

4<sup>th</sup> Lent, March 30, 2014

Crossroads at Boone United Methodist – Treasure: Seek  
Jason Byassee

Matt. 6:33

I'm delighted to be with you, Crossroads. Vern and I think this is the first time I've preached in here when he's in town, usually I fill in when he's away. I'm honored to get to stand where he normally does. Vern is such a gifted preacher and leader and I'm grateful to God to call him a friend and brother.

One thing Vern and I have been trying to do is to plan our preaching together. Not by saying the exact same thing—there are stories I tell well in the sanctuary that wouldn't work in here and jokes he tells well in here that I couldn't get away with in there. But we're trying to learn from one another, make one another better, and to get all of us in the various worship services at Boone Methodist *on the same page*. Literally. *This* is the page we're reading from this morning. It's so fast if you're not paying close attention you'll miss it, like a one horse town off the interstate.<sup>1</sup> It's just one sentence. In Lent we make do with less—we go without, try to moderate our appetites so we can learn to hunger for God alone. Here is a little Lenten sized verse for the day. You ready? Here goes.<sup>2</sup>

*Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

That's the Word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God**.

We are in a series of sermons on Treasure. And this morning's little bitty scripture tells us what, or who, to treasure. The text and this series are about priorities. What really matters? What do we most want? *Who are we* in the deepest sense? Or maybe more importantly, what does *God* most want? Who is *God* in the deepest sense?

God is one who seeks us.<sup>3</sup> Jesus comes among us as a person, a servant, a slave, and dies. God has sought us to the ends of the earth, to the bottom of hell.<sup>4</sup> God has sought us in Jesus. Let's seek him back in the church. I often ask God in prayer that God would make us, Boone Methodist, the church that God dreams about. A church that seeks Jesus first and last and always.

Let me back up. I don't go a week without a conversation like this. I'm talking to someone about the church or faith or whatever and they say you know, I have my qualms with institutional religion. I like Jesus, but the church? My goodness. I just don't want to be identified with it, all the awful things its done, crusades and inquisitions and intolerance. What do you think *pastor*?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-r3GOxfc\\_3B0/Tzvdqx\\_s04I/AAAAAAAAAGE/H2MnUp4-sqk/s1600/4635183499\\_bfc5c05822\\_z.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-r3GOxfc_3B0/Tzvdqx_s04I/AAAAAAAAAGE/H2MnUp4-sqk/s1600/4635183499_bfc5c05822_z.jpg)

<sup>2</sup> Mt 6:33 on screen plz

<sup>3</sup> <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Tjkl-F6aTHU/TTwXoDTRStI/AAAAAAAAAnM/KAoOC2i7wkc/s1600/grunwld1.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/archeo/images/buon-pastore\\_big.jpg](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/images/buon-pastore_big.jpg)

What do you say to that? Nothing. You listen and nod. The church has done countless stupid and evil things. Because the church is full of people. And the only people available are sinners like us. If you want to know what's wrong with the church look in the mirror. It's me. And you. There are no perfect people available. That's true also of the people *making* this accusation from outside the church. If you gather a bunch of agnostics or atheists or Jesus-not-church people you'd have just as many sinners. God only has sinners to work with. At least in church we admit it.

In the church here is all we got. Jesus. And Jesus is always hanging around the people who don't have it together. Jesus is always making the religious and civic leaders mad. For example, the scripture I just read is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just said not to worry about life, what we'll eat or drink, or about the body, what we'll wear. The birds don't do work, but God feeds them. The lilies don't labor, but Solomon in all his glory was never so beautiful. Have you seen the first few daffodils pushing through the earth? Don't you agree no king has ever looked so radiant? Don't worry about food or drink or clothes, don't. Don't worry about tomorrow, tomorrow will worry about itself. This is what the church is—a bunch of people whom Jesus makes crazy, but who stick with him. What's he talking about here? I defy you to explain it to me. No one can. But it's marvelous, beautiful, worth giving your life to. Jesus could have just told us, "Don't worry, God provides." But he told stories about flowers and birds and mountains and kings. We are not Christian because we have it together or understand it. But only because we have Jesus. And we won't *ever* be able to figure him out.

I was talking with a parent of a child here at church who's considering joining. He has the usual qualms, don't we all? Then he said something brilliant. "You know what?" he said. "If I don't give my kids faith, where else will they learn their morals except from the market?" If the church doesn't tell us who we are who will? Commercials and magazines and social media, that's who. Everyone is hustling. Without some foundation we'll just be blown around like grass or birds. With Jesus terrible things will still happen. But at least we'll know who we are, who we belong to.

Here's the danger of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes dismissed. Politely, of course. Some say Jesus makes the demands so difficult here, so impossible, that we'll know we can only be saved by grace. That's interesting, but it's not what Jesus says. John Wesley says Jesus makes clear *he* thinks we can do these things—*so do them*. Preachers like me sometimes try to dodge, weave, evade, insist Jesus doesn't mean it. A friend calls this "Protecting people from Jesus."<sup>1</sup> But Jesus gets past our defenses and mugs us just the same. Others point out there's a kind of economic system here. Share what you have. Give to those who don't. Don't plan for tomorrow. Sounds sort of communist doesn't it? But of course it isn't. No government is enforcing this, equally sharing misery all around. But neither does it sound capitalist, does it? Karl Barth, the greatest theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost never got invited to the US.<sup>5</sup> Here he is on his one trip with Dr. King. Why no invites? Because Barth argued that both capitalism and communism are equally arrogant efforts to avoid the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is its

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<sup>5</sup> [https://sites.google.com/site/beeldfiguren/karl-barth/achtergronden/barth%20-%20martin%20luther%20king\\_01.jpg](https://sites.google.com/site/beeldfiguren/karl-barth/achtergronden/barth%20-%20martin%20luther%20king_01.jpg)

own politics, its own economics, and the kingdom of God is an offense to the world. New Testament scholar Paul Minear put it this way.<sup>6</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus assaulted the whole human race at the point where that race is most sensitive: its desire for security and superiority.

To read the Sermon on the Mount carefully is to be mugged, assaulted, by a God whose ways are not our ways.

I was in Rwanda recently with some others from church. We saw inspiring ministry to orphans by an outfit called Zoe, and we saw a genocide museum, which tried to make sense of how one million Rwandans were turned on by their neighbors and killed by machetes or burned to death in churches. And here's the problem: most of those folks were Christians, killers and victims. 90% of them. Rwanda was considered a textbook missionary success. The problem in Rwanda wasn't that the people weren't Christian. It was that the Christians were hacking each other to bits with machetes. And *we think we have problems with institutional Christianity?* So coming back I've been reading some Jewish writers on the holocaust. David Weiss Halivni opens his book on his experience in Aushwitz with a parable. The archangel Michael approached God about the holocaust to get God to stop it. God refused. And Michael was furious.<sup>7</sup> Here's what happened next

Michael went back to his place, ashen and dejected, but could not resist looking back sheepishly at God and saw a huge tear rolling down God's face, destined for the legendary cup which collects tears and which, when full, will bring the redemption of the world.

God's ways are not our ways. Michael wanted God to intervene. God does. Not the way Michael wanted. But with tears. Tears that will one day save the world. We worship a savior who sweated blood, who wept, who can understand. Does that make sense of genocide, of holocausts, of the pain in your life? No. Nothing can make sense of any sin. But it does say this. We have a God who weeps. We have a God who will redeem all things. You wait.

There's got to be a sermon in here somewhere.<sup>8</sup> "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," is how I learned the verse in a song, and we don't have nearly enough opportunities to use the word "ye." A writer I admire says you can learn a lot about a person<sup>9</sup> *by asking them what they're waiting for*. It'll tell you who they are. Seek, strive, prioritize, put the kingdom of God first, Jesus says. Another way to describe God's kingdom is to call it God's dream. What does God want his beautiful broken world to be like?

Among the orphans in Zoe in Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Kenya and elsewhere, the first thing they have to teach the kids to do is dream. When street kids come into the program they get no food. They expect a handout—that's what westerners are there for—to give handouts. Instead they get a sheet of paper and some markers and they're asked to draw their dreams. They don't understand at

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<sup>6</sup> Quote on screen plz

<sup>7</sup> Quote on screen plz

<sup>8</sup> I. Seek or strive

<sup>9</sup> On screen: "What are you waiting for?"

first.<sup>10</sup> Then they draw. *They* don't dream about college or a house or what they're going to be when they grow up like our kids do. They want simpler things—food. A safe place to sleep. Not to be beat up. Not to be so lonely. Ok, draw that, the workers say. Next they say draw what makes you sad. It's always an image of a funeral, when their parents died. Draw what makes you happy. And they can do that—a soccer game, or a time when someone was kind to them. Now, they say, imagine that happy thing all the time, what would make that possible? Draw that. And they do. They illustrate their hopes for the future: A sewing machine. A motorcycle repair shop. A field of corn. Their little siblings in school. Now you're getting it, they say, you're dreaming. Go home and come back tomorrow and we'll teach you about seed and soil and school and savings and the bible. That's the thing with passages like ours today—Jesus doesn't want people grindingly poor. When you're poor, you can't dream. Poverty is awful. Poverty can mean choosing between the doctor or food for your kid. Poverty can mean a house you dreamed about is underwater and you're better off walking away. Poverty can mean a dream business opened on borrowed money and closed just as fast. It's awful. When our spirits are crushed we have to be taught to dream again. And Jesus is in the dream business.

Seek ye first his kingdom.<sup>11</sup> What's a kingdom? Sometimes Americans say that the Brits or whomever can get this better because they have a queen. Actually their queen has no more power than Boone's mayor, she can turn up and cut ribbons and knight people (actually knighting people is cool.<sup>12</sup> I remember Bono saying his kids were disappointed when he was knighted. They thought he was becoming a jedi). The truth is the president of the United States has more power than any king or queen in history, he commands more arms, he determines more lives. We just don't call him a king. The US is like Rome that way. Rome had Caesars who ruled empires, continents, the world. Don't call them kings of Rome though. Kings--those are tyrants.

In popular culture that we never see anybody ruling well. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* the kids take their thrones and then the movie is over. We never see them govern, they just overthrow the witch, the end. Same in *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn is crowned king of Middle Earth--role credits. What'd he do next Tuesday? When we see ruling it's horrible.<sup>13</sup> *Game of Thrones* for example sees people murder and manipulate on the iron throne. King Joffrey says, "the king can do as he likes." That's what we think of as power, as rule, as a kingdom.

But Jesus rules differently than the president, than Caesar, than King Joffrey. How?

Let's try this. Jesus rules with absolute patience. For example, Jesus has been trying to get us, his people, to trust him for millennia. And we still don't. Jesus says 'Look, I'll take care of you, trust me, I won't let you down,' and we won't trust him. Countless millions of people don't know about Jesus. He doesn't seem angry about it. People all the time defy him. And he still sends them rain, sunshine, love. God is so unbearably patient with us. Waiting, hoping, but not forcing, that's a strange way to rule.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://bumczoe.blogspot.com/>

<sup>11</sup> II. Kingdom

<sup>12</sup> <http://media1.s-nbcnews.com/j/ap/lon80303291404.grid-6x2.jpg>

<sup>13</sup> <http://sciencefiction.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/game-of-thrones-2011-wallpaper-iron-throne.jpg>

Jesus' rule has no borders. A friend of mine recently met his daughter's birth parents in Myanmar, Burma, a country long closed to Christian missionaries. And when they arrived to meet them they cried, hugged. Then her birth parents said "Let's go to church." They prayed, sang, praised God. One word came through loud and clear: "hallelujah." It means the same in any language. We may not speak another's language or eat one another's food or look alike. But if we share a king, we are sisters, brothers, friends. Some of you discovered the same in Guatemala. Others in Rwanda. Others will in Cherokee this summer.

In this country we're very close to a fundamental faultline between political parties. Those on one side hate the other. This is new and frightening. We choose a side and only hang out with those who agree with us. But not in church. In church we befriend others *because* of Jesus. Politics does not matter as much. Jesus is first. Politics can be 5<sup>th</sup>, or 17<sup>th</sup>, or 194<sup>th</sup> most important, but when Jesus is first, other things are not.

*His* righteousness.<sup>14</sup> Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his *righteousness*. Not a word with much cache at the moment, not very chic. It sounds like self-righteousness, where I condemn others and bless myself. Jim Deal, longtime leader in our church, points out that most people want grace for themselves, punishment for someone else. But here's *Christ's* righteousness: mercy. Tenderness. Forgiveness. *Not* condemning. Think of the holiest person you know. Go ahead. Someone good and thoughtful and forgiving and wise. They are witnesses to the *righteousness* of Christ, even if they don't know it! One of you approached me recently seeking a mentor. Someone to hang out with, get to know, push you toward Jesus as you push toward adulthood. Great, I got just the woman, I said. So I went to her, someone my age, and she said, you know, *I've* always wanted a mentor, someone older, wiser, holier. And I realized whoah, this is a basic human need. We all want Gandalf. Someone to take an interest in us, someone to admire and become like on the way to becoming like Jesus. That's *Christ's* *righteousness* we want.

Jean Vanier founded an institution called L'Arche in France.<sup>15</sup> He's 80 now, I hope he wins a Nobel Peace Prize before he dies. When he was young the mentally handicapped were kept in cages in France. He asked three disabled men to come live in his home with him, not as patients or clients but as friends and brothers. L'Arche is now in hundreds of countries worldwide, with thousands of residents. The goal is for able bodied and disabled people to live together, pray, love one another. It's so beautiful it's hard to describe. When I met Vanier I wanted to touch him to see if the holiness would rub off.<sup>16</sup> He preached in Duke Chapel, big fancy place, in a windbreaker. And when he preached he told of a couple who had a baby born with Downs Syndrome. They were crushed. He cried every moment he was awake, 20 hours a day. And the mom said, I want to throw my son out the window. Can you imagine? Vanier said with infinite patience I know, I know, I understand. Only when we face weakness, like that in the disabled, can we face the violence in our own hearts. We all have it. We could all throw a child like that away in the trash. Vanier says no, don't, give me the child, come with me to learn to parent this child. People are not products to be discarded. They are

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<sup>14</sup> III. Righteousness

<sup>15</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7f/702524260\\_txjiQ-0.jpg/220px-702524260\\_txjiQ-0.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7f/702524260_txjiQ-0.jpg/220px-702524260_txjiQ-0.jpg)

<sup>16</sup> [http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/qUGllud\\_Qf4/hqdefault.jpg](http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/qUGllud_Qf4/hqdefault.jpg)

mysteries who reflect the infinite mercy of Christ. *That's* Christ's righteousness friends, and if you're like me when you hear *that*, you want to sign up.

<sup>17</sup>“And all these things shall be added unto you.” Now this is tricky. There are religions out there that preach if you believe the right way, you'll get all the stuff you want. Pray it and it'll happen. Name it and claim it. This is, how to put this nicely, this is pathetic. It reduces God to a genie, to a fortune cookie, to someone we manipulate to get what we want. I'll give you an example. I even remember the year. 1987 and not a very good Duke basketball team. We were losing at Clemson and I was praying. My dad teased me—you're praying for Duke to win? I was 13, what can I say? And we started to come back, helped by this new invention called the three-point shot. And at the buzzer Tommy Amaker, now the coach at Harvard, shot a three. It hit the rim, bounced up, hit the backboard so high it almost hit the shot clock, bounced back down rolled around the rim and went in. What was that about prayer you were saying, dad? My prayer didn't make that shot go in, much as it seemed like at the time. If it did people could pray away cancer, disability, death. We can't. In this age they win. But Jesus destroys them eventually. The “all these things” we get are not clothes or food or drink—even the birds and the grass get those, plenty of righteous people *don't*. What we get is Jesus and all his gifts. And his gifts are the poor, our enemies, those who are difficult to love, ourselves.<sup>18</sup> Let's put it this way, a preacher I admire says “God gives us what we want, after he changes our wanters around.” From beating Clemson, to caring for the poor. From using God to get what I want, to asking God to bless those I don't like. It's slow, takes a lifetime, but God is patient.

I'm going to close with a story from Vern Collins. Seems appropriate right? Vern came into Christian faith partly through Young Life, an organization I admire like many of you. He went away to their cool camp in Colorado one summer, the perfect place to get kids away and introduce them to Jesus. It worked. He's here because of it. The next summer he wanted to do the same thing. But they only let you go to Colorado once, too many want to go. So they sent him on a mission trip to inner city DC. By the way—how do atheists get to go on mission trips to meet the poor? To realize they're useless with a hammer? That's an important lesson! Anyway Vern met a street woman who brought up Jesus. He was nervous and surprised—aren't I supposed to be telling *you* about Jesus? She said honey let me tell you. When you lost everything, your family, your house, your job, your self-respect and your dignity, faith is all you have left. And they can't take that away from you. It was a mission trip in reverse. A homeless woman preached Jesus to our beloved Vern. Can you think of any better reason to take to the streets and love God's homeless? Can you think of any better reason to take to the church? I mean, where else do we get a preacher and a homeless woman, black and white, poor and middle class, in one conversation about the living Lord. Where else? Here. And in the streets. And that's reason to keep on putting up with the church. And with Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> IV. Added

<sup>18</sup> “God gives us what we want, after he changes our *wanter* around”

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<sup>i</sup> It's Will Willimon's phrase