

I've told you before that my Dad was in the U.S. Forest Service. He loved the woods, hunting and fishing, all that. And he wanted his kids to do the same, so, when I was in Junior High my Dad thought my younger brother Reed and I were old enough to start hunting with him. We mostly hunted birds -- chukar, grouse, duck. But to get started we needed hunting licenses -- and to get those we first needed to take a hunter safety class.

We went to a gun club in Issaquah several evenings for the class. There we kids were taught about the game laws, what to do if we got lost in the woods, etc. But what struck me most were the safety rules. The instructors made it clear that those guns we would carry could kill us -- or our family members. And there were hard and fast rules you ALWAYS had to obey: the gun is always loaded no matter how sure you are that you had removed all the cartridges or shells. And the gun could go off at any time, no matter how sure you were that the safety was on. Therefore, the barrel of a gun must never on any occasion ever be

pointed at a person. I think I absorbed those rules pretty well. I made sure my shotgun was always pointed at the ground or into the air.

I mention those gun-safety rules because they have something to say about our Gospel passage today. I want to begin by describing the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a religious faction of the Jews in Jerusalem that was made up of the aristocracy and the priestly class, the people most involved with running the Temple. They did not believe in the existence of angels. They believed only the first five books of the Old Testament were divinely inspired. Most of all they did not believe in the Resurrection of the dead.

Now, because they didn't believe in an afterlife, the Sadducees obviously thought this world is more real than a, to them, nonexistent heaven. They took the principles of this world and the institutions of the world as the guiding principles of life, hence the hypothetical story they use against Jesus in the Gospel. The Sadducees were concerned with providing children for the widow because she needed material

help in this world – and her deceased husband needed sons to provide heirs for his property – and for a kind of quasi-immortality, given that true life after death was impossible in their theology.

In the Gospel passage we hear Jesus confront this attitude by revealing how different heaven is. The truest reality is what heaven is like – and that heavenly future should guide how we interact with this world – including the institution of marriage. Jesus explains to the Sadducees that, given the eternal life in heaven, their priorities will fall away. Most of our earthly concerns no longer apply there.

So, let's look at our own lives. We may say we believe in heaven and an afterlife, but many of us are functional Sadducees -- because we believe that the concerns of this world are ends in themselves rather than means to our real end, which is heaven. How many of us live as if our accomplishments, spouses, children, careers, are the ultimate meaning of our lives?

Here I come back to my gun safety course. The most important thing that class taught me was -- don't aim at the wrong thing or really bad things can happen. The life of a Disciple of Jesus is also all about aiming, making sure I'm seeking God Himself, and that I don't point my life's goals, and motivation in the wrong direction, because at my death the gun fires and hits whatever it's pointed at. Given God's respect for our free will, we get what we aim for. So, aiming my life for the things of this world is really dangerous because my life can end -- go off -- at any time (even though we thought the safety was still on!)

So, in light of Jesus words, we functional Sadducees need to ask ourselves some questions. Being honest with myself, what do I put first in my life? What are the "this-world" concerns my life is pointed at right now? Some of these, of course, are necessary and good, but how much time do I spend on things that will not matter in heaven? And how much time do I spend on God and what will matter in eternity?

As I grew older and left for college and then graduate school, I gradually stopped hunting. And I suspect many here are very suspicious of, even allergic to, guns. They're very powerful. They can do great damage if misused. So, we may not like to think of our life as a gun. And I don't want to push the analogy too far. But my point is that this is serious business. When we read about tragic accidents of family members or friends shooting one another, we should remember that in every case there was a failure of aiming. Someone forgot the basic truths of the safety rules.

Our lives are also very powerful for better or worse. We can change the world and live out the Kingdom of God if we live our lives well, according to God's will and commandments – His safety rules. But we can also do a lot of damage to ourselves and to others if we aim our lives at the wrong things. So, pray about this: What's most important in your life right now? That's what your life is aimed at. Is that safe for you -- and those you love? Is the target of your life what Jesus thinks is the

most important thing? What if the gun went off today? Because it's always loaded, and the safety is always off.