Today we re-read a familiar passage that has been called by the German theologian Martin Dibelius as a catalogue of Christian virtues. Or as Johannes Neuhausler, a priest imprisoned at Dachau, said: They lead us to think to ourselves, “Am I like this?” The Beatitudes are standards of behavior for us as a Christian community and as members of that community. They are what contemplatives might call a Rule of Life.

They are impossible for us to reach all the time on our own, but we are called to strive toward them nonetheless, knowing that the Holy Spirit will help us. Each one begins with the word “Blessed.” God, who is merciful and compassionate and loving, doesn’t condemn us if we fall short, and God gives us a special blessing each time we draw closer to these ideals. God also blesses those Christian communities who strive to bring these ideals into the world.

The Beatitudes call us to a life of humility, compassion, and being at peace with our neighbors – both those within the Christian community and those without. They also call us to take some risk – to go against society if society is not keeping to these values. They are essentially a restating of the Ten Commandments, but, in some ways, tougher because they go beyond telling us not to kill and not to steal and not to covet to telling us instead to actively engage in behaviors that are lifegiving to others – that care for them. They are a call to humility – toward keeping our attentions focused on God alone and totally away from anything that brings us a false sense of security or that inflates our importance over that of God and the spreading of God’s Word in the world.

Corrie ten Boom, who has been knighted and honored throughout the world for her actions in helping many Jews escape concentration camps and death during World War II, was once asked if it was difficult for her to remain humble. Here is what she said:  
“When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road, and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?” If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in His glory, I give him all the praise and all the honor.”

For us as Christians, the call is to be that donkey – the way in which Jesus Christ rides into the world in glory.

Some of us may be familiar with Eugene Peterson’s idiomatic translation of the Bible, which is called the Message. It was Peterson’s way of making the Bible accessible to those who had never read it and to make it fresh for those for whom it has become old hat. I particularly like the way in which Peterson has translated the Beatitudes because I find the situations he describes to be very concrete and relevant to my life. Here is that translation.

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4 “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5 “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

6 “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

7 “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

8 “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9 “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

10 “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

11–12 “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

The Beatitudes call us to a way of life that is radical in its acceptance and love of others and in its call to put Christ first. It’s a standard of behavior, yes, but it is one that is full of grace and blessings for us and not condemnation. It is a Rule of Life for those of us who are called to create and participate in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. And it foreshadows the community in the Kingdom of Heaven eternally.

Amen