Scripture tells us that even someone as familiar as Jesus can be hard to recognize at times. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, grieving the death of Jesus. When she arrived, she saw that “the stone had been removed from the tomb” (John 20:1). Finding the tomb empty, Mary assumed that grave robbers stole Jesus’ body. She ran and told Peter and John, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” (v. 2). Peter and John ran to the tomb. They confirmed that there was no Jesus there, then they returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. When she turned around, she saw a man standing there, but she did not recognize him as Jesus. Mary was not a super-recognizer, so she could not identify the man. The he said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (vv. 14-15). As Mary explained the situation, Jesus broke through the confusion by calling her name: “Mary!” Suddenly, she recognized him and called out, “Teacher!” Jesus said to her, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (vv. 16-18). In a flash, Mary became The Recognizer!

What an amazing experience for Mary! “I have seen the Lord,” she said, something that none of the other followers of Jesus could yet claim. Her darkness turned to light. Her confusion turned to clarity. Her grief turned to joy. Mary’s life changed when she recognized Jesus.

So how might we become super-recognizers and identify Jesus in the world today? This past year, the Presbyterian Church (USA) started an initiative called “Matthew 25,” which issues the challenge to “actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive.” Across the denomination, Presbyterians are being challenged “to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.” When congregations do these things, they are classified as a Matthew 25 church.

This initiative is based on our reading (Matthew 25:31-46), which tells the story of the final judgment. At that time, Jesus will look out over all the nations of the world and separate people into good sheep and bad goats. He will say to the sheep, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you…for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:34-36).

Then the good-sheep-people will say to him, “Lord, when did we do this for you? We don’t remember ever serving you in these ways.” As typical recognizers, these good-sheep-people will not recollect seeing Jesus. But Jesus will say to them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40).

This, then, is the key to the Matthew 25 initiative: To serve the neediest members of the family of Jesus. When Presbyterians do this, they are a Matthew 25 church. And when any of us do this, we are recognizing Jesus.

So, how might we see Jesus today? Jesus may not be clear at every moment, just as he was not clear to Mary at the empty tomb. But Jesus is present in the power of his resurrection life. He comes to us in people who are strangers, who are hungry, and who are sick. When we serve vulnerable people, we become super-recognizers of Jesus in the world today.

**We can** **welcome a stranger.** You do not have to go far to find a stranger. There are probably people unfamiliar to you within our own congregation. Go to your church directory and find a person you do not know. Give them a call. Tell them you are a fellow church member. Ask how they are doing. You are not asking them to volunteer, or to contribute, or do anything at all. You are simply finding out how they are doing and getting to know them a bit better. When you greet a stranger, you are greeting Jesus.

**We can** **feed the hungry.** Some years ago, when the Little Free Library movement swung into action, people built containers for their neighborhoods and filled them with books to borrow. Today, many of these little libraries are being converted into Little Free Pantries. People are filling them with canned goods and other non-perishable foods for hungry neighbors to pick up. Why not create one for your neighborhood? Children love to keep the pantries stocked and to know they are helping their neighbors. When you feed the hungry, you are feeding Jesus.

**We can** **care for the sick.** This pandemic year provided many opportunities to care for the sick, for the caregivers, and for the lonely. Diseases will always be with us, and those who struggle with illness or who are at home appreciate help with shopping, hot meals, or rides to the doctor’s office. Taking the time to send a card or make a phone call shows your care and concern. Remember, when you care for the sick and the lonely, you are caring for Jesus.

Such efforts to be super-recognizers are really nothing new. On the road to Emmaus, two disciples invited a stranger to stay with them and eat with them. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:28-31). It was Jesus!

Benedict of Nursia developed a rule for monastic life that stressed hospitality to strangers, a practice grounded in Christ’s identification with the stranger in Matthew 25. Benedict called for the monk in charge of provisions for the community and its guests to be wise and mature, with special concern for children, guests, and the poor (Rule of Benedict 31:1, 9).

When we serve children, guests, and the poor, we are really serving Jesus. When we welcome strangers, feed the hungry and care for the sick, we are really helping Jesus. The good news for today is that vulnerable people give us a chance to identify Jesus, alive and well in the world today. We can be super-recognizers, whenever we reach out to people in need.

**Sources:**

* Brinton, Henry G. The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 10.
* “Facial recognition: research reveals new abilities of ‘super-recognizers.’” Neuroscience News, January 12, 2020, https://neurosciencenews.com.
* “Matthew 25 in the PC(USA): A bold vision and invitation,” www.presbyterianmission.org.
* Vedantam, Shankar. “Some People Are Great At Recognizing Faces. Others … Not So Much.” NPR, May 20, 2019, [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

**Recognizing Jesus**

Sunday, November 22, 2020 Matthew 25:31-46

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Marty Doerschlag has an unusual superpower. Marty can remember a face forever. “If I spend about 30 seconds looking at somebody,” he told NPR, “I will remember their face for years and years and years.” Doerschlag discovered this gift after a series of strange encounters and sightings.

One year, he sat behind a man at a Michigan vs. Ohio State football game. Three years later, he recognized the guy in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Marty could not remember the score of the game, but he recognized the man.

At company Christmas parties, Marty always remembers exactly which spouse belongs to which employee.

At a Las Vegas restaurant, Marty asked the waiter if he once served customers at a restaurant in Columbus, Ohio, many years before. “The guy just froze,” said Julie Doerschlag, Marty’s wife. The waiter had, indeed, once worked at that restaurant in Ohio. Such recognition of strangers is a rare superpower. It is also a little creepy, but still impressive.

Scientists have a name for people with exceptional ability to identify faces: “Super-recognizers.” If you never forget a face or can spot the same nameless extras across different television shows, ads, and movies, you might be a Super Recognizer. Most of us, however, are just “typical recognizers.”

According to Neuroscience News, psychologists believe that our ability to recognize faces varies a great deal, kind of like the ability to sing. While a very small proportion of the population can sing like Sinatra or Adele, the vast majority muddles along. And when it comes to recognizing unfamiliar faces, most of us are pretty poor at it.