“***One Father***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Nov. 1, 2020

**Matthew 23:1–12**

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We get a lot of information here about the Pharisees’ behavior and the values that they really hold. We hear of them seeking “the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,” being greeted in the market-places, and called “rabbi” (23:6–7). They work at being well-respected, and receiving titles of honor. They are the glitterati, the red carpet walkers, of their society.

Jesus rejects self-promotion and pride, and advocates putting simple loyalty to God the Father foremost in our minds. He is offering a whole different set of values than theirs: common decency, self-restraint, humility, and honest devotion to God. Inner piety matters more than outward show and social status.

The self-promotion that Jesus critiques is not a Jewish feature; we see it happening in Christian circles just as often. There are certain people who know how to work the room, who know how to win friends and influence people, for the sake of their own promotion. It’s the way of the world, really. In the case of the Pharisees, along with their self-promotion go the heavy religious burdens that they lay upon others, and an unwillingness to help people to carry these burdens. If they were more kind-hearted, they would help people fulfill all the rules they are imposing. Jesus recoils from this kind of behavior. It is a religious control-trip, and is as unpleasant as any other domineering regime that shows no sympathy for people. Once again, this is not a Jewish feature, but a human one. The Catholic Church laid some heavy burdens on people for centuries, and eighteenth century Congregationalists laid some burdens upon believers, as well.

When Jesus encounters this, he takes the opportunity to give a teaching about God the Father. Call no one “father” in a holy sense, for you have one father—the one in heaven. Call no one “rabbi” for you are all brothers (*adelphoi*, in Greek; 23:8–9). And call no one “instructor” because you have one instructor, the Messiah (23:10). And the final message again has to do with humility: “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (23:11–12). Jesus is tossing out all arrogance and boasting. He is connecting us with God, with himself, and with each other, but although that bestows spiritual life and power, it is not supposed to create arrogance.

We instinctively know this already, but the competitiveness of the world tends to push us in a direction of accepting the bullying and grasping ways that so often prevail in the world. Competitiveness is also found within the world of Christian professionals. Some preachers dumb the message down to a formula, offering simple answers, preaching that God wants believers to become wealthy and powerful. They are like slick salesmen seeking the places of honor and seizing the best seats for themselves. And yet, they are very popular in *this* world. Sound and fury sell a lot better than do quietness and assurance (Isa 32:17 KJV). Expect the truth-sayer to receive little honor in his own country and among his own kin. That is the way of the world, even in the synagogue and the church. But the loudest are not the truest. Many who are loud will have to be quiet. Many who seem slick will be seen to be shallow. Many who are popular will be humbled.

What are the positive parts of Jesus’ message, apart from the conflict with the Pharisees? They are that we have one father, the one in heaven, that we are all brothers and sisters, and that we have one instructor, the Messiah, who honors the humble and faithful people. He teaches the Brotherhood of Man, or Humanity, and he’s talking about real family feeling, and familial love and ethics between all persons. Such brotherhood depends upon recognition of the Fatherhood of God and of the role of the Messiah as Instructor. You can’t learn the lessons the school has to offer if there is no one to run the school, and if there is no instructor. Jesus is our instructor, in God’s school. The universe is a university in which we are all students. If you are learning from Jesus, you will be moved on from grade to grade, only to learn more about truth, wisdom, and loving and living in community.

Call no school here a university, for you have one university—the universe itself. Sharpen your pencils; the teacher is coming.