

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
August 30, 2026

Matthew 16: 21-28

Would you join me in prayer?

Holy One, Creative Creator, and God of Mystery: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This past week my best friend from Harvard happened to be visiting San Diego. One of the non-profits his church works with was having a conference in San Diego, he sends me a screenshot of where they were staying—which predictably was in Hotel Circle in Mission Valley and he while he was only here for 2 nights we knew we had to get together. You have to understand something about Michael and I, we were the Thelma and Louise of Harvard. It was a thing. He was starting his first year of his Master of Divinity when I was starting my first year of college. So he's a little bit older than me. But he decided to stay at Harvard for his PhD and so we were together for the entirety of both of our degrees there. And we just followed each other around, we studied together til 3 am, we saw each other through our ordinations, through all the church bureaucracy we had to face, through our first internships and residencies, as we took our first baby steps into this odd and wondrous calling. On paper we are very different—he is a straight guy, married with a kid now, from Alabama, who was President of his fraternity at the University of Tennessee, he's a Baptist, now pastoring a church in Evanston, Illinois. And we were quite a pair, he's really tall, he'd dress like a southern version of a Brooks Brothers catalog, bow tie, pastel colors, his aesthetic actually worked well at a place like Harvard. And then, I'm me, and especially then in my Patagonia looked like I had just come from the Rocky Mountains. And so now that I've given you a physical description of him, it would make a lot more sense to you that of all the places he wanted to meet me here San Diego he wanted to go to Cigar Bar. So there we were on Thursday night in a cigar bar talking about church and oddly it worked—it was dark and the dense smoke that would rise to the ceiling around us felt almost as if it was incense and we were in some sort of holy cavern somewhere.

But the thing is we were so different but just so close and no one from the outside could really understand that. Or maybe they did but they wished they had that too. Now, I know this might be shocking and scandalous to you, but divinity school students can be mean—they can be just as nasty as a popular high schooler. And one time I was standing outside of the bathroom in Divinity Hall waiting for Michael and along comes this classmate of ours who was in her mid 40s at the time and she was a Wiccan—which is a pagan, Earth focused religion—and she asked me what I was doing there and I said, “oh, I'm just waiting for Michael to come out.” Which I thought was obvious as I was standing next to the bathroom, to which she said, “Oh honey, we all know that.” It took me a minute for her joke to land. But it belied the fact that people didn't understand—they didn't understand the possibility of closeness between two people who are seemingly very different, different backgrounds, different accents, different faith backgrounds. But if you ask me there is something so incredibly Christian, about that. Something that is so reflective of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And as it always does the lectionary text just speaks directly into my soul because at the heart of this week's text that Ken read there is a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding about the mission and ministry and purpose of Jesus. That even those closest to him, those who are his classmates in this life, don't fully understand. Jesus is beginning to show his disciples where the end of the road leads—and the reality is, it leads to a really dark place. A really difficult place. He's telling him it ends with death. That it ends in Jerusalem. That this path that he is on is not one that results in some sort of victorious triumph, or battle, but that it is one that ends in humiliation, in suffering, and ultimately in the blinding light and joy of resurrection. And the disciples don't want to understand this. They don't want to even think about it. Peter, even taking Jesus aside saying, God forbid this. This must never happen to you. But Jesus says sets a boundary—Jesus tells them that their view of this entire project is so small, is so limited, that they aren't comprehending the immensity of this—the earth shattering, cosmic, history changing nature of what is happening right in front of them. It's so human to do this. We all do it. We can't fault them. We get so comfortable with what is right in front of us. That we lose sight of the grander, bigger picture. It seems so far out. It seems too impossible. Jesus' disciples are being human, they are being good church people like all of us. I can't tell you the number of times I've sat with colleagues who regale me with such salacious church controversies such as the 2022 blow out over whether or not to use ceramic or paper cups at coffee hour, or how many times I've read church profiles that lament over the exodus of church members that occurred in 1997 after those pushing for red carpet in the sanctuary lost to those pushing for blue carpet. These little things become battlefields for bigger things—and blow up in ways

that it feels in that moment to those people like the entire integrity of the Gospel hangs in the balance, the scales of good and evil balancing ever so precariously on the pendulum swing of red or blue carpet, ceramic or paper cups. This is what we see here, just in the disciply version of it, which is them saying to Jesus, “No, we are winners, not losers—we live, we don’t die, we triumph, we don’t tank. And Jesus says, no, this journey leads to the cross but even that isn’t the end of the story. Because the darkness that we must pass through makes the blinding and glorious light on the other side all the more incomprehensible.

When I sat down with Michael at the cigar bar on Thursday I still had that book on my mind that I told you about last week: Suicidal Empathy. He had never heard of it. In case you weren’t here last week, I talked about a book that my seat mate on a recent flight was reading that intrigued me. The book was called Suicidal Empathy and you can bet the minute I got wif I was searching that up. And it was exactly what I thought it was — a book about, *the inability to implement optimal decisions when one is psychologically conditioned to prioritize empathy or displays of empathy over a rational course of action.*” The author argues that suicidal empathy prioritizes minority groups such as immigrants at the expense of survival and security of one’s own group and values. Optimal decisions. In fact on Thursday I told Michael this story and essentially read him that quote and his succinct response was simply, “that’s evil.” I’m stuck on the phrase “optimal decisions.” Our inability to implement optimal decisions when conditioned with empathy. I want to know what an optimal decision is. Because I don’t think Jesus was much in the business of making optimal decisions. If optimal decisions prioritize survival then Jesus certainly wasn’t into that. An optimal decision would have been to appease Rome, to ride a war station into Jerusalem instead of a donkey, to assemble an army, to raise money for armor and munitions, to take up the sword, to leave the wayward fishermen behind and assemble an elite team of Galilean Navy Seals. That would have been optimal decision. And I think Peter, based on his comments to Jesus we just heard, would have said, let’s start making some optimal decisions.

But by this metric of optimal decisions as Rev. Lilian Daniel writes, “Jesus would be considered a loser of founder, who died the most humiliating death at thirty three years old without accomplishing any goals that any of us would recognize.” Jesus is inviting Peter, his disciples, and all of us who are trying to be disciples to go with him into a darkness that is so cavernous, to put the book on optimal decisions back on the shelf, and even Peter himself is petulantly dragging his feet begging him not to go through this. Because what Jesus is describing to him, what is he is saying is going to happen to him is disgustingly awful. You might recall our humdinger of a Maundy Thursday service this last year which was so dark, and so heavy and so difficult that several of you struggled to stay through it.

This is really like why Holy Week is the most important week in our tradition. It is in our human nature to want to skip right from Palm Sunday to Easter but as Lillian Daniel writes in her reflection on the journey to the cross those who do that are missing out. She says, “Palm Sunday is the cosmic gateway into the long religious arc that none of the tourists know about. We go into the dark to better appreciate the light. The sadness, the betrayal of the crucifixion... It fills up your melancholic tank so that you can really appreciate the sweetness of Easter, when new life returns in stunning relief. If you do that deep practice year after year in Holy Week, you will find that it may even become a day-to-day thing, a beautiful rhythm that reminds you that your heart beats up and down for a reason. That betrayal, wrongdoing, and suffering do not have the last word.

Jesus is all about the long arc. The cosmic gateway into things that even those closest to him can’t fully comprehend. The road less optimal. The decisions less logical. The ones that lead to a justice and a redemption and a sweetness beyond imagining. I wonder just how disappointing Jesus was in this moment to those who gave up everything to follow him. How disappointed they were that he was uninterested in optimal decisions and how unfocused he was on survival at all costs. I wonder how that felt for them. This is a disappointment that goes far and beyond not getting the carpet color you wanted on the sanctuary floor. This would have been a crushing disappointment I imagine. But it shows us that such is life in community. That this is church. At one of my colleagues churches in fact they have a rule, you can’t become a member of the church until it’s disappointed you at least once. And I bet Peter and the disciples are so disappointed in this moment, confused, worried, wondering why they’ve given their lives to someone who isn’t even wanting to be on the winning team.

And yet, Jesus is pointing us toward the way and that way is not adorned with colored carpet and paper coffee cups and all the other things that we think are the great church debates of our time, but rather it’s a path of non-optimal decisions that point toward a greater Gospel. That point toward a community that is formed by something bigger than a superficial affinity or shared values, but that is rooted in the cosmic love of a God who came to live and die among us, as one of us, and in solidarity with all of us. And then surprised everyone by defeating death and injustice and power hungry dictators and empires that thought they were God.

But as with all stories with Jesus, there's a twist. Peter, this guy who is clearly not getting it, who is disappointed, who likely feels let down, who is not wanting to go through all of this, who would prefer to just be a tourist and skip over the hard parts just so happens to be the one in whose hands Jesus leaves the church. Peter would be the first shepherd of the church after Jesus' death. Which is like Jesus' way of turning the story up-side down as he likes to do and is saying in that that it's ok to not understand something, it's ok to not fully see the long arc of something, it's ok to misunderstand and to be misunderstood—because those are precisely the people, the heartbroken and disappointed and weary ones who Jesus uses to redeem the world. And so if you might ever find yourself as a tired and worn out disciple who is on team blue carpet when the team red carpet carries the day, or you feel heartbroken and disappointed by the jagged contours of life in messy community, just always remember that in the story that Jesus writes you have a part to play that even Peter himself, the custodian of the ceremonial keys to the church, was once one of you—tired and threadbare, weary and worn and yet was just the shepherd the church needed. And so it is, the church of tomorrow needs you too.

May it be so.

Amen.