

Feb 16, 2014 Epiphany 6A: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37. St. Augustine's  
The Rev. Mary Green

Some of us are old enough to call up the black and white tv images of Rod Serling and “The Twilight Zone.” Rod Serling would introduce each episode by telling us why the main character was about to enter the twilight zone. We understood from his remarks that the unusual realm of the twilight zone was not entirely realistic, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. Fast forward fifty years from the early days of television images to now. Some of you may know I paint icons, images of Christ or the Virgin Mary or the saints. Understanding icons requires stepping into another realm, not the twilight zone, but another realm of metaphorical and symbolic language. The people depicted in icons do not look realistic in a literal sense. But the message of icons is that these holy people who were once *in* this world *are no longer of* this world. They look otherworldly. But, this sermon is not about icons. I use icons to make the point, that, like icons the message of this sermon comes from another realm – a realm full of symbols and metaphors, where things aren’t quite realistic, but a realm where, nevertheless, there is truth. And like Rod Serling, I offer as explanation that the main character of this sermon/episode needed to enter another realm for the sake of her soul. I invite you now to come with me as we enter another realm, another twilight zone.

It was not long after Christmas when the woman showed up one afternoon with her daughter, supposedly so our daughters, who were about the same age, could play together. I didn’t even greet her at the door. I was busy in the back of the house, so my husband must have let them in. I heard my daughter squeal in delight that her new friend had come to spend the afternoon playing. I assumed, or maybe I simply wanted to assume, that the mother had left, that she had just dropped her daughter off, had gone on about her day and would return before evening to pick up her daughter.

So I continued with my work of sorting through Christmas decorations to pack them away, and collecting the boxes and paper debris for the trash. I felt absolutely overwhelmed by all the paper and clutter in my house. It seemed like every object in every room had reproduced itself. Every flat surface housed a stack of something, and every corner was full of boxes I’d intended to put away. There was not one room where there wasn’t some kind of mess that needed attention. There was not one room where I could sit down in peace without the distraction of first clearing a path to get to a chair. Ruthless de-cluttering was needed. Serious recycling was needed, only we didn’t know the concept of recycling back then. Just about everything went in the trash, or reusable things went to the church rummage sale.

My husband came in to carry out the pile of trash I had stacked up. I was at the point of irritation with myself for acquiring so much stuff that I naturally deflected it to him. That was my pattern when I was mad at myself for my own shortcomings, to self righteously project it on to him. “I can’t believe you are so messy,” I said to him with more than my usual sarcasm. “How can we have a home where we can entertain people with all this mess *you’ve* made?” I said, completely casting all blame on him.

Without responding to my accusations, he began to gather up the pile of trash. He quietly said, “You know, that woman is still out there? She’s sitting in the living room next to the Christmas tree.”

Oh no, I thought. Getting the bedraggled Christmas tree out was next on my list of tasks. The pine needles were mostly on the floor, along with a good portion of the silver tinsel. I had already taken off most of ornaments which I'd left strewn in one area of the kitchen floor to sort. But the woman would have already observed that part of the disastrous mess of my home. There was no hiding that. My failed attempts to present a serene and tasteful home had been observed, and exposed. The woman was sitting right next to the biggest symbol of my failure to keep up appearances, the biggest symbol of all my failures to be someone better than I knew I was that I tried to cover up. Oh well, she's already seen it, I decided. It's too late to hide that. I'll work awhile longer back here, and pretend I don't know she's out there, I thought.

Just then, the woman's little girl came into the room where I was cleaning.

"Can we play with the coats in the closet?" she asked. "We want to play like we're cold and see how many coats we can put on at once."

"Thank you for asking," I replied in my best condescending tone. "But no, you may not play with the coats. We don't play with the coats like that in this house."

"Okay," she replied. "But why do you have so many coats if you don't play with them?" she wondered more to herself than directed at me as she left the room.

What a weird little girl, I thought, wanting to play with coats.

I worked on through the afternoon, enjoying the pleasant sounds of the girls' laughter as they played in my daughter's room. I began to think about preparing supper for my family, and wondered if the uninvited woman parked next to the Christmas tree expected to stay for supper. How could I give her the hint that it was time for her and her daughter to leave? I didn't want to invite her to dinner. I didn't even know her, and besides, I didn't know what to fix for guests on the spur of the moment. How rude to put Hamburger Helper before guests, when there was only enough for us. I might as well go out and talk to her and try to make the best of it.

I breezed into the living room trying to act casual. There she was beside the spent Christmas tree, quietly sitting in my grandmother's very uncomfortable blue upholstered straight-backed armchair with the lumpy seat. There she sat, a middle aged woman with very black hair, looking rather stern. Also serene. She looked both stern and serene.

"Oh there you are." I said. "I didn't realize you were still here."

Well that was a lie. I knew perfectly well she was there all along. She didn't say anything, but her eyes just seemed to look right through me as if she'd just read my thoughts. I suddenly felt guilty, that uncomfortable feeling I was accustomed to dealing with by various methods of deflection, like blaming my husband for example. But this time, for this guilt, I couldn't find anyone to blame, but myself. How rude I had been. Here this woman had sat in my living room all afternoon and I had ignored her. I couldn't think of anything to say. I sat down, speechless, in the chair opposite her. She didn't say a word.

Her little daughter and my little daughter came into the room, breathless with joy for the fun of the afternoon they had had.

"Shall we go get some supper, Honey?" the woman said to her daughter.

"Oh yes, I'm hungry," said the little girl. "But I'm tired of eating in restaurants. Can we eat somewhere else tonight?" the little girl said.

It suddenly occurred to me that this woman and her little girl didn't have a home to go to. I found my voice and awkwardly asked, "Where are you staying?"

The woman looked directly toward her daughter when she answered me. "We're living in the Sunset Motel for now, and we've been eating out every evening since we've been in town."

The words "some have entertained angels unaware" came to my mind. I blurted out, "We're having Hamburger Helper for supper and I'm not sure how far it will stretch, but would you like to have supper here with us this evening? No, let me rephrase that. I'd be very pleased for you to stay for supper, if you can forgive my very cluttered and messy house."

The woman now turned her gaze from her daughter back to me. As if choosing her words carefully, she slowly replied, "We'd like very much to stay for supper."

"Thank you," I replied, not sure why I was thanking her for accepting my invitation considering the rude way I had treated her.

Falling quickly into the usual pattern of social small talk, I asked, "What do you do?"

"Oh I do all kinds of things," the woman replied. "You name it, I do it. Mostly reclamation work though. That's my specialty. Reclamation, and well, creation too. Creation and Re-creation, that's on my logo."

God, I thought. She's just as weird talking about a creation and reclamation logo as her daughter is about playing with coats.

"Are you looking for work?" I dumbly ask.

"I'm always looking for work. I spend my life looking for work."

Her eyes continued to bore right through me, but her face somehow looked less stern. There was a different look on her face now than when I'd first walked into the room. There was the look of a very loving parent, the look of a strong mother who had rules and boundaries and expectations. A woman who knew how to raise good children, children that you'd want your children to have as friends, even if they were weird at times. She had the look of a mother who knew the difference between discipline and punishment. She must know how to discipline her children in a way that shows she cares, rather than punishing them with condemnation. The woman's eyes spoke to me of a love that I couldn't really put into words, so beyond any kind of love I'd ever experienced before. She seemed like a loving mother, pleading with me with her eyes – pleading with a passionate love that seemed to say, "I'm not giving up on you, but I need to see some changes on your part. You aren't allowed to live your life this way any longer. You're going to have to choose."

Choose what? I wondered.

Before I could say anything, the woman stood up and took a step toward me. She looked down at me and said, "To better answer your question about whether or not I'm looking for work, I'd say I've just found a job."