

Sisters have a unique bond, a special relationship. They can be the best of friends! They can encourage one another when there's trouble with boys, share each other's clothes and make up, and support each other with phone calls and texts that speak right to the heart, during the ups and downs, and drama of life.

It's the positive side of this sibling connection that Sisters Day aims to celebrate. Seriously, just when you thought you'd caught up with every holiday obligation, it turns out there's another. Not that this is a bad thing. The first Sunday in August is National Sisters Day which aims to recognize and celebrate the special blessing that a sister brings into one's life. Now, before you begin to think that such a celebration is a stretch -- yet another manufactured, Hallmark moment -- think again. Take five minutes and hit up [Pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com), the "idea" site that's hugely popular with wives, moms and sisters, and do a quick search for the holiday. You'll find all sorts of memes on the subject of sisterhood and pictures of siblings celebrating their special connection. Clearly there's something about having, and being, a sister that needs to be, and is already being, celebrated. So, mark your calendars!

Part of what makes the bond between sisters, in particular, so unique, is that while they have the ability to be the best and most intimate of friends, the same sisters can also be the bitterest of "sis-ling rivals." They can push one another's buttons and compete for attention in a way that can lead to lots of eye rolling, door slamming, tear jerking, and not-so-passive-aggressive comparing and competing.

Take for example Eppie Lederer and Pauline Phillips, two of the world's more famous siblings with a sisterly rivalry. While rumored to be at times very close they engaged in a very public battle for the title of "America's favorite advice columnist." Eppie and Pauline -- or "Ann

Landers" and "Dear Abby" as they were known -- spent many years as estranged, "sis-ling" competitors.

But perhaps the most well-known example of the unique relationship of adoration and irritation shared between sisters is found in our Gospel narrative this morning. As most of us probably know, Mary and Martha couldn't be more different. While they obviously loved and cared for one another -- enough at least to share a home together -- those differences welled up in moments of deep frustration, moments where the contrast in their character and personalities took center stage. And while their moment of bickering, so beautifully captured by Luke, may be just one of many for them, it is an important one for us. Sure, it highlights a relational dynamic we can all relate to. But more importantly, Luke redeems and utilizes their moment of sis-ling rivalry to bring to life a simple truth about following Jesus that each one of us, sister or not, must pay attention to.

I feel I must point out though that knowing the context of the story is critical in grasping the significance of the rivalry between Mary and Martha. Just before we hear of Martha welcoming Jesus into her and Mary's home, we're told the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus vividly and scandalously illustrates true spirituality, what it means to live in harmony with the values of the kingdom of God. It was Jesus' way of bringing to life, in story form, one half of the "great commandment," what it looks like to love one's neighbor as one's self. But the lesson is not over. In this moment of sis-ling rivalry, we see two very different approaches to the first half of that all-important commandment. Mary and Martha are not just two very different sisters. They are sisters with two very different takes on what it means to love the Lord your God with all you've got.

And while our text for today doesn't tell us that Martha is the older sister, is there any doubt that she is? Worried about every detail, trying desperately to please, and overflowing with a sense of authority over Mary, Martha has all the characteristics and then some of a Type A, first-born sibling. Not only does she proactively invite the would-be Messiah into her home, but she also then dives headfirst into serving him, making sure everything is perfect and appropriate for him. Such a typical "older sister" type: she has the idea for a grand party, but then can't even relax enough to enjoy it. "Martha," Luke tells us, "was distracted with much serving."

Such attention to protocol, and the desire to please, is not in and of itself a bad thing. In fact, it can be a very, very helpful thing. Psychologist Dr. Kevin Leman, author of *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*, asserts that this perfectionist bent on life attitude -- derives he surmises from extra attention from mom and dad -- **it's what accounts for the fact** that so many astronauts, presidents and leaders in general are firstborns. They tend to strive to meet expectations. For Martha, this was certainly the case. Jesus had come to dinner, and she would *not* be caught flat-footed, rude, or with one hair out of place.

Martha's view of the world was very clear, perhaps you can relate. For Martha, what was expected of her trumped or took precedence over what was *immediate*. If a clean house is what was expected of her by others this trumped whatever else might be *immediate* for her -- be it a headache, a hungry stomach, or that deep desire to sit and chat with the man she'd invited into her home who she found intriguing. And needless to say, those who live free from the burden of expectation become a source of deep irritation. Those of us who are wired -- be it through birth order or otherwise -- to always be doing, perfecting, and meeting obligations can't stand it when someone else doesn't seem to live within the same intense sense of responsibility.

Mary's approach to life was a complete contrast to the Marthas of the world. While Martha seemed driven by responsibility Mary was different. For her, that which was *immediate* trumped that which was *expected*. Being more in the moment, Mary knew -- at least on this day - - the value of pressing "Pause" on the expectations of others and yielding to what was unfolding in front of her. Yes, this would frustrate her sister, leading Martha to plead with Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But some things, to Mary, were worth stopping for. And the Lord's visit to her house was one of them.

Have you ever known someone like Mary? Can you relate to her? Perhaps you have a sibling -- probably the middle child -- who has no problem showing up late to the family party, because he or she just had to stop and talk to a friend at the supermarket. Or maybe you're the type who changes plans on a dime, despite having a lot of yourself already invested in the previous itinerary, all because you had the chance to scratch something off of your bucket list. That was Mary. And sometimes those sisters are irresponsible and underachieving. But sometimes -- just like many a Martha become PTA presidents -- the Marys among us buck the system of expectations and strike gold.

Such was the case on that day. Mary's approach to life proved to be marching more in line with the priorities of the kingdom of God. And yet, we should keep in mind as we read the story that both sisters were simply trying to love their Lord in their own way. One tried to love him with all her activity, her busyness, and her attention to culturally expected details. The other loved him by dropping what was expected, and dealing with, dwelling with, and focusing on the immediate activity and presence of God. Just as the Pharisee failed to love his neighbor, hustling past the injured man in the story of the Good Samaritan and on to choir practice, Martha failed to love her Lord by inviting him into her home only to stay stuck in the kitchen!

In the kingdom of God, what matters most is, well, God -- not our plans and perfectionism, not the approval of others or the expectations of our culture. When God shows up, in his word preached, and his body and blood given to us on a Sunday morning, in the unexpected opportunity to serve him by loving the least and the hurting, or the chance to learn from him and rely on him in seasons of struggle and pain, we drop what we're doing and we attend to him. That's what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And that is what Martha's little sister Mary was doing. She was, as Jesus himself said, "choosing the good portion."

Sister or not, sibling or not, we are, each day, given a similar set of circumstances. As followers of Jesus Christ, we have all, like Martha, invited him into our homes. And we should seek to love him with all we've got. But lest we move against the flow of life in his kingdom we must be ready, and we must be willing, to engage the immediate opportunities, presence and activity of God even if it means ditching for a moment what's expected and demanded of us by others.

It seems unfair and almost wrong to pick sides in this sis-ling rivalry. But hey, Jesus did. So why can't we? Martha would have, undoubtedly, many victories in her own right. But on this day, it was middle-child Mary who scored the victory. That had to burn for Martha. But that's okay. They're sisters. They can be bitter rivals today, and hug one another tomorrow. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.