

Sermon for Sunday, November 10, 2013 Luke 20:27-38 "Nuts and Bolts"

My mother was a good cook. It wasn't fancy, but everything was delicious and nutritious, and it was satisfying. My father was the son of a butcher and was a real meat and potatoes man. That meant no fancy sauces, no exotic ingredients.

Julia Child used to say that the mark of a really great cook was making a wonderful roast chicken. If that was true, my mother was a superb cook.

As with many good home cooks of her generation, she did not use recipes. She did it by feel. A pinch of this, a shake of that...and when I tried to learn from her and asked her for precise details, she would shrug and say, "you learn it by taste and feel as you go."

Now I'm a pretty intense cook myself, but unlike her, I don't have the ability to go by feel and taste. I need – at least in the beginning – to have someone give me precise details. I need a recipe. Precise measurements and a sequence of steps and techniques. The nuts and bolts of how to do it.

Many of us like having all the nuts and bolts laid out for us. It's like buying a cabinet from Ikea and following their pictorial instructions on screwing in all those screws with the infamous hex wrench...ever get those blisters from using one of those things? But there's a certain comfort in knowing that if you follow the instructions step by step, you'll end up with a finished product that looks like the picture on the box.

We might imagine that the Sadducees who were questioning Jesus in today's gospel were nuts and bolts people. It's no surprise that Sadducees were religious reformers. They were concerned with how people were following the ancient laws, or more accurately, how people were not following ancient laws. Although part of their reason in asking this thorny question about marriage was about trying to leave Jesus flat-footed on an issue of the law, to embarrass him, there is also a grain of genuine desire to know within this inquiry about a not-uncommon problem in that time and place. Remember that when a woman was widowed in that time and place, the woman's brother was obliged to marry her, both to provide for her and to keep the family property within the clan. The Sadducees were taking the problem to ridiculous levels with these seven dead brothers, but it was not uncommon for a woman to have been married to two or three brothers. So it was a legitimate question.

But Jesus would not be drawn into the question. In essence, he said that they were worried about the nuts and bolts list printed on the Ikea instructions rather than seeing what the final product looked like. And in matters of relationship with God, it's less about the instruction manual or the component list than it is about the final product.

Just as my mother could visualize that beautifully browned and tender roast chicken, and the visualization was enough for her to go through the steps to get the finished product, Jesus was about painting the picture of what heaven would look like. An angelic place with all of us looking like angels. Marriage was not a necessary component to heavenly existence, because it

was a different time and place outside of our time and place. He was trying to get the wayward Sadducees, and us by extension, to imagine an existence that bears little resemblance to our lives here. It is life, but something more and better and different.

And that's about as much as Jesus ever tells us about heaven, which leads us to the "so what?"

So what if heaven is different? So what if it doesn't matter if we were married to more than one spouse on earth? So what if we are like angels in heaven?

Here's the What: if we spend all our energy on worrying about a list of rules, about the nuts and bolts rather than the larger picture of relationship with God, we miss Jesus' point.

God is not a bean-counter. He doesn't leave us little instruction manuals. Instead, he challenges us to use our imagination. He says we should live as we imagine a heavenly life would be. A life where we do right by each other not because of fear of a heavenly judge, but because we want to love as God himself has loved and continues to love us. A life where we visualize God's generosity and imitate it, as children imitate their parents' behavior.

That said, we still seek the comfort of rules and lists and requirements. They make us feel safe. And that is a part of what we will be a part of in a little while in our congregational meeting. We will attend to nuts and bolts: doing the required vestry election, reviewing our finances, listing the many activities and ministries of the parish for the past year. But we also will engage in a little bit of visualizing, imagining what God is asking of us in the year ahead. For that part of the exercise, there are no rules to constrain us and we can join our Creator in imagining creatively as we seek to do God's work.

It feels very scary, being that unstructured. We prefer the recipe book, the instructional manual. But we might well embrace this moment, when we get excited about the possibilities that God sets before us, when we say "Yes, I can imagine that."

Each day of our lives as Christians is a chance to be a co-Creator with our Lord, to bring the reign of God closer to reality. So let's respect the rules and lists and manuals – they do help in their way – but let's not permit them to become idols that we worship instead of our wildly creative Heavenly Father. Let's try and risk and do and fail and learn and try again. It is what Jesus did. It is what the disciples did. And if we are to be disciples of the living God, it's what we will do, too.

Amen.