



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Treasure Hunting"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on July 30, 2023, from Matthew 13:44-56*

In 1988, retired US Air Force pilot Forrest Fenn was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Confronted with the tragic news of his impending death, he decided to hide a treasure chest containing gold nuggets, jewelry, and gemstones valued at over \$2 million dollars in the Rocky Mountains. His hope was to create a nationwide treasure hunt. After hiding the treasure, Fenn recovered from cancer and published a memoir entitled *The Thrill of the Chase* where he wrote that the treasure could be found "in the mountains somewhere north of Santa Fe," and he included a poem containing clues to help prospective hunters in their search. As you might imagine, his memoir prompted thousands of Americans to engage a hunt for Fenn's treasure.

Over the next ten years people from all over the country searched for Fenn's treasure leading to a host of controversies and tragedies. One man was arrested in New Mexico for desecrating a cultural artifact. A young couple was detained for digging in Yellowstone National Park. A man was arrested for breaking into Fenn's house. Another had to be rescued after trying to repel 850 ft. into the Grand Canyon, which led to a week in jail and a \$4000 fine. Five people died searching for the treasure leading New Mexico's police chief to publicly implore Fenn to end the hunt stating, "Your putting lives at risk!" Eventually, in 2020, Fenn announced that the treasure had been found in the mountains of Wyoming. It was discovered by a medical student from Michigan named Jack Stuef, and an auction of just a few items from the treasure resulted in \$1.3 million dollars in sales. We love a good treasure hunt, don't we?

From Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* to *Indiana Jones*, to *National Treasure*, to the CBS show *The Amazing Race*, we are captivated and enthralled by the adventure of searching, hunting, and scavenging for treasure. Some say it's the journey that energizes them, the satisfaction of searching. Others say it's the destination that attracts them, the gratification of finding treasure at the end of the hunt. For many, it's both—the combination of journey and destination, seeking and finding, the search and the discovery, the hunt and the treasure. These stories beg us to ask, "How far would you travel? What mountains would you climb? How many oceans would you cross? What obstacles would you face? How much time would you take? What sacrifices would you make to find a hidden treasure?"



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If we're talking about literal treasure—money, artifacts, jewels—something with a high cash value, many of us would be willing to travel across the world and back, face whatever comes our way, and do just about anything to find that treasure. And there is one very simple reason most people would be willing to climb every mountain, cross every sea, and sacrifice everything to find monetary treasure. Some of you might think the reason is greed, or the love of money, which the Bible says is the root of all evil. Greed is a powerful force that can motivate people to do extraordinary things. But that's not the reason most of us would do anything and sacrifice everything to find a massive monetary treasure. The reason is because we know that treasure has the power to change our lives. It's the same reason people buy lottery tickets at the gas station or gamble on everything from sports to the stock market. As human beings, we know "money makes the world go round" and winning on a lottery, or a bet, or a stock, or finding a treasure would radically change our lives.

People living in the first century experienced this as well, especially the disciples. In Matthew 13 Jesus taught a series of parables by the Sea of Galilee. Scholars call this "The Sermon on the Lake," but there are two parts to the sermon with distinct audiences. First, Jesus taught the crowd four parables sitting in a boat—the parables of the Sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, and the yeast. But then he left the crowds and entered a home with his closest followers where he told three more parables just to the disciples—the parables of the treasure, the pearl, and the net. We don't know why Jesus told these three parables only to the disciples, or why Matthew wanted us to see it that way, but what's clear is the lesson of these stories is something Jesus wanted to make sure the disciples understood. Because when he finished his trinity of parables Jesus asked them, "Do you understand all this?" The disciples quickly answered "Yes," but the response seems hasty to me. How could they understand these parables? Were they pretending? When these three stories were read this morning, if I immediately asked you, "Do you understand all this?," what would you have said? Would you have pretended to understand? Do really get what Jesus was saying?

Jesus' first century disciples had some advantages we don't. As poor fisherman from Galilee, they were well aware of the financial precarity of life in the first century. They knew what it felt like to be trapped in an exploitive economic system where they were forced to engaged in the hard labor of fishing every day only to see their catch sent to a processing center in Magdala where it was ground up, dried out, and seasoned to make a fish paste called *garum*; a prized delicacy in the Mediterranean world that donned the plates of kings like Herod and emperors like Caesar. Fisherman received no share of the fish for themselves or their families but were compensated with a meager wage and taxed heavily by the Temple-state in Jerusalem and by Rome. The Galilean fisherman who became Jesus followers and founded the church, were the day laborers, farm workers, food service and retail workers of the first century.



Today there are 140 million poor and low-income people in our country. 46% of Americans are living in families with insufficient income to meet their basic needs. Everything costs more than it ever has. The cost of living, and inflation have skyrocketed, yet wages have stagnated. Can you imagine gathering in a house with people who've been laboring all day on a farm, at Wal-Mart, or in an Amazon warehouse and saying: "The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Or "The kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Those poor workers would reply, "Is seeking kingdom going to make me rich?" The answer is "no," of course, which begs the question why would anyone poor or low income take the incredible risk of giving up everything they own (as the parable of the field and pearl state) to search for the treasure that is the kingdom of God?

For generations, evangelical religion has claimed the kingdom of God is synonymous with a place called heaven, an eternal paradise where we exist forever with God. They contend that if we don't "get saved" we'll be thrown into a horrible fiery furnace of judgement called hell where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Every time I hear "weeping and gnashing of teeth" I imagine an eternal visit to the dentist with no air conditioning. That would be hell! The problem is heaven is not what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom of God. For Jesus, the kingdom was the in-breaking of God's reign of love into human history, which would turn everything upside down and completely reorder society and all our relationships. And Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God was at hand and taught his disciples to work so "the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' vision of the kingdom followed the Hebrew prophets who envisioned its dawn as the advent of broad sweeping social changes, the establishment of justice, peace, and equality on earth, the renewal of creation, the inclusion of the Gentiles, the forgiveness of debts, the deliverance of prisoners, the liberation of the oppressed, good news to the poor. God is love, therefore God's kingdom is a kingdom of love—a world of perfect unconditional love between all people, all nations, and all of creation; a place where the last are first, the least are greatest, the bottom are on top, the outside are in, and all the unjust structures of our world are overturned. The Greek word Jesus used to describe this "kingdom" was *basileia*, which is the same word Romans used to describe their empire. So, there is no mistaking the earthly, material, social and political implications of Jesus' most significant teaching. *Basileia* meant the Roman Empire, Caesar's world, but Jesus stole their word, appropriated it, and inverted it to cast a vision of a radically alternative *basileia*, the *basileia* of God.



When people want to summarize the message of Jesus they often say, "Jesus was love, and that's true, but Jesus primary teaching was about the kingdom of God, which means that the kingdom is what Jesus meant by love. For Jesus, the *basileia* of God was a place where there were no poor or low-income, no sick or oppressed, no hungry or homeless, because everyone would have their daily bread, all their needs would be met, and no one would be in debt. There would be no oppression based on gender, class, race, or ability. There would be no war. The *basileia* of God would be the opposite of the world the disciples were struggling to live as fisherman, and the opposite of the world we live in today.

The kingdom was the promise of a whole new world, which is a treasure so valuable, so precious, so extraordinary and compelling the disciples were willing to give everything up to follow Jesus and try to make the kingdom a reality on earth. The reason the disciples dropped their nets so quickly and left the family business without hesitation has a lot to do with their social location. When you're poor and living off nothing you have less to lose. So, when an itinerant prophet comes around inviting you to give it all up to seek something that will change the world, it is easier for the poor and oppressed to leave it all behind.

When you're on the bottom, you'll do whatever it takes to change the world. You'll climb every mountain, cross every ocean, face any obstacle, sacrifice all the time and energy you have, to get that treasure. It's a lot harder for those of us well-off and well-heeled folks who have a lot to lose. If we're struggling to imagine what it would mean to give everything up for the kingdom of God, it's probably because we lead lives of privilege and have become comfortable with the way things are. About a year after coming to Charlotte to serve as Senior Minister, Carlyle Marney was asked to speak at a Baptist seminary where Marney preached a sermon entitled, "We Have the Treasure." In that sermon Marney described the churchgoing people of Charlotte as: "numerous enough to be a majority; established enough to be unchallenged, settled enough to need an earthquake to disturb them; old enough to want some dignity, poise, stultification; rich enough to be social leaders; powerful enough to feel no social pressure; pious enough to know no conviction of their sin; and complacent enough to feel no real responsibility anywhere."



Four years later Marney wrote, "In all our world of Mecklenburg, and in Charlotte, the 'city of churches,' not one single, objective, historical church projection of the historical objective work and person of an objective historical Christ has taken hold of one single powerful, effective, objective structure of evil to change anything. The gospel of the status quo is the only gospel we know." What would it mean for such powerful, privileged, and pious people to give up everything to search for a different kind of treasure? What would it mean for people with a lot to lose to surrender all for the sake of the kingdom? What would it mean for the well-off and well-healed to wake up with a passion to change the world? Marney spent the rest of his career in Charlotte trying to find out.

Last weekend, my daughter Lucy and I completed the Barbenheimer marathon, which for those who don't know means we saw the movies *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* on the same day. It was a long day of existential crisis and cognitive dissonance. On the surface, it seemed like these movies had nothing in common, but they're both centered on an event that happened after WWII, in the Cold War period of American anti-communist sentiment. One could even argue, if you were trying to make a point in a sermon for instance, that both movies are about kingdoms that need to be overturned and the means people engage in to overturn those kingdoms. You know about the "kingdoms" we fought in WWII. In the *Barbie* movie, feeling rejected, beset by male fragility, stewing in resentment, Ken discovers something he'd never know of before "the patriarchy," and proceeds to use it to transform *Barbieland* into a dystopian misogynistic nightmare called "The Kendom." (It writes itself!)

"The Kendom" is a metaphor for the real world (no spoilers), the Barbies are forced to organize themselves to overthrow "the Kendom." But they don't turn the *Barbieland* back into a completely woman dominated world. What makes their overthrow of "the Kendom" work is that the Barbies are not interested in taking power back for power's sake. They're invested in helping the Kens understand they have a place in *Barbieland*. The Barbies take power, and regain control over *Barbieland*, but they don't obliterate or dominate their enemies. Instead, they understand they're all in this life together and graciously offer a way forward to the Kens who were once their opponents. *Barbieland* is not the kingdom of God, but it offers us more hope for the future than the atomic violence we find *Oppenheimer*.



A lot of us men would rather keep comfortably living in the “Kendom of Patriarchy” instead of the kingdom of God. We don’t want to give up our power, comfort, money, privilege, status, position, our control. But if you ask the average woman, trans, or non-binary person, what they’d give up to overturn the patriarchy, the answer would be big enough to drown the state of Texas. If we don’t understand why poor fisherman would urgently drop everything and follow Jesus, then it means we’re happy in “the Kendom,” comfortable with status quo, content with the current state of injustice and oppression in the world. We may even think that what we’re doing about it is good enough or working. But 140 million people wouldn’t be poor if our efforts were working. Women wouldn’t have lost their reproductive rights if our efforts were working. People of color wouldn’t have lost affirmative action or keep getting battered by police if our efforts were working. Trans people wouldn’t be losing access to gender affirming care or getting murdered if our efforts were working. Books wouldn’t be getting banned if our efforts were working.

Every one of us is searching for some treasure. The problem is that too many of us are searching for a treasure that will change our lives but leave everybody else’s the same. Everyone is searching for treasure that will create their own personal “Kendom” but not the kingdom of God. Everyone seems to be searching for a treasure that will change their world, but not the treasure that will change the world. down on us, instead of organizing together to overturn the system.

We need a shift in the destination of our expedition. We need a change in the direction of our journey. We need a new heading for our trip, new navigation for our GPS, new coordinates for our quest, a new latitude and for our trek, a new orientation for our “X marks the spot.” We need a whole new treasure map, so that we can search for the kind of treasure that will not only change our lives but change everyone else’s life as well. That’s what it means to search for the kingdom of God like a person who found hidden treasure in a field or pearl of great value. It is to be on a mission to find the treasure of life, love, and liberation for everybody—the life, love, and liberation that will bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven and change the world into the beloved community for all God’s creatures.



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We don't need any more people searching for their own treasure, trying to build their own kingdom. We need people searching for the kind of treasure that brings good news to the oppressed, that binds up the brokenhearted, that proclaims liberty to the captives, release to the prisoner, and proclaims the year of jubilee—a kind of treasure that comforts all who are mourning, that presents a garland instead of ashes, that pours out an oil of gladness instead of sadness, that gives a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, that provides the world with daily bread instead of deadly poison, living wages instead of mounting debt, love instead of loneliness, hope instead of heartbreak, justice instead of judgement, joy instead of performative gestures—a treasure that has the power to build true community.

When Jesus taught the disciples in that house by the sea, he said, is there anybody willing to go on a treasure hunt? Is there anybody willing to go searching for a treasure that will turn the world upside down? Is there anybody willing to go looking for a treasure that will overturn greed, patriarchy, homophobia, racism, ableism, ageism, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and all the other “isms” that keep us from living in community together?

Is there anybody willing to sacrifice the abundance they have so others can have enough to live? Is there anybody willing to give up all the worldly treasures to help find the treasure of the kingdom? Is anybody willing to go on a journey to find the kind of treasure that will change more than our lives, but has the power to change the world? Is there anybody willing to search for the kind of treasure that builds up community instead of tearing us apart? Are there any treasure hunters in the church this morning?” If there are, then the time has come for us to pack our bags and tie up our boots and hit the road. The journey will be filled with treacherous obstacles and countless distractions that will try to divert our course. So, we must gird our loins, set our faces like flint, and press on toward that holy destination, so we can find the treasure of the kingdom that will transform our lives, transform this community, and transform the world. Friends, are you ready? People are you reading? Church, are you ready to go out and find that treasure?