

## Guess Who? *Matthew 16:13-20* | 8/27/2017

Have you ever gone to the Pima County Fair and tried some of the games along the midway? Sure, they're rigged and what you might win probably cost less than what you spent to win it. Still, it's fun to try to beat the system, and one of the places you might do that is a booth where a carny attempts to guess your weight and your age just by looking at you. Usually they win. But what if this game were played with one crucial adjustment? What if the guessing game were to be played without the person or subject *being seen*? How would you guess the age? How would you guess the gender?

Truth is, it's even *easier* to guess these things sight. All that's needed is your smartphone. Look at the apps on the smartphone, and you can deduce the age, gender, income level and marital status of the owner.

Researchers recently cross-referenced the app usage and demographics of 3,700 people to determine which apps and personal attributes correlated and found that they could predict a person's gender, age, marital status and income with between 61 and 82 percent accuracy. To put it another way, *you are what you download!* Not only do your app choices say a lot about you, they also make it possible for the Internet to know you even better than your family and friends. There's a reason those ads that pop up on your phone or computer are so creepily accurate. Your data usage reveals the real "you" in many ways.

It would have been a lot harder for people in the ancient world to guess your age and weight given the many layers of robes and a short life expectancy and, of course, the complete lack of cellphone coverage and Wi-Fi hotspots. That didn't stop people from trying, however, especially people who didn't quite fit the usual mold.

The crowds had been observing Jesus for some time by now, but no consensus had developed. In a world where a person's demographics involved a 3g analysis (gender, genealogy and geography), Jesus was an outlier. Consider the data sets about him to this point:

- + He is born in unusual circumstances and of questionable parentage (1:18-25).
- + He is from a poor family, but his birth threatens a king and attracts foreign diplomats (2:1-23).
- + Rather than stay at home and take on the family business, as expected of a Jewish male, he becomes a wandering teacher who leads a ragtag group of disciples.
- + He performs incredible miracles, but never uses his power to benefit himself.
- + He casts out evil spirits but, at the same time, is blamed for being in league with them (12:22-32).
- + He is a student of the law of Moses, but teaches that it doesn't go far enough (5:1-7:29).
- + He appears to be a righteous person, but he hangs out with the dregs of society. He even eats and drinks with them.
- + He talks about eternal life, but seems to be obsessed with death and, in particular, his own death on a cross.

It's little wonder that people were confused. The guessing game took place every time he appeared in public and, in fact, even among his closest associates.

This brings us to our text, where Jesus turns to the question of his real identity. Jesus and the disciples arrive in "the district of Caesarea Philippi" -- a fact which is significant for the dialogue that follows. Pagans living in the region believed that a cave near the city was the residence of the Greek god Pan, from which comes the word panic, and the entrance to Hades -- the realm of the dead. The city was also significant because it was built by Herod Philip in honor of Tiberius Caesar. It seems appropriate that in a place identified with two significant rulers, and a place identified with the personification of evil and death, Jesus would bring up the question of his own identity as a counterpoint. So one day he says to his disciples, "Guess who?" His actual question was, "Who do people say that I am?" (v. 13). What's the buzz about me right now?

The answers given by the disciples as to the crowd's perceptions are all connected to the prophets. There was some expectation of a return of the prophets at the end time, particularly Elijah. Some thought that John the Baptist was an Elijah figure, but when John was executed by Herod Antipas, they began to transfer that moniker to Jesus. Many of Jesus' miracles had seemed to mirror those of Elijah -- especially raising the dead.

When Jesus announced God's judgment on unrepentant cities and downplayed the central role of the temple, he sounded a lot like the prophet Jeremiah. The crowds linked Jesus with what they knew from the past, seeing his ministry as a prophetic one pointing to some future figure who would finally overthrow systems of injustice and oppression, introduce the kingdom of God and rescue them from subjugation.

But those closest to Jesus began to suspect there was more to him than that. Jesus was more than a prophet; in fact, he was the One for whom they had been waiting. When Jesus asks his disciples the pointed question, "But who do *you* say that I am?", it's a question that will not only define who he is but also define the identity of his followers.

Simon Peter answers with confidence, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Simon has concluded that Jesus is the real deal. But while Simon gets Jesus' title right, he still doesn't quite understand what it means. Like most Jews of his day, Simon had certain Messianic expectations. The problem with expectations is that they often narrow our vision, allowing us to see only that which is compatible with our expectations. Clearly, Simon's vision is, like the crowd's, limited by what they've seen in the past.

Simon probably knew that God had promised King David that his royal descendants would be his adopted children. So, it was natural for any successor to the throne to be seen as "the Son of the living God." The Messiah (which means "anointed one") would be that royal descendant. When Simon confesses Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God, he is actually not thinking of him as the second person in the Trinity but rather thinking something more like, "I think you might be our future president."

It's clear from the next section, when Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, that Simon's bold confession, while technically correct, still doesn't match the messianic identity Jesus has in mind. It will take the cross and resurrection of Jesus to give Simon the full picture.

Still, as we said, Simon was technically right. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven". In a place where Caesar is hailed as a god and the realm of death stands wide open, Simon acknowledges the one person who is really worthy of worship. Standing here near the gates of Hades, Jesus proclaims that it is on Simon (now called Peter, the "rock") and his bedrock confession that his church will be built. Even the forces of Hades and death will not prevail against it. Peter's own identity is changed because he acknowledged the true identity of Jesus. Wherever he goes from now on, he will be identified by his association with the Christ.

This brings up an important question for those of us who would follow Jesus as well. Would we be easily identified primarily by our association with Jesus? Age, weight, gender, education or income are really not relevant factors. Jesus only wants us to identify with him as our true Lord and then to work on his behalf, imitating him in all that we do. This identification means that we are willing to not only share in his blessings, but also in his cross (v. 24).

The apps on your phone might say a lot about you. Following Jesus, on the other hand, might be personal but it's never private. Once you are associated with him, it's an identity that sticks. Anyone we meet should be able to tell right away from our words, actions, compassion and way of living that we belong to him. They shouldn't have to guess!

Jesus would sternly warn his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah at this stage of his ministry. Well, now the secret is out and we have no such restrictions. The question is whether people will be able to discover Jesus, see God, through the way we live our lives. And they shouldn't need an app for that!

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