Text: Luke 10:38-42

**Introduction**

I’ll often joke around with some old school friends that we’ve become a nation of degenerate gamblers. And the punchline to the joke is that I try and defend it by noting something like “Yes life in general becomes a bit shabbier and meaner, but a nation of degenerate gamblers also knows when to hold’em and when to fold’em.” There is something to be said for having a sense of the probability of events.

And to back that up I usually point out a few things. Warren Buffett, the famed investor, if the stock market was a pure random walk, or if it was as efficient as academics might think, Warren should not exist. Or for the same matter neither should CNBC’s Cramer, just in the opposite direction. There would be the occasional stock picker who could go on a heater, or pick losers, but to consistently win or lose as much a Buffet and Cramer defies the odds. And there are academics who have entire careers trying to explain the magic captured. Moving from one Casino to another I tend to point at the World Series of Poker. The number of people attempting to play it exploded after the man with the perfect name – Moneymaker – won the main event out of nowhere. But that is exactly what you’d expect to have happen. And a bunch of professional gamblers did complain that it was impossible to end up in the money with all the noobs sitting at the tables. But the problem with that has been there has also been a consistent group of professionals gamblers – who maybe you can’t call degenerate – who make the money year after year after year. They might not always make the final table. But out of 10’s of thousands their consistency of making the money breaks the pure odds.

All of this was kinda put to the test by a modern academic. A guy by the name of Philip Tetlock has been running for about 20 years what he calls superforcasters. He’s been running ongoing contests about predicting world events that basically anybody can sign up for. We have no end of gurus on TV making predictions and telling us what we should do. Most of them with some type of impressive credential they are standing up. Like the old saying, nobody ever got fired for buying IBM, rarely if you listened to the advice of Harvard did you get chased out. The problem being – as we’ve experienced for way too long – those experts can be anything but. Tetlock’s superforcasters are like the Warren Buffets of world events. They really do seem to be able to see the future consistently. And the one thing they all have in common is the ability to think in terms of probability. They almost all can break any one evert they are asked to forecast down to a chain of things that would have to happen and place a spookily consistent probability on each event. Whereas most of us tend to place probabilities of never, coin-flip, or lock, they rarely do. Locks for them are more like 80%. Never is more like 20%. And coin-flips are almost never fair shading one way or the other.

**Text**

Now this really isn’t a sermon on gambling. It surprises me how blasé the Bible actually is about that subject. There isn’t really a killer verse like “Thou shalt not gamble” or “The one who gambles is house is an abomination before the LORD.” Neither of those are in the bible. To make the case against gambling itself you have to depend upon some deeper theology. Something like the 7th commandment against steeling and Luther’s positive explanation of that. Not only does that commandment have the negative force of no smash and grabs, but it has a positive force of “help your neighbor improve and protect his possessions and income.” Which becoming a nation of degenerate gamblers does not help improve and protect for most people. Or you have to go to the 9th and 10th commandments on coveting and make some type of argument that get rich quick gambling is the raw expression of coveting what is not yours. You are getting your neighbor’s house “in a way which only appears right.”

Most people are loss averse enough to not risk too much. And my guess is that we are figuring out collectively how terrible parlay bets are. Which losing a few hundred dollars to gain that knowledge is probably a better expenditure than most college classes.

And eventually, when you learn to think in terms of probabilities, Pascal’s wager seems to naturally strike everyone. And Atheists howl at it, but their howls are always special pleading. Because all Pascal – a rather orthodox Christian by the way – attempted to say was play out the what you win or lose. If you bet that God doesn’t exists and you “win the bet” what do you get? You still get a grand heap of nothing. Whereas if you bet that God exists or he doesn’t exists and He does, what do you get? Heaven or Hell. It’s a thought experiment that points toward the one needful thing. No natural revelation gets you to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But it can certain get you to the god of the philosophers. Which is always a base to then ask, did that God ever make himself known.

And that I believe is the core of our gospel lesson – the one thing necessary. Mary and Martha are experiencing a once in a lifetime type event. God has come to their house. God is making himself known directly to them. What does Mary do? She recognizes the hour of her visitation and she “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” What does Martha do? “She was distracted with much serving.”

The cares of the world are always with us. And should the seed of the gospel take root, those cares are how Satan will try and choke it out. And it is not that God does not recognize the cares of the body. But to most of those Jesus would tend to say “look at the lilies of the field” or “observe the sparrow.” Do any of those things lack? Your Heavenly Father knows you need these. The cares of one day are more than enough. Which are all reminders of the providence of God. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. And He does this out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.

But we need to learn when the WORD is present and being proclaimed. Luther would say the gospel is like a raincloud. It pours for a while and then blows on. And you don’t know when it will come back. Jerusalem did not know the hour of her visitation. Some seed falls on rocky soil. The Spirit blows where and when it wills. But if it is all coming together right now. If you have the ears to hear the Word. And that Word is taking root. Don’t get up to make sure all the drinks are full. Don’t take your phone out to make a quick scan. You aren’t missing anything. Because that Word is the one thing necessary. That WORD is God making himself known to you.

And to those who recognize that moment. Who know when to hold’em you might say. You have chosen the good portion and it will not be taken away.

**Conclusion**

There are lots of allegories that get layered on Mary and Martha – contemplative and active lives. There are the attempts to turn Mary and Martha into pop psychology tests. There are boatloads of preachers who are evidently embarrassed by Jesus’ words who try and explain them away. And I wouldn’t completely trash all of it. But none of that is the one thing needful.

Jesus is being memorably offensive. Nobody who hears Mary and Martha ever forgets the story. Although the purpose may get clouded. But that purpose is very clear. You need Jesus. The entire world needs Jesus. Like the voice from the heavens said, “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”

And the one who hopes in him, will not be put to shame.