To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman – I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:10-12)

Happy are those who are persecuted because they are good, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. When you are reviled and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers – wonderful! Be happy about it! Be very glad! for a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too. (The Living Bible)

Aren’t you just so pleased to receive this word of God this morning? Face it – what Jesus says here isn’t the way we think. “We’re going to be persecuted for being good? We’re going to be reviled and lied about because we follow Jesus? We’re going to be the doormats for the cruel and hard-hearted of the world? Well, that’s just delightful. That just makes my day. Jesus must think we’re gluttons for punishment!” We all want ‘pie in the sky in the sweet bye-and-bye,’ but not if we have to be persecuted in order to get that sweet reward.
All of the other beatitudes seem to be talking about other people. They talk about “the meek,” “those who mourn,” “the poor,” “the peacemakers,” “the pure in heart,” “the merciful.” But this beatitude suddenly turns on us. “Blessed are you when you are reviled and persecuted and lied about!” And while all the other beatitudes are one line in length, this beatitude is three times longer than the other seven. Why is this? I’d say it’s because this is the beatitude where the sandal hits the road. This is the beatitude where the consequences of our decision to follow Jesus are made clear to us. This is the beatitude in which the great paradox of Christian discipleship comes home to roost. We are glad to believe in Jesus, but do we really want to follow him? Because if we actually follow him, there’s going to be trouble. So this beatitude puts things in stark contrast for us. When we believe who Jesus is, we’ve got to follow him. And Jesus is brutally honest. To follow him is going to cost us.

We see this so clearly in the life of the Apostle Paul. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once subject to a stoning. Three times shipwrecked. In danger from bandits, threatened by his own people, by the Gentiles, in danger in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, endangered from false brothers and sisters. Faithfulness, he found, had a price.

As in Paul’s world, so in ours. This week is a special one in American history. It marks the 50th anniversary of Rev. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. It’s now regarded as a courageous and unifying event in our history, bringing praise from many sides. President Obama calls Dr. King “quintessentially American.” Speaker John Boehner says Dr. King “showed how much good a single life could do in a short period.” Yet King experienced abuse, persecution, and eventually death as a result of being faithful to the Gospel.

I want to tell you the story of a man who was equally transformative in the life of our nation. His story is told in the movie 42. A lot of movies anymore, I can’t recommend that you see. But 42 is one I highly recommend. 42 is the story of Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. 42 is the number that Jackie wore. Jackie Robinson faced tremendous abuse as the first black man in major league baseball. The movie reminds us how terrifying it was. He faced racial prejudice, death threats against himself, his wife and infant child, hatred and abuse by his own teammates, and he led the league his rookie year in the category of being hit by a pitch. Most of those pitches hit him intentionally, not by accident.

However, this movie is also the story of Branch Rickey, the President and General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. None of this would have come about had it not been for Branch Rickey. Red Barber, the famous broadcaster for the Dodgers and later the Yankees, wrote about this in his memoirs.

I remember how upset the New York fans were. They couldn’t believe that Branch Rickey was going to put a black man on the field with all of these white men. But when they would ask me, “Did you ever imagine Branch Rickey would do that?” I said, “I knew he was going to do it. I knew he was going to do it. And I’m glad he did.”

“How’d you know?” Because two years ago, in 1945, I was having dinner with Branch Rickey. World War II was over, and we were about to be able to turn our
minds again to things like baseball. And I asked him: “What do you think will happen to baseball once all these soldiers come home?”

And he said, “One thing that is going to happen is that we’re going to have a black player, we’re going to have a black player on a major league team.” I looked at him. And then Branch Rickey told me a story.

When Branch Rickey was a child, his Methodist parents used to read to him from the Word of God, would teach him what it meant to be a real and genuine human being, to care for other human beings, other Children of God. One time when he was in college at Ohio Wesleyan, a small Methodist school, trying to work his way through school, he was asked if he would help manage the baseball team. He was only a student himself, but he needed the money. And so he said he would.

Rickey said, “I’ll never forget, we rode into South Bend, Indiana, to play Notre Dame – this little Ohio Wesleyan team. We started to check into a hotel in South Bend, and as I had my players come up to the desk, each one signing his name, putting two to a room, my catcher walked up to the desk and immediately the young receptionist grabbed the pen and said, ‘We don’t register Negroes here.’

‘I could see the hurt in this kid’s eyes, and I handed him my key and sent him up to my room saying, ‘I’ll check on you in a minute.’ And I started arguing with this desk clerk, but I had no success. Finally, I went upstairs to my room and when I walked in, this young man was sobbing, sobbing. And he said to me, ‘I can’t help it that I’m black. It’s the way I was born. Why do they treat me that way just because of my skin? Why, Branch, why?’

Branch says, “I sat there, put my arm about his shoulders, and tried to just hold onto him while he sobbed. I remember his body trembling. And I said, ‘One day... One day.’”

Branch Rickey had held in his heart for more than 30 years the image of that young man weeping in that hotel room that afternoon, and he was determined one day black men would play with white men in the finest stadiums of this country.

Early on in the movie, when Rickey is looking for just the right player to bring to the Dodgers organization and his closest advisors were arguing against it, he comes across the file of Jackie Robinson. And he said with a smile, “Ah, look here. He’s not only a great athlete, he’s a Methodist! I’m a Methodist. Robinson’s a Methodist. God’s a Methodist! We can’t go wrong!” That was wry humor, but the truth is, Branch Rickey was resolved to shine Christ’s light into the darkness of racial prejudice and segregation.

Rickey knew that this would be a living hell for Robinson, and he pressed him hard about whether he, like his Savior, would be able to turn the other cheek to all the abuse that he would face. “Can you stay composed when people are spitting on you, calling you names, threatening your family?” Rickey had a filing cabinet full of thick folders of the threats made against
Robinson and his family. Robinson managed to face that humiliation and persecution with tremendous dignity, and he won the respect of his fellow players, and eventually, the nation.

Now every year on April 15, the day Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues, every player in professional baseball wears the number 42. When Branch Rickey died in 1965, Jackie Robinson was one of the speakers at his funeral. Jackie said, “Besides Abraham Lincoln, nobody has done more for the African-American people in the United States than Branch Rickey.” But it came with a cost.

Let’s give Jesus some credit, okay? He told it like it was. When he sent his disciples out two-by-two into Israel, he warned them that people would turn them away from their door and said that they should be prepared to shake the dust off their sandals and move on. He warned that anyone who was not willing to take up his cross and follow him was not worthy of him. Do we think that life as a Christian is meant to be easy and that people are going to love us for it? Actually, Jesus tells us quite the opposite: it’s a hard and narrow path; you can expect to be persecuted, reviled, and even martyred. You’ll be doormats for others to tread upon – and, honestly, that’s not what we want to hear.

How clear-sighted Jesus must have seemed to those in the generation after his death. They saw John the Baptizer beheaded; Jesus himself horrifically crucified; their friend, Stephen, whose face shone like an angel, stoned to death by a group that included Saul; James, the brother of John, killed by the sword by order of Herod Agrippa. Peter and Paul both martyred, as well. The early church had no illusions as to the course they had chosen. The prospects for advancement were not so hot if you followed Jesus. Did they choose to follow Jesus because his Way was broad and easy? By no means. They followed Jesus because they had seen God’s light in him as in no one else.

I truly regret that I cannot present a picture of user-friendly Christianity for you today. How wonderful it would be if I could stand here in good conscience and tell you that if you just believe in Jesus, you’re going to be blessed with all kinds of riches, that nothing painful or tragic will ever befall you, and that everyone is going to think you are wonderful for your faith decision. I can’t tell you that. The truth is what Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Are we shocked by this? Well, the most surprising part is yet to come. In this teaching that Father Quainton will develop fully next week, after warning folks about the hardship of his Way, Jesus flipped people on their heads. He said, “Blessed are you when you’re persecuted for righteousness sake... Rejoice and be glad!” And you and I are left to ask, “Why should I rejoice when others grind me down into the ground? Why should I jump for joy when people mistreat me? Why should I be glad when people say evil things about me, falsely? For that, I should be glad?”

We should be shocked by this. None of us are pleased by the prospect of persecution and pain. Yet Jesus says something totally new. He says we should be “exceedingly glad” when we suffer for his sake. The New Testament phrase that is translated as “exceedingly glad” comes from two Greek words which mean literally “to leap exceedingly,” like kicking up your heels. Ellsworth
Kalas, that great biblical expositor, says, “We’re talking about the kind of joy that sets a person to dancing. When you’re persecuted – Wheeee! It’s a reason to leap about. That’s the mood of this word.”

My suspicion is that we’ve never looked at persecution in quite this way before. Leap up and click your heels together! Be exceedingly joyful! However, remember the reason for this exuberant happiness Jesus describes. Happy are those who are persecuted because they are good. The promise of a dancing joy is not just because we are being persecuted, or because people don’t like us. It’s about being persecuted for the right reason. Because we become good when we seek to follow Jesus. Because when we follow the path of Christ, we are going to rub the world the wrong way. When we are on the right path, when we have got God in our heart and seek to do good above all else, much of this world will turn against us. And in this, we join a long line of faithful people stretching backwards from Christ to the prophets – and into the future from Jesus to the saints.

Now, if this sounds too difficult for us, there’s always a way to avoid persecution, you know. There’s an old, old preacher-story about a young man who took a summer job in a rough-and-tumble logging camp in the deep northwest. His mother feared that the rugged crowd with whom her son would be working would harass and ridicule him for his Christian convictions and practices.

When he returned home at summer’s end, his mother asked, “Did the men make it rough on you for being a Christian?” And the young man’s face brightened, “Oh, no, never! They never found out!” I fear he was happy for the wrong reason. And Jesus could not have been pleased that he was hiding his light under a basket.

Christ Jesus does not invite us to hide our light. For the love of God, we’re called to hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God’s kingdom! We’re called to do right, to do good, even when all the world scorns it and reviles us. Doesn’t matter! We do not live for the world. We live for God. And when we actually do this, there are joyful rewards here and now, and there are rewards that await in the kingdom of God.

On the wall of Shishu Bhavan, the children’s home in Calcutta, India operated by Mother Teresa’s order, the Sisters of Charity, you’ll find these words. I think they capture the attitude to which this beatitude calls us:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. 
Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.
If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.
The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.
What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight. 
*Build anyway.*
People really need help but may attack you if you help them. 
*Help people anyway.*
Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. 
*Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.*

This beatitude from Jesus, then, is like a postscript on the rest of them. It’s a blessing, and it’s a cautionary note. It’s like Jesus is saying, “P. S. If you don’t want to be criticized, don’t bother saying anything, don’t do anything, don’t be anything. But if you want to be my disciple, there’s a cost.”

Are you willing to be poor in spirit? Are you willing to mourn? Are you willing to be ‘meeked’? Are you willing to hunger and thirst after God’s righteousness? Are you willing to show mercy? Are you willing to purify your heart? Are you willing to be a peacemaker? Are you willing to be persecuted for my sake? If so, you’ll come to know my joy, the joy of doing right not for your sake but for God’s. And, if you are so willing, I dare say you’ll be eternally happy, beginning now.

May we pray? Gracious God, your son Jesus gave us a charter for a new kingdom, a kingdom not of this world. Help us to have the courage to live for you. Help us to know that when we follow you as our Lord, we may face persecution. If we do, help us to stand tall; help us to hold on to our commitment. And help us to live in the spirit of Jesus Christ, full of forgiveness and grace. So, help us, O Lord, to keep on trusting you, come what may. Amen.

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i. 2 Timothy 3:12
iii. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables from the Back Side*, pg. 84.