“***We Will Be Like Him***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Apr. 18, 2021

**Psalm 82:2–8**

How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

6 I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

**1 John 3:1–7**

1See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Both of our Bible texts speak of people being the children of God, but they approach it very differently. The psalm speaks more directly about justice and kindness. It reminds us we should take care of the weak and the orphan. In fact, when this is not done, then people walk about in darkness and the foundations of the earth are shaken. That’s how serious it is. Light is squelched and stability is destroyed, when justice, mercy, and kindness are given only to the few. All of us are equal in God’s eye; all children in God’s family deserve justice and mercy. We are expected to take this responsibility seriously.

While making this point, the psalmist says “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you” (Ps 82:6). The wording is straightforward, but the meaning is a bit unclear. Are we gods or are we children of God? Can we be both? Can we be gods while we’re worried about our job security, or are thinking about our back pain or an upcoming bill? How improbable that sounds!

Could the phrase “you are gods” be a mistranslation? That does sometimes occur, but here it really does say “you are *elohim*,” which is the Hebrew word usually translated “God” in the Old Testament. A glance at the history of this word will assist us in finding the meaning here. The word *elohim* is plural in form, although whenever it refers to God, it is translated as a singular. When it refers to pagan gods, it is translated in the plural. Here, being addressed to a group of people, it needs to be translated as a plural, but I think the most accurate translation in this context is “you are divine beings.”

What an extraordinary statement—you are divine beings! When does the Old Testament ever say that human beings are divine? Yet here the psalm seems to be saying exactly that. However, the listeners are also told they are not living up to that potential, not being compassionate enough, and they will die, like all mortals do. So it’s a very unusual statement.

It involves an extraordinary compliment, joined with a couple of put-downs. It seems that the psalmist *does* want his audience to know that they are divine beings, or *potentially* divine beings, but that they also need to get their act together ethically. Still, what stands out is the rare statement that the hearers are divine. Have you ever thought that you were divine, or that you carried a divine spark within you?

Jesus uses this same passage once, when he is being accused of blasphemy for making himself out to be God. He responds by saying “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’?” (John 10:34). In other words, if your own Scriptures show people being called *elohim*, why are you so upset that the one sent by God can call himself God’s son?

Let’s consider what is meant by calling people divine beings. It is the idea that we are meant to grow spiritually, even taking on some of the qualities of God. This idea of people becoming spiritually transformed is called deification or divinization, and it is a far more prominent idea in the New Testament than it is in the Old. It is clearly present in the First John passage. Today *you* should know, John says, that you are the children of God, and besides that, you shall be something additional when Christ returns. He does not know what it is, but he knows that, when Christ is “revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (3:2). Becoming like Jesus? I call that deification. Jesus teaches this transformation, too, as he proclaims: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). Of course, fulfilling this mandate requires time: a lifetime here, and a long period of time in the heavenly kingdom. It is a process of gradual divinizing and spiritual transformation. Paul says it best: “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:17–18).

So, transformation proceeds through stages, in this life and the next. Transformation into the Lord’s image! What a concept! It turns out our salvation is also transformation, and transformation is also deification, or *theōsis*, as it came to be called. And this is what John is talking about when he says “we will be like him.” If you are like Jesus, then you have astounding spiritual character, faith, and loyalty. Paul says we are “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). So, Christians are meant not only to learn from the life of the divine Son, but to make spiritual progress toward Jesus’ *own nature*. We are to be spiritual kin to Jesus himself, and he himself indicated this was possible: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). We are all children of God, in God’s family. And we still need to care for the widow and the orphan.

So today’s message is our spiritual mandate. Transformation will come from real spiritual progress, and the taking on (to a limited degree) the qualities of God. It is real and permanent spiritual change. We will be changed! And it begins today.

Becoming like Jesus is the goal and ideal of every Christian. We are God’s children now, but we are increasingly being spiritually transformed into Christ’s likeness. “You . . . may become partakers of the divine nature,” Second Peter says (2 Pet 1:4 RSV). What an astounding promise, and a necessary theme in Christian preaching! These passages have inspired Christians since the first century. We need these vitalizing sayings again today. They are astounding promises, and hard to fully assimilate, just as the instruction “be perfect” is hard to know how to absorb. How could we ever do that? It would take forever, at least!

But that is the whole point. It is a mandate for unending spiritual progress toward the goal of perfection, a mandate we will spend all of eternity seeking to fulfill! We need to accept this extraordinary destiny awaiting those who choose to follow Jesus. We are children of God, even now, but we are meant to be transformed and partake of the divine nature, forevermore. It can begin even in this lifetime. Even now, today, allow the transformation to grow you into God’s love, and lead you to return that love to those around you.