

Grow Up

A sermon by Angie Witmer based on Luke 10: 38-42

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It's finally happened. I've turned into my parents. Or grandparents. Or somebody much older than I think I am. I know this is true because I find myself referring to things in conversations that I then need to stop and explain—just like my parents used to do. I talk about things like how we used to have to sit in the kitchen to talk on the phone because the phone was attached to the wall in the kitchen by a cord—a cord that would get incredibly twisted and tangled up every time you used it. Crazy.

Sometimes I even talk about the way we used to watch TV. Remember when we had to get up and walk across the room to turn the channel? Yup. We did. Which was OK, actually, because there were only three or four channels to choose from anyway. Weird.

Wow. I remember how I used to roll my eyes when people started this kind of thing—and I'm about to do it again, so bear with me. In today's sermon—in just a moment, actually—I am going to reference record albums. Records were big, black grooved disks that we used to play music. The thing you need to know about records for the purpose of today's sermon is that they scratched very easily—you had to be careful with them as a scratched record wasn't a good thing. A scratch on a record would cause it to get stuck play the same thing over and over and

over again. That's where the phrase "you sound like a broken record" comes from (just a little trivia for those of you too young to remember).

That's what happened to my dad's favorite Johnny Cash record. I still remember the day it happened. My dad and I were sitting in the living room, hanging out and listening and singing along as Johnny sang: "I fell into a burning ring of fire. I went down, down, down...I went down, down, down...I went down, down, down..."

Johnny was stuck.

That's the image that pops into my head when I think of Martha in today's story. She's stuck—just like a broken record—in patterns and behaviors and ideas that cause her to go down, down, down. It's really not pretty or easy to watch. But it's important to try to understand why she does what she does so we can make some sense out of why Jesus does what he does, so let's back up in the story a little to get a broader picture:

Martha and Mary are sisters and friends of Jesus. Jesus was traveling through the countryside doing the things that he does—you know, teaching, preaching, transforming people. The usual. He found himself in their neck of the woods needing a place to stay...so he stopped by to spend time with them, hang out and catch up with each other. It was a great idea—and the girls couldn't have been happier to see their old friend.

Mary was so excited to have Jesus in the house that she couldn't wait to hear what Jesus' stories—and boy, Jesus had some good ones to share

this time. For example, he had just had the most amazing exchange with this lawyer. He couldn't really tell if the lawyer was actually interested in what Jesus had to say or if he was just yanking Jesus' chain—whatever the case, he started a great conversation by blurting out “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus ran with it, engaging the guy in the law (“the command is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself”) and what that was all about. Then they started talking about who, exactly, is a neighbor...wow. It was intense. And Mary wanted to hear all about it and figure out some answers for herself: what is eternal life, really? And who is my neighbor? Huh. Those really are good questions...Mary was glad he was there.

Martha was crazy excited about Jesus showing up, too—it had been awhile since they'd seen each other. She wanted him to feel right at home—but wow. There was a lot to do. She needed to change the sheets on the bed, throw together a meal—oh, but she's have to clean up the kitchen first. And run the vacuum, too. It's been awhile. And while she's at it...ohmygosh...you could write your name in the dust on that shelf. Embarrassing. Need to fix that. And the bathroom! Jesus can't see the bathroom like that...and on...and on...and on.

Yup. Martha is stuck: stuck in the need to do things “right.” To look right. To be right and have things “just so”. And it's making her crazy. So crazy, in fact, that after awhile she can be found standing over Jesus, insisting that he tell her sister to stop laying around and start helping out. She's

frazzled and frustrated and doesn't know what to do—which is why she turns to Jesus. When you hit bottom, who better to ask for help?

The problem is, Martha wasn't really asking for Jesus' help. What she really wanted was for Jesus to confirm in front of everybody else what she already knew to be true: that she was right.

Oh, Martha. She should have seen Jesus' response coming a mile away. She knows the guy after all. But I don't believe she did. The story doesn't say what her reaction was, but I can only imagine the look on her face when Jesus does what Jesus always does: he tells the truth, even to a friend, even when it might sting a little.

Basically, Jesus told Martha to grow up.

Before I go any deeper into this, let me be sure to stop and point something out, lest I forget: Jesus did not ever criticize Martha's gift of hospitality. Remember—he's a big advocate for hospitality, for sharing our things and opening our lives to show our love for God and one another. So please don't hear what Jesus has to say to her as a slam against housework or hospitality. What Jesus takes issue with is Martha's distraction. Her busy-ness. It is her seeming lack of awareness of what is really important and needed in the moment that prompts him to reply to her complaints with a statement along the lines of, "Hey, Martha—chill out and grow up."

"Grow up" is a phrase that can really push people's buttons. I'll bet many of us can still hear the voices of our parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches or a variety of other well-intentioned, well-meaning adults

telling us to “grow up and stop being such a big baby.” That message is a broken record that plays over and over and over again in many of us, saying: “Make something of yourself. That’s what a grown up does.” The message that we got somewhere along the line is that real grown ups are those important, busy people with long lists of things to do and places to be with days that are packed full of one thing after another after another after another and minds that are overflowing with too many things to remember and too many things to do. Grown ups are worried and distracted by too many things, just like Martha. It comes with the territory, right?

Not so, says Jesus. Not so.

In today’s story—and in other places throughout the Gospels—Jesus invites us to be a different kind of grown up: someone who makes space for the Spirit of God to breathe in and through us and renew our lives (thanks to Henri Nouwen for that phrase), someone who lives life abundantly, who focuses on the one thing that’s necessary, who may have lots of things to do and lots of places to be but first makes room and listens for the still speaking God to speak. Just like Mary.

Every year, a week or two before Confirmation Sunday, the 8th grade Confirmation class goes on a retreat from Friday night to Sunday noon—about 40 hours, give or take. The purpose of the retreat is to get away from everyday routines so that we can all think about and wrestle with some big questions about what eternal life is or who is my neighbor. We talk about what it means to be a member of the church, a follower of Jesus Christ, a child of God—all good things to think about

every now and then. In order to (try to) stay focused and keep distractions to a minimum, the rule is that the kids can't bring their cell phones, iPods, video games or any other electronic gadgets. And every year before the retreat, I get an earful about how unfair that rule is. I am mean. I am horrible. I am stupid. My rules are stupid. And this whole thing is dumb. Obviously, I don't understand that these kids cannot live without their things.

That's the attitude before retreat. After retreat is another story. By the time the weekend is over, I get another earful about how awesome retreat is, how we should do things like that more often, and how cool I am and how cool Plymouth is and how everybody should do confirmation no matter what. It is the best. thing. ever.

I happen to agree with that last statement. Confirmation—and especially confirmation retreat—is the best. thing. ever. Unfortunately, though, I can also relate to the first sentiment as well because the truth is, I know that although I may not use electronic gadgets as my main form of distraction, I'm still pretty good at finding lots of ways to keep from being still and making room for God. And when someone points out—or worse yet, tries to take away—the habits and techniques I use to distract myself from God, I get testy. Just like the kids get testy. Just like I imagine Martha got testy. It's not easy to face the fact that even though I'm old enough to remember and refer to obsolete electronics in both casual conversations and Sunday morning sermons, I have a ways to go before I can call myself a grown up.

But I want to. And I'm guessing that some of you want to, too, or else you wouldn't be here today. So let's take Jesus up on this invitation to grow up. Let's sit and be and go and do and make the one important thing the main thing in our lives. It might feel weird and you might even think it's dumb...but after awhile, who knows? Maybe those old broken records that keep us stuck will stop repeating themselves and we will find that full, abundant, eternal life really is possible right here, right now and that it really is the best. thing. ever. Just like Jesus said it would be.

Pretty amazing. May it be so.

Amen.