First Congregational Church
August 30, 2026
14th Sunday after Pentecost
"Minding the Things of God"
Matthew 16:21-28
Rev. Dinah Haag, preaching

Sermon and Scripture

When God was handing out brains, Ole thought God said 'trains,' so Ole asked for a slow one. When God was giving out noses, Ole thought it was roses, so he asked for a big red one. When Ole heard it was the day for chins, he thought the word was gins, so he ordered a double. He asked for two fat ones when he thought the day was for kegs instead of legs, and a big soft one for the day about beds, when it was about heads.

An angel flies down and finds God resting after a long stretch of work. The angel asks, "Lord, do you know what you just did down there? You just created a 24-hour period of alternating light and darkness on Earth. Isn't that something?" God nods, smiles, and says, "Yes. And you know what? I think I'll call it a day."

In what I estimate was a week, 1. Jesus used five loaves and two fish to feed well over 5,000 men, women, and children with 12 baskets of leftovers. 2. Walked on water. 3. Gave a lesson on the results of cleanliness. 4. Bared his humanity in an encounter with a Canaanite woman. 5. Fed an additional 4,000+ followers who had been three days without food, with seven loaves and a few small fish, collecting seven baskets of leftovers.

Whether it happened according to Matthew's timeline or not, today's passage has irony: in that the one right before it, when Jesus asks the disciples who the Son of Man is, Peter speaks up, declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Matthew 16:21-28
21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for

his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. 28 I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Thank you, Dave. I got to wondering how it would feel if I, or how you might feel, hanging out with Jesus, and he started talking about all that was to come down the pike at the hands of those who were already giving him and the disciples trouble, especially the part that he "must be killed." We've all had that person, maybe a teacher or mentor, colleague or friend, that you begin to admire and want to hang with. I think the disciples saw Jesus like our "person," but unlike our person, Jesus starts saying that he and the disciples will go through horrific things, which would be bad enough, but then imagine trying to wrap your brain around the "raised to life" part.

I'd venture that more than a few of us have had a doctor or other individual stand or sit across from us and deliver news we surely didn't want to hear. I don't care how good that person is at delivering the news; our human tendency is for the brain to begin a tailspin we didn't realize we were capable of. That's one of the biggest reasons a second set of ears should attend appointments we aren't sure about, maybe even recording the conversation, because it's hard to stop that tailspin to hear the rest of the words.

People like to pan on Peter - which is not the same as Peter Pan - and his impulsivity. If anything, I think he is one of the greatest representatives of humanity - with all our blunders and blusters, loyalties and sleeve-bearing passions. Maybe you've been that person sitting with a family member or friend responding to a crummy prognosis, proclaiming the belief of every cell in your heart that you will help your person to overcome the upcoming battle. Imagine what it would feel like if that person were to say, "Get out. I don't need your help." I wonder if that's how Peter interpreted some of Jesus' words.

I hadn't really thought about it before, but Peter got a double barrel of horrible that day, and I'm very certain he wasn't the first or the last to have days like that. Today's passage can feel stark and lifeless, but once you start standing in other sandals or seeing the similarities, a lot of emotion comes through in just three sentences. If there's nothing else that might come from this section, it is that we are not singular in our experiences. The longer we live, the more we can appreciate the verse from Ecclesiastes 1:9: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

For whatever reason, one of the statements from today's passage has been rolling around in my head - long before I realized that today's passage would be today's

passage. It was verse 26: “What good will it be for a person if they gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Maybe part of the reason for that sentiment rolling around like a ball in one of those little handheld maze games you can find at many a tourist trap is because of a TV series I’ve been watching called The Last Ship on Netflix. It stars the recently departed McSteamy Eric Dane as the commander of a naval guided missile destroyer that confronts the reality of a new existence when a pandemic kills off most of the Earth's population. The intrigue lies in that the series ran from, get this, 2014-2018 - a year before a real pandemic created a new existence for the world.

Anyway, it’s a great story, based on a novel by William Brinkley, about sticking to one’s principles even when the consequences of those convictions bring you and loved ones into harm’s way. Granted, it’s not based on a true story, but there are very real applications, and there is, of course, McSteamy.

The phrase in verse 23 really caught my eye when Jesus told Peter, “You do not have in mind the things of God.” The mind of God. I'm not sure how I came across him, but there is a young man named Daniel White who was associated at one point with a mega church in New York called Northridge Church. He was part of a series on the question, “Who Am I?” The 50-second clip I came across showed Mr. White making the point that we don’t read the Bible so we can know some “cute Bible verses,” as he called them, or to counter various truth claims. Mr. White’s point - and mine, truthfully- is that we dig around in the Bible so that we take on the mind of God or at least get closer to it.

That idea is rather audacious, to say the least. If anyone was ever able to fully take on the mind of God, then they’d be God and not a person. Taking on the mind of God isn’t a 4-week course, a special beanie hat, or any other human construct we can think of. But it is, I think, a little like becoming an apprentice to God.

What I mean by that is like apprentices, back in the day, to printers, builders, stone masons, blacksmiths, seamstresses, tailors, shipwrights, and the like. An apprentice often began young, doing menial labor for their mentor and often living with the master craftsman so they could learn not just the skills, but the lifestyle and associations that came with the trade.

Apprentices started with small jobs and learned through observation, repetition, and correction. They learned the tricks of the trade that could lead them to become revered experts in their fields, if they had the chops for that kind of patience and dedication.

Although an apprentice might have become a craftsman, if they were worth their salt, they wouldn’t simply replicate what their mentors taught them. They would expand

their knowledge, test new methods and theories, and keep improving. Many people deserve our gratitude because they helped create the list of edible and poisonous mushrooms. Hunting mushrooms alongside someone who has been a hunter for a long time has created observers who have led to innovations that have created much safer ways to determine a mushroom's benefits or deadliness.

Reading God's word doesn't create God-mindedness overnight. It takes time and some knowledge of life to appreciate that the Bible seems to actually contradict itself. Paul said that women were to be quiet in church, which was in regard to a specific situation and time, but that was long after Deborah was a judge over Israel, which meant she held military, religious, and legal power. Esther confronted her husband, the king, in an act of disobedience in order to protect her people. Closer to Paul's day, Mary Magdalene was called an apostle to the apostles. Mary of Bethany sat in a seat reserved for men.

The Old Testament allows eating fish with both fins and scales, but not anything living in the water without fins or scales, like shrimp, crab, lobsters, oysters, and mussels. It may have been because shellfish could be poisonous, but unrefrigerated fish can be too. It was more likely about identity: if they didn't eat shellfish, it was a signal that that person was probably a follower of God, capital G, as opposed to other gods with small g's. But later on in the New Testament, Paul says, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." It could drive a person mad trying to sort out what is true and right. That's where having the mind of God comes into play.

Having the mind of God, as much as we are able, allows us not to be worried about what people eat, what church they go to, with whom they associate, or even what fishing reel they use, because any matters of such judgment are for God. The mind of God loves all of God's people, because to separate any out, for any reason, brings God's love of our own selves into question. If God loves everyone except Ole, it doesn't matter that Ole is my uncle or boss or grocery bagger. If God doesn't love everyone, then how do you or I qualify to deserve God's love, whether a person believes in God or not?

Yes, some people have done and are capable of great harm and injury. But no matter what they do, it doesn't mean that God stops loving them. Love doesn't have anything to do with liking. I haven't thought it all the way through, but I wonder if love comes from the mind because it is a decision, whereas like comes from the heart because it comes from a reaction.

I'm sure there are great rebuttals to that idea, but the more time we spend seeing how God works, the more we can take on how God works, which helps us become more like the person who God has always seen us to be. Sometimes we will get it wrong. But the

more time we work at it, the more times I think we get it right, which brings more glory to the One who created us to do just that, which also brings us to a fine place to pray.

Holy and Loving God, we can appreciate the fact that we are not you—and on many days, that's quite a good thing. Yet we also know there are days when we act as though we are the ones sitting on the throne of judgment. Forgive us when our human-mindedness causes pain or injury, certainly to those we love, but even more so to those we do not know or understand. Inspire us to see this world more as you would have us see it, rather than simply through the lens of what sits so comfortably within our own hearts. Help us to worry less about how we are seen by others and to focus more on who you are. Give us the humility to listen before we judge, the courage to question our own assumptions, and the grace to recognize your image in those whose lives and experiences that are different from our own. May our words be gentler, our hearts more open, and our lives a clearer reflection of your love. Amen.