

A Tale of Two Sisters

Europe's biggest-ever lottery, Super Enalotto, stood at *66 million* euros. Without a winner, the jackpot had been rolling over for six months. An Italian man living on his old-age pension had purchased the winning ticket in a store outside of city of Milan.

But on the day the winning number was drawn, the man was totally preoccupied with the details of his daughter's wedding and in the midst of the wedding chaos, the father of the bride completely forgot to check his lottery ticket. And, according to Italian news agencies, by the time he realized he had picked the correct six-figure number, the deadline for claiming the jackpot had passed so he forfeited a prize never to be seen again. What lay within his grasp and reserved only for him had slipped through his fingers. Feeling faint, the man, who wished to remain anonymous, was hospitalized.

(Reuters News Service (8-19-03))

This was the chance of a lifetime: to sit at the feet of Jesus. And Just a note here on historical context: "sit at the feet of" a rabbi was a formal term in the religious language of Judaism. To "sit at the feet of" meant to be "a student of" a rabbi. So in other words, Mary had not just sloughed-off her kitchen duties for an hour or so one afternoon, but had become a regular student of Jesus, spending significant amounts of time with him absorbing his teaching. Her life routine had changed noticeably. So what we read in Luke 10:38-42 not a spontaneous outburst of sisterly anger, but the flashpoint of a long-building tension between these two sisters. Mary had leapt at the opportunity, Martha had not. This is not a good sister/ bad sister story. Nor is it about spiritual people vs worldly people. If nothing else, this is a story of *radical social behaviour* for there is no record that any Jewish rabbi had ever before accepted a female student. And if a rabbi allowed someone to "sit at his feet" it was for the sole purpose of grooming that person to be a rabbi themselves. The social implications of kingdom of God living here are immense! For Jesus to allow women to sit at his feet speaks of the incredible empowerment he gives them in the church. And perhaps Martha was still unable to bridge that kind of a cultural gap. And so her sister's behaviour offended her.

But more than the social implications of a woman perceived as "not knowing her proper place", far more than that .

This is lesson on *priorities*.

Some of us, by natural temperament, are high-octane action figures. Others are far more reflective. One sees a job that should be done and doesn't stop until it's *done*; while someone else, though raised by the same parents, may need to walk away from unfinished work and take time to reflect. Such differences in temperaments within a family can make for some real household tensions. But it is *not* really their temperaments that sets Mary and Martha at odds. It's their sense of *priority*.

We *all* need to take time each day to reflect on God's Word. We *all* must respond and *act* as obedient Christians. Those content to sit all day discussing various Bible verses while ignoring the desperate plight of others will quickly become unhealthy in their spiritual lives. Despite all their spiritual sounding dialogue, they will lose any vital connection with God.

But on the other hand, those who are perpetually busy, labouring night and day -- albeit doing good things, just things, noble things, serving others, may soon forget to depend on God and *listen* for his voice. And they too, will end up with an equally dysfunctional spirituality. Exhausted physically. Empty spiritually.

So what are the *lessons* from the story of Mary and Martha? There are several, but the first that emerges is . . .

Developing a unique gift.

The story of these sisters is an interesting study in the distinction between natural ability and a spiritual giftedness. *Both* women, obviously, are seeking to honour and serve Jesus, but in very different ways. Every day of their lives they engage in perfectly worthwhile and necessary tasks: but the difference lies in how they choose to use their time *on this particular day*. What is most crucial at *this* moment? Listening to Jesus, or serving him his lunch? Well, Martha's choice is to throw herself into preparing a meal while Jesus is teaching in the other room. Mary's choice is to seize the moment and *listen*. So Martha scolds, not Mary, but *Jesus*: why he doesn't *care* that her sister has left her with *all* the work?

But he gently rebukes her. He apparently knows Martha quite well. They are obviously good friends and he's had many opportunities to observe her over time. I'm sure Jesus would have been perfectly satisfied if Martha had simply put pot of lentils on to boil. Just a bit of bread and lentils Martha, *please don't fuss!* But what was Martha *doing* that got her so busy? This is totally speculative question, but my suspicion is she was busy folding up the napkins to look like little sailboats.

Just kidding.

But Jesus *does* say she was worried and upset about *many things*. And she *seems* like the kind of person who might be upset if the napkin sailboats weren't working out very well. Or if they didn't get the best fish from the market or it was the wrong kind of wine or the lentils have bits of gravel in them. . . And Mary's not helping her.

Maybe.

But on a deeper level Jesus is speaking to her, not just about this one busy hour in one busy day, but about an on-going deep need in her heart. There's a whole lot going on in this woman. She's complex. And she's not the only one. Jesus often warned people not to worry about this life's needs and problems. (See Matt 6: 33 ; Luke 8: 14)

Now, it is, of course, good to serve the needs of others. But when *Jesus is the guest and he is speaking*, it's time to *stop* and listen. Because there's something unique he has to say to *you*. There's something unique he wants to draw out of *you* so that *only you* can give to the world.

I have this weird, re-occurring dream

Every once in a while I have this dream where I'm invite to preach at a really *large* church: Sometimes it's a swanky urban church full of well-heeled people. There's a grand pipe organ and stone pillars holding up balconies filled with crowds. Sometimes it's the same dream but it takes place in a very plain blue collar echo-ey tabernacle church filled with ordinary joes. But this church is always *huge* --like a opera house, or town hall. And the place is always full. These people are all dressed up and waiting and I'm stressed because I arrive a bit late and I'm ushered through a series of back rooms onto the platform. There is superb music, or a moving dramatic sketch -- everything is so well planned, and the pressure is on *me*, because soon everyone will be listening to what *I* have to say. But as the service goes on and on, the time is running out and finally, by the time I get up to speak, it's too late. And just as I get up to start my sermon people start getting up to leave. I'm standing with my jaw hanging open.

And in my weird dream that turns into a *nightmare*, I then walk through the crowd, and it's so large and everyone seems so excited, but I just get lost in the shuffle. And then there's coffee time, and everywhere I look, there are little groups of people, clutching coffee cups, engaged in conversation, but I can't seem to work my way into any one of those conversations. It's like I'm totally socially inept. I'm the unloved outsider. The last straw comes for I when get in the long line-up for the refreshments and find, when it's my turn, that the cake's all gone and the coffee pot is dry.

So I slip out of the back door to get some air, and I just go home.

But what is for me just a really nightmare, is, *for Jesus* a constant reality. It happens to Him lot. Every Sunday! Churches are big and new, sound systems are turned on, preaching talent is astounding, music well done, the coffee is *Starbucks*.

But nobody's listening.

Nobody is really getting the message. And at the end of the day, the Holy Spirit slips out the back door *grieved*. Do you know that Paul says that God's Spirit *grieves*. What a profoundly disturbing thought.

Martha planned the dinner so well. But, you see, the *dinner itself* became so much the focus she had to *neglect* her guest in order to pull it off, and what purpose did *that* serve? Mary, on the other hand, realized the whole point of the gathering was a chance to *listen to Jesus* – to sit at the feet of Jesus.

Why is that so important?

It's the only way we can grow in our spiritual lives. Being a “doer” never takes the place of hearing the Word and thinking through how it uniquely applies to me.

If Martha is to properly understand the relationship between her abilities and her spiritual gift, she must stop so much “doing” and *start listening more*. For only then can she truly *serve* God to the fullest. Only then will she discover *what she alone can bring to the world*. If she carries on simply using her *natural* abilities, as wonderful as they may be, she will simply become a very busy person doing many good things, who never learns to operate out of a sense of God's enablement.

A person can have amazing abilities and talents, yet remain spiritually immature all their life. In order for Martha's spiritual growth to be woven into her natural energies, she must grow in her knowledge of God. And Paul say, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing form the Word of God.” (Rom 10:17)

Could it be that Jesus knows something we don't know about Martha? Could it be that she is a person with a deep *unmet need* for love and acceptance. I'm just wondering if Martha might be what we call today a *work-a-holic*. And a work-a-holic is someone driven to do more and more to meet a need for acceptance from others by. Work-a-holics do so much for so many, yet never quite get to sense they have ever done enough. A WORK-AHOLIC is driven by the unending urge to find some pot of gold at the end of the rainbow where they will finally be accepted and loved. But every time they get close, someone moves the rainbow's end and they must continue to strive. . .

There's only one cure for work-aholism and that's to learn to what it means to live in the GRACE of Jesus Christ. To receive God's GIFTS unearned. To exercise a *spiritual* gift in which God works through us to bring glory to himself. But it

takes *time* to discover and develop such a gift. Will Martha ever be able to take the time? Or will her days go by drawing her back, further and further in to the work-a-holic whirlwind?

Martha has a *choice* to make. There is but only one way out of the whirlwind: she must stop and listen to Jesus. And if she does, then perhaps, she will learn of whole new areas of service where she can direct her unbounded energies. Perhaps Jesus will push her out of the comfort zone of her kitchen, ask her to step out in faith and do amazing and wonderful deeds of love. She has not yet made that choice, but *Mary* has. And Jesus says, “there is need of only one thing, Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.”

Today, none of us can *physically* sit at the feet of Jesus as Mary did so long ago. We can however, still learn at his feet as we read and absorb the Bible. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to hear and read the Bible is the only way to grow in the unique spiritual giftedness we each have as believers in Jesus Christ. But we can’t do it alone. So this tale of two sisters is also about . . .

Cultivating energizing relationships

In the kingdom of God, raising money and gaining expertise are not nearly as important as building friendships. Many a Christian has starved to death *spiritually* alone in a room with their Bible. John Wesley said there is nothing more un-Christian than a solitary Christian. (Mc Grath, The Journey p)

To really come alive as Christians we must spend time with those who energize us. At the feet of Jesus, among the other disciples, Mary has found a place to recharge her batteries.

Picture two tomato plants: this one is healthy. It has put out strong deep roots into the soil and is drawing its nourishment from it.

Here’s another plant that’s wilted. It’s in transplant shock. This plant likes to move around a lot. It sees a nice patch of afternoon sun over there and says, “I’d like to move over there.” only to realize that over in that other corner, the sprinkler dumps extra water so it wants to move again. But in the process, this poor plant goes through waves of shock. It wonders why it doesn’t grow as much as others, why it hasn’t yet produced any tomatoes? The answer is simple: it needs to stay in one soil long enough for the roots to develop and pull out the nutrients.

People are like that. There *are* times in our lives when we will experience being transplanted. If relationships grow difficult, we pull out and experience shock and set back -- and we *can* survive these shocks -- if we are taken care of. But, always, is best to stretch out our roots and get nourishment in one place --from God’s word, and in deep and sustaining relationships. That’s what Mary found at Jesus’ feet. Her sister Martha, however, is starting to get a little wilted: Her hair is falling out of its ribbon, she’s got flour on her cheek with a stream of sweat flowing through though it. . . And she wonders – out loud. . .

Doesn’t anybody care?

“Lord, don’t you *care*. . .?”

It’s interesting that this incident comes directly on the heels of the parable of the Good Samaritan in which a man falls into the hands of robbers. Sometimes people rob us. They may not be thieves or abusers -- (they could be our own beloved children) but just being with them can really take it out of us. They rob us of our energy. We come away from spending time with them feeling just a little wilted.

But in the parable, who *revives* this man? The religious folk, the priest and Levite, walk on by offering nothing. But a *Samaritan* comes along, brings him to the inn, and is says he “*took care of him.*” And he gives the innkeeper money and instructions: “*Look after him.* . . “ he says. It’s the same Greek verb in both verses. It means *care involving both forethought and provision*. And it’s the same verb used in 1 Tim. 3:5, of a leaders care of the church—a significant association of ideas. In that verse Paul says if someone can’t *take care* of his own family, how can they *take care* of the church the household of God?”

To take care of another means we must be able to *re-energized them*. And in order to do that, the care-giver must first of all sit at the feet of Jesus. It means we are in a vital, energizing relationship with the Word of God. But that implies more than merely a private devotional life -- walking *alone* down the Jericho road is precisely the place where we can expect to run into the robbers. We don’t need that. For there was one who was beat up for us. Went to the cross for us. And we need to but sit at his feet. But what does it mean for us today to “sit at the feet of Jesus”? It can never be merely sitting alone in a room with a Bible. It means actively seeking out those *people* who have the ability to energize us with the word of God. And when we do

We will find our place in the kingdom

Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

Jesus was not asking Martha to become a different type of a person any more than he asked that of Mary. What each sister needed was to find the place in the kingdom where God wanted them to be: "Only one thing is needed," Jesus says, and it is for us to *be* in *that* place. And Mary had chose to be in that place. And she would not be cheated out of the empowerment that would come from remaining where God wanted her to be. No one could take it away from her.

A few years back we rendez-vous-ed with our Rainy River, Ontario friends in Radium. It was so great to soak in the pool and catch up on the news -- especially from the Christian school where Korleen taught for ten years. And we were delighted to hear on that occasion that Daniel Neusbaumer had graduated.

When Korleen started at this school, this little boy was in kindergarten. Daniel is Down's Syndrome. Daniel would never be able learn in the same sense others would learn, yet he would become one of the greatest blessings to that school. For one thing, he is an incredibly happy, funny guy. No matter how gloomy the day, his smile brought contagious joy to his classmates. He was also a very determined kid, who seemed never to get discouraged, even though at times it must have been incredibly hard for him. Yet he worked hard at his studies in spite of the challenge. No student could fail to be spurred on when facing their own difficulties simply by watching Daniel do his work. But something else happened when Daniel came to the school. Because of Daniel's special needs, the school was able to hire Marylyn, to be a learning assistant for Daniel. But Daniel never took up all Marylyn's time, especially as Daniel moved up through the grades, Marylyn, was increasingly free to help all the students -- especially those who needed extra help. And not just with school work, but with personal problems, during lunch hour or recess, Marylyn was always there. But if it weren't for Daniel, Marylyn would not have been part of the school.

And finally Daniel graduates. And at the ceremony, it was noted how Daniel, in his later high school years, had taken on the school's recycling programme -- collecting all the pop cans and juice boxes -- that was *his* job. As the MC of the grad ceremony listed all the rest of Daniel's achievements, he grinned and pointed to himself to say, "That's me, I did that!" Then Daniel received a long, long, standing ovation from parents and teachers and fellow students lasting *many minutes*. They acknowledged the blessing this guy had been to his school. Daniel Neusbaumer will never hold a Phd. or be the Prime Minister or play NHL hockey. But who can estimate the power he can have in the kingdom? Who can imagine the energy released by one person who is in the right place in the kingdom?

Which is really what this story is about.

Each one of us has been placed somewhere where only *we* can make a difference. All we have to do is "*choose the one thing that is needed.*" Mary chose to sit at the feet of Jesus.

So here's the life application question: Am I more like Mary? Or am I more like Martha "worried and upset about many things"? And you can ask yourself that. But, to be honest, I'm more like Martha far too much of the time. Maybe you, too? But here's the Good News: We need only to chose that *one thing* in our lives that is truly needed. What might that be? We can *know* that God accepts us by his grace and not because of what we can *do* but because of *who we are*: redeemed, renewed people.

We can simply take our place and work and rest where we belong in the kingdom.