good life.

- Blessed are the proactive, for theirs is the satisfaction of achievement.
- Blessed are the assertive for they will not let themselves be taken advantage of.
- Blessed are those with talent and drive, for they shall be unstoppable.
- Blessed are those who can occasionally be tolerant of others’ mistakes, for they will develop a pool of goodwill that will result in future favors from others.
- Blessed are the single-minded for they shall achieve their goals.”

Barbara Brown Taylor adds these two:

- “Blessed are they who have good 401K plans, for their old age shall be comfortable; and
- Blessed are those who floss for they will keep their teeth.”

Acknowledging that there is much that is attractive in these secular beatitudes, we can smile at how farfetched it is to imagine Jesus dispensing such advice. However, in our individualistic, self-actualizing culture it is dangerously easy for us to turn Beatitudes into stepping stones for achieving a blessed life. A more careful reading of the text shows us that Jesus isn’t setting up conditions we must meet in order to receive blessing. To the contrary, he is unconditionally blessing his hearers. However, the blessing Jesus bestows is not one that is in fashion in our world, is it?

Lance Pape asks, “But if the Beatitudes are a description of reality, what world do they describe? Certainly not our own. ‘Blessed are the meek’, says Jesus, but in our world the meek don’t get the land, they get left holding the worthless beads. Blessed are the merciful, says Jesus, but while mourning may be tolerated for a while we are expected to pull yourself together and move on. Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, but in this world such people are dismissed as hopelessly naïve. Blessed are the peacemakers, but those who are too outspoken for peace may have their patriotism called into question.”
Pape notes, “When our national leaders end their speeches by saying, ‘God bless America’ they appeal to optimism, not mourning; confidence, not poverty of spirit; and abundance, not hunger or thirst of any kind. And so the society in which we live needs more practical beatitudes, such as:

- Blessed are the well-educated, for they will get good jobs
- Blessed are the well-connected, for their aspirations will not go unnoticed
- Blessed are you when you know what you want and go after it with everything you’ve got, for God helps those who help themselves.”

If one reads the Bible carefully, seeking to hear God’s saving Word, one discovers that Jesus’ Beatitudes bestow blessing upon those who have no foothold on the ladder of success. A careful reading of the text begins with noting to whom Jesus’ words are spoken. He is not addressing the crowds who came in response to healing miracles he had done. Instead, he leaves the crowds to go up the mountain with his chosen disciples, those whom we know have left behind family, occupations, and security to follow him. In other words, Jesus is not speaking to the general public, but to those who have made a commitment to living under the reign of God. To borrow a word from our Epistle lesson, these are not people “who were wise by human standards, or powerful or of noble birth”, but those who were among the lowly, those considered to be foolish in the eyes of the world.

Think about the difference this one detail makes. A few weeks ago when we read the story of Jesus’ baptism we noted that Jesus chose to be baptized “to fulfill all righteousness”. A closer look at “fulfilling all righteousness” showed us that righteousness in Scripture is not about being sinless, as if that could ever be possible, but about caring for the poor, opening the eyes of the blind, and unbinding the chains of those who are imprisoned. It is about creating a world that “works” for everyone, especially those on the margins of life. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is clarifying his mission in more detail to those who have cast their lot with him.

Thomas Merton put it this way, “Into this world, this demented Inn in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed, and exterminated. He is mysteriously present in all those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. It is in these that He hides Himself, for whom there is no room.”

Reading the Beatitudes from this perspective, we see that Jesus’ teaching is not at all about insuring individual success and reputation, but all about risking it for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. In the Beatitudes, Jesus invites us to align our lives with the prophet’s values of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. He is inviting us to join him in suffering for the sake of justice, speaking truth to power when necessary, and trusting in the power of love, even if that leads to persecution for us as it did for him.

I don’t know about you, but these Beatitudes sound dangerous to me. They are neither safe nor easy, but they call us to live the only life that truly leads to freedom, i.e., following Jesus whose death on a cross revealed the power of God that has overcome death itself. To the world, such faith will always be seen as foolish, but God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Isn’t this why we study Scripture carefully; why we gather here every Sunday?
To claim the power of the Resurrection which empowers us to defy anything that would degrade humanity.

There is a moment in one of the Lord of the Rings books where after all their battles with evil which nearly do them in, Sam, almost disbelievingly says to Frodo, “I thought you were dead and I thought I was dead!” Then, pausing to contemplate their miraculous deliverance from death, Sam asks, “Is everything sad going to come untrue?”

“Is everything sad going to come untrue?” This is the promise embedded in Jesus’ Beatitudes. The world as it is, in which personal gain and exercise of power without concern for the least among us seem to be in ascendancy, will not prevail. The truth is that God still shows up in mercy and blessing where one least expects to find God—with the poor, those who mourn, the meek and those who hunger for peace and righteousness. To them and us who seek to follow Jesus in faith by standing with those in the margins, he proclaims, “Blessed are you,...you may have felt and even thought that death is more powerful than life, that fear is greater than love, but in Christ Jesus, everything sad is coming untrue. Rejoice and be glad, your reward is great in heaven.