

Recognizing Jesus
Matthew 16: 13-20

L. Frank Baum, was famous for writing The Wizard of Oz. Published in 1900, it told the fantastic story of a little girl from Kansas who is swept away by a tornado to a mythical land. Over the years many stories evolved about how he came up with the name, Oz. Some people said, he used the pseudonym of Charles Dickens, Boz. Others that he got it from the Bible's land of Uz, where Job lived. Others from Percy Shelley's poem, Ozymander. One speculator said it was a code based on the postal abbreviation of his home state - NY. O comes after N, Z, after Y. Even Mrs. Baum, Frank's wife had a theory: he just made it up. But the most likely reason for it is given by the author himself: L. Frank Baum said this: "I have a file cabinet on my desk. As I was thinking and wondering about a title for the story, my gaze was caught by the gilt letters on the three drawers of the cabinet. The first was A-G, the second was H-N, and the last were the letters O-Z. And "Oz" it once became."

It is always best to get the story from the source.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells Peter that he got the truth from the source. After Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus responded: Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my father who is in heaven.

How did God reveal to Peter who Jesus was? We tend to imagine that he sovereignly dropped a thought bomb into Peter's brain: Zap! Yay, Peter! Now you're the rock!

However, the Gospel of Matthew suggests something much more interesting about this revelation. It is embodied in the lives and stories of those who encountered Jesus. Peter's declaration takes place more than halfway through the Gospel of Matthew. It has taken time to recognize who Jesus is.

At the beginning of Jesus's ministry, everyone was wondering who he was.

When Jesus taught in a synagogue in his hometown, people asked: Isn't this the carpenter's son?

When Jesus healed a paralytic and pronounced that he was forgiven: Everyone asked, who is this who even forgives sins?

When Jesus amazed everyone with his teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, people asked: "Who is this, who speaks with such authority?"

When Jesus calmed the stormy sea, his disciples asked: "Who is this, even the wind and the waves obey him?"

And on this day in the lush, green rocky resort area of Caesarea Philippi, north of the sea of Galilee, when Jesus asked the question, people knew he was significant. But they weren't sure how.

King Herod thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead. That was scary because Herod had beheaded John The Baptist, and was tormented by notions of his vengeful return. Others thought he was a prophet come to proclaim the new age that Israel was longing for, when they would be free of Roman oppression and restored to God's blessing and favor.

Peter replies: "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

You can be with someone a long time before you recognize him. Some time ago, I was shopping for men's socks in Brooks Brothers in NY, on Fifth Avenue. Brooks Brothers has a lot of socks, so I saw a man who looked like a salesman and asked his advice. He was very helpful, but as we spoke, I kept imagining I had heard his voice before and seen his face. It wasn't until after I had purchased the socks that I realized I had heard his voice and seen his face. Every night on the CBS evening news since I was a child. He was the famous anchorman Walter Cronkite!

You can be with someone a long time before you recognize him.

Peter and the disciples had been with Jesus a long time, and it only gradually dawned on them, who he was. How did God show it to them? Through the works of Jesus in the lives of people, and what they said about Him.

Peter was not the first to call Jesus the Messiah.

Matthew 9:27. Blind beggars: **Son of David, have mercy on me!** Son of David was simply another title for Messiah.

Chapter 12: Demon-possessed man, blind and mute. The crowd: **Can this be the Son of David?**

Chapter 14: Walking on water. **"Truly you are the Son of God."**

The stories of what Jesus had done were so many and so amazing that they spread beyond the borders of Israel. Beyond the Jordan, into Syria, into the decapolis. Foreigners crossing the border, seeking Jesus.

Last week, Chapter 15: Canaanite woman, a pagan, the ultimate outsider for many reasons. Matthew mentions she was a Canaanite, because that phrase provoked the ire of any religious Israelite. She came to Jesus, desperately pleading for her daughter, she falls on her knees and she calls him, **"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me."**

This woman got it at every level. Not only was he Messiah. He was, Lord. And she came on her knees. Begging for the crumbs that fell under the table - the leftovers that Israel did not want.

And Jesus was amazed at her faith. Think about it. Up until then, everyone was amazed at Jesus. Now Jesus is amazed!

I love that Jesus could even be surprised at the effect he has on the world. I would like us to be as surprised and amazed as Jesus is.

But isn't it fascinating that the people in Jesus's inner circle discovered who Jesus was by seeing him at work not primarily in their lives, but in the lives of the outer circle? The needy, the outcasts, the foreigners?

“Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this has not been taught you by flesh and blood, but by my Father who is in heaven.”

Flesh and blood: It was not taught to them by flesh-and-blood rabbis or philosophers; but it happened through God at work in flesh-and-blood. In the encounters between his flesh-and-blood son and flesh-and-blood people. Jesus's person was revealed through Jesus's works.

Peter's understanding of the Messiah is not yet complete. As we will discover in next week's Gospel, he seriously misunderstands Jesus's person and purpose. Peter's deepest understanding of the Messiah will take place when Peter comes to a painful realization of himself. During Jesus's trial, Peter will be confronted with the truth about himself: he will see his hubris, his faithlessness, his fear, and his fickleness. He will, in that moment, believe that the Gates of Hell have won.

But he will discover that they will not prevail. Like the Canaanite woman, be brought to his knees, and the same mercy poured out on the blind man and on the Canaanite woman, will be poured out for him. The same love, the same truth, the same kindness. He will be washed clean and pure, and set on a solid rock.

Jesus said to Peter: You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. Scholars debate what Jesus meant when he said “the rock.” Some say the rock was Peter, himself, or the apostles. Others, that it was Peter's confession. Still others, that it was Jesus, the rock of our salvation.

However, the proclamation, itself, suggests that it was all of the above. Peter saw that the heavenly Son of Man and the human Messiah come together in Jesus. We saw that God's revelation and work takes place in flesh-and-blood encounters. Therefore, the rock is Jesus. And the rock is Peter. And the rock is the apostles, and the rock is Jesus's life and teaching, death and resurrection, ascension and the Holy Spirit. And the rock is the stories told by the apostles about these encounters, and about all the ways the Holy Spirit worked to form the church through many more encounters. And the rock continues in your and my encounters. The work of Jesus is the confession of the Person of Jesus.

And on that rock Jesus has built his church. You can be with someone a long time and never know who they are. What is their truest story? What is hidden inside of them, wrapped in shame and pride, guilt or grief, heartache or hopelessness? Waiting to come before Jesus the Messiah, and be transformed into glory and beauty? One more testimony that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of the Living God?