“***The Living God***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Aug. 23, 2020

**Matthew 16:13–20**

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Here, more than halfway through Jesus’ public ministry, he asks his disciples who people think he really is. Some say he is John, others Elijah, others Jeremiah. I’m not sure how literal those remarks are, whether they *actually* believe in reincarnation. It would be hard for them to think he is John reincarnated, since Jesus and John were contemporaries. Probably they are making an equivalency based on similarity, thus, saying that Jesus is *like* John, or *like* Elijah or Jeremiah. These are highly complimentary comparisons, especially with Elijah, who was a heroic prophet in his own day, and still a folk hero in people’s imaginations. Jeremiah was much admired, and so was John, who had recently been killed by Herod.

Then Jesus asks them who *they* think he is, and Peter’s remark goes beyond just the linkage to fondly remembered heroes. He hits the nail on the head with his insight: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16). Jesus immediately points out that this is spiritual understanding given by God, by the Spirit speaking to Peter’s heart. He is blessed to have received this revelation. And it is on this insight into Jesus’ divinity that his church will be founded.

It’s not because Jesus needs or craves power. It’s because he really is the Son of God who came to reveal God’s nature to us, and the recognition that he is the anointed one, the Son of God, is a genuine insight of permanent spiritual importance to the human race.

Peter’s wording is interesting for a couple of reasons. It’s dramatic and powerful, and ends with an appealing concept: “the living God.” It’s a phrase that shows how *real* God is for Peter, and for all the disciples. They had strong religious hopes before they ever met Jesus, and now their hopes are deeply invested in him.

Jesus’ unique role as Son of God is that he reveals the Father. Most of what we know about God comes from understanding Jesus, and appreciating his attitudes. As Messiah and Son of God, Jesus has authority, and we recognize that authority when we agree with Peter’s declaration. Yet Jesus has to tell them not to spread the word about his Messiahship.

He does not want them—at least not *yet*—to go around proclaiming that he is the Messiah, probably because Messiah is such a politically charged concept at that time. We saw how the Galileans tried to declare Jesus a king at one point, and he had to walk away from them (John 6:15). But presumably it will eventually be okay for them to proclaim that he is the *spiritual* Messiah, and the Son of God. First he has to get them to think differently about the Messiah and about the kingdom of God. They have to stop thinking of the Messiah as someone who will dominate, and think of him as someone who serves. He tries to do that when he says “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:4). That would get them to think about humility, instead of power, as characteristic of holiness. Anything he could do to get them to stop hoping for political power and to see the kingdom in more spiritual terms, would make it more palatable for them to start talking about the Messiah.

What about the living God? Turns out this “living” God is also a “serving” God, a loving God who is not into domination and total control, but into harmony and mercy. Only once the apostles start understanding that, will it be safe for them to start talking about the Messiah. The earliest apostolic preaching seems to have emphasized the innocence of Jesus, his resurrection and vindication, and the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:23–24; 3:15; 4:10; 5:32; 10:38, 43). There was nothing about wielding a rod against the Gentiles or about ruling from Jerusalem. It seems they were finally cured from that delusion. Peter still needed to have a trance dream that showed him it was alright to eat non-kosher foods, which meant Gentiles could be accepted (Acts 10:10–16, 34–35).

In our story, Jesus sensed that the apostles were nearly ready, but not *fully* ready, to proclaim the gospel. They needed some new information, and some new insight. Sometimes that’s the case for us, too. We may be nearly ready for the next step in our lives, but we need to learn something first. God is unchanging, but we are constantly changing. We need to be ever growing. We have to trust that we are on the path of progress, and we have to pray for growth.

It was important then that the apostles develop a spiritual and not a nationalistic concept of what they understood the Messiah to be. It was true then and it is true now: to be a loyal follower of Jesus, we need to be open to all nationalities and races. All the little children, be they yellow, black, or white, are children of Jesus. We may not always be the *best* of children, but the human races truly are his children, so let’s encourage love and understanding between people.

I used to work in a print shop. One of my work associates was a sales clerk. We had some spiritual conversations. He told me that these helped him to accept God as loving rather than punishing. I think he was probably on the verge of coming to that insight, but he said the conversations helped him to affirm that truth. He had become *ready*. It was a spiritual breakthrough for him. He felt very optimistic moving forward.

Let’s rejoice in our blessings. We could start with gratitude for the good news that we are loved by God. We can then make that an invitation to others to recognize the spiritual overcare of God, and the potential connectedness of all members of the worldwide family of God. We testify that the Son of the living God is the head of this family. “Come, Christians, join to sing.” We have something to rejoice for! “He is our guide and friend; to us he’ll condescend; his love shall never end” (“Come, Christians, Join to Sing”). Jesus wants us to be part of his great family. He wants to help us socialize, to study, and to grow, always learning about the Living God. Which of our life experiences can we share with the Son of the living God? All of them. He cares about all of us. He has already walked *with* us along every step of the way. He is still walking with us.