



Proper 16, The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A small town zoo's most popular attraction was its gorilla and one day the gorilla died. Because it was a small zoo, operating on a shoestring budget, they couldn't afford to replace the gorilla right away. Instead, the zoo's owner talked an employee into wearing a gorilla suit every day for an extra hundred dollars a week in pay.

Soon the very human acting gorilla became even more popular than the previous, real gorilla had been, and the employee found that every day he had to come up with new antics to entertain the people and keep drawing a crowd. One day he climbed up a tall tree in his enclosure and out on a long limb that shaded the lion enclosure next door – then, to the crowds shock, he fell from the tree into the midst of the lions.

Immediately he abandoned his role as a gorilla and began to shout, “help, help, get me out of here, these lions are going to kill me!” Suddenly one of the lions rushed up behind him, clamped his paws over his mouth, and whispered in his ear, “shut up, you fool, you're going to get us both fired!”

Neither the gorilla nor the lion were quite what they seemed to be, were they? And so it is, in a way, with Jesus in our reading from today's gospel text. Jesus presents his disciples with a very direct challenge – the challenge to recognize that he might be more than just the son of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth and that there might be a deeper truth to his identity.

He challenges them with a simple question: who do you think I am? In doing so he is, obviously, posing to them the deeper question that lies behind those words: what do you think I am doing in the world, where do you think I came from, and what do you think is the deepest truth of my identity?

I find it interesting that Matthew tells us that Jesus posed this question in the ancient city of Caesarea Philippi. The ruins of this city can still be seen today, in the northern part of the modern nation of Israel. The city had been founded several centuries before the time of Jesus when the Greeks ruled the region and the city had

been intentionally situated next to a spring that is one of the headwaters of the river Jordan. Here the Greeks built a temple to the God Pan, whom they worshiped as one of the gods of shepherds, rural places, and wild forests. You have probably seen his image before – he’s the one with the legs of a goat and playing a kind of flute we call a Pan flute.

Like many of the ancient gods, Pan was a trickster, who sometimes appeared in disguise or went initially unrecognized when he interacted with humans. In fact, both the ancient Hebrews and the ancient Greeks and Romans shared the idea that humanity has a hard time recognizing divinity when it breaks into our world. In the Hebrew scriptures, when God shows up, his appearance is often a puzzlement to those who encounter him – think of Moses at the burning bush, for example. And in Greek and Roman mythology, when the gods show up, they are often in disguise, as with Pan.

I would suggest that the ancients were onto something here, that they had an insight into the relationship between divinity and humanity. When God shows up, when God speaks, or when God acts, we often do not initially recognize what is happening as something divine. It often takes a while for us to realize that God is at work and, sometimes, we don’t fully recognize it until we look back on events from a later vantage point.

And so it is that, in a place of many gods, including the trickster Pan, Jesus poses this very fundamental question to his disciples: what do you think is going on here? Who am I, Jesus asks, and do you recognize what God is doing here?

Peter’s answer goes to the heart of the matter, though I’m fairly certain that Peter himself doesn’t fully understand the answer. Peter answers that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. At this point in his life, these are just words, a title that Peter is aware of, but not really a spiritual truth that he has yet comprehended. And yet, within that simple phrase, we find the fullness of Jesus’ identity and mission.

Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, the Son, in flesh and blood as the man Jesus. In him a permanent union has been created between divinity and humanity and as a result of that union all of humanity is now included in the life of God and the life of God is revealed to permeate all of human existence. Peter doesn’t really understand all that, at this point, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit he has been given the fundamental insight from which all other Christian spirituality will grow in the years to come. It is the fundamental insight that in Jesus we have not just met a messenger from God, we have met God himself face to face.

And the question that Jesus poses to Peter he also poses to us – not just at one dramatic moment in our lives, when we decide what we believe about God, but over and over again on an almost daily basis. Do we see God in our neighbors? Do we see God in our enemies? Can we discern when Jesus is at work in a situation in our lives and can we follow his lead in how we treat others and show them love?

Thankfully, like Peter, we don't have to get it perfectly right or understand it fully. In fact, we can't. Mystery and hiddenness are within the nature of the meeting between the divine and the human. We don't have to understand fully what God is doing because God will do what God intends to do, with or without our understanding. But in Jesus, we have invitation from God to look deeper into the reality that lies behind the reality we see with our eyes, and to perceive with our souls the deeper truths of existence: that we are all connected to one another and to God through Christ, that we are all loved and included in the love of the Trinity, and that God is at work in this world even when we have trouble recognizing him.

May the eyes of our souls be opened, as Peter's were, and may we see what God is doing in the world around us, and may we be given the gift of joining with him in his work.

Amen.