

Sunday, February 19
7th Sunday of Epiphany

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

The Rev Fanny Belanger

I've recently started to watch this show:
The Good Place.

The story of a girl named Eleanor who suddenly wakes up in heaven –
or what looks like heaven.

Seems like there you can get all you want:

The house of your dreams,
delicious food – mostly frozen yogurts with exotic flavors -
amazing friends, like this beautiful woman who in her earthly life was this big-time
fundraiser for charity.

Yet, in this perfect world, where you lead the perfect life,
something seems wrong to Eleanor:

Little by little, she realizes that she does not belong.

Oh, she was not a criminal. But when she looks back, she knows she has lived
selfishly

and actually, as the story unfolds, she realizes that there has been a case of mistaken identities
on heaven's records:

She has been mistaken with another Eleanor, a "good one", and now

she finds herself being an impostor.

As she does not want to be expelled into hell, she tries to learn from
one of her amazing friends (who used to be a professor of Ethics)

how to become a truly moral person.

And this is of course the comical twist of the first season:

How a selfish,

mean-spirited,

superficial person can survive in a perfect world?

How a selfish, mean-spirited and superficial person
can become a perfect person, who belongs to a perfect world?

Well, I guess we are all our own kind of Eleanor when we hear the Gospel today,
The climax of the Sermon on the Mount:

Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect

(That is:) Love your enemies

Do good to those who hate you

Bless those who curse you

Pray for those who mistreat you

Well, if it is really what the kingdom is all about
clearly there is a case of mistaken identities.

Clearly, we don't belong there.

Probably we aren't all criminals, but if we look at ourselves sincerely

we don't measure up to any of this. As Eleanor, we find ourselves in a realm that isn't ours,

and never will be.

Because we have lived with our own selves for so long,

with our twisted thoughts, our broken hearts, our cowardice and our covering up,

We know the truth about ourselves:

In a way or another, we are all impostors.

I don't know if you have noticed in the Gospel, how often it is mentioned that Jesus knew all the thoughts of the people who were listening to him.

Jesus knew their thoughts.

I don't think it has something to do with extrasensory perception – like, because he was God - But for sure, Jesus knew very well what people are made of.

And if he knew what we are made of, well, he probably knew just that too:

That in a way or another, no one of us measure up
to any of this.

And so I was wondering: Knowing that,

why would he ask of us such a thing:

To not turn our back on the bullies, when it's already hard for us to be open to friends?

To love our enemies, when it's already hard for us to tolerate our own family?

Is Jesus trying to humiliate us, to tell us

what an impostor all along

we have been?

That there is nothing we can do to truly belong to the Kingdom of God?

But he knew we know it only too well.

This is the story of poor Eleanor whom, living with her perfect friends, learn as much as she can in Ethics only to realize she cannot do one single good action without afterthoughts

(would it be only the afterthought of, at last, becoming as good as her friends).

And actually, trying so desperately to be good, this is when the truth hits her:

She is in hell, actually. Because she will never manage.

And it turns out all her good friends who seem so perfect are doomed as well.

The professor of Ethics is so boring, unable to make any decision without weighing them all

he is damned for leading such a fruitless life.

The charity fundraiser is so self centered, unable to reach her own goals without counting them all

she is damned for leading such a calculated life.

Well, weighing and calculating, we are all under the talion law:

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

The talion law is not a law of the vengeance, as we often assume, the Leviticus reminds us today that nothing justifies vengeance.

The talion law is a law of retribution

– a law that was made so anyone gets exactly what they deserve.

You take an eye, you have to give back an eye (generally you give the money for it)

(this is still how our justice works)

You do wrong, well, you pay for it – you do the math and this is fair all right but it's also

a life of calculation.

As Jesus puts it: *You won't be able to get out until you have paid the last penny...*

This is not a life of mercy and generosity. This is the best we can do, and still this is not the life of the Kingdom of God.

And yet, yet Jesus on that day facing a crowd of beggars, disabled, and insane people
and all the hypocrites from the Temple

All of them oppressed under the Roman Empire.

Jesus goes:

*Love your enemies
Do good to those who hate you
Bless those who curse you
Pray for those who mistreat you*

I wonder, what does the sermon on the Mount do, other than reminding us how doomed
we all are?

Well consider this: maybe, just maybe, Jesus is not asking of us something impossible.

Maybe Jesus is asking of us something very easy

even all too easy.

Because to be perfect as God is perfect, we don't need to reach any results.

We don't need to be a professor of Ethics knowing exactly what is right and what is wrong.

We don't need to be a charity fundraiser knowing what's broken in the world and how to fix it.

To be perfect, we don't need to do the math, we just need to love.

And as shocking as it may be, it is easy to love, even to love

our own enemies.

Yet, to contemplate this difficult truth, we need to stop being an impostor to ourselves.

We need to let down our defenses.

Actually, we may need to remember when we were a defenseless child

a time when it was easy to love, and even easy to love our enemy.

How easy it was to love a drunk father or an indifferent mother,

Easy to want so badly to be friend with the bully, all we did to please him

Easy to be madly in love, even with the girl who made fun of us in front of everybody.

Let's take a deep breath and search our souls and let's remember a time when it was easy
to love people who did not love us.

And how it hurt us in return

And how it broke us

And how we decided one day that our enemies will be our enemies and that

we will never be anyone's fool again.

We decided to toughen up

to build a wall and to

get back to those those who have wronged us.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth

And since then, we have been on a self-defense mode constantly.

We don't hate so much our enemies as we are afraid that if we let them, in they will break us in return
and today we go: Fear the Muslims, fear the refugees.

They're working an agenda against us.

Hate them, before their hatred falls on you.

And we come to believe hate is our self-instinct, and that is what protects us.

But today Jesus tells us: You are love
You have been made out of love, you have been made to love
and love is the salvation lying inside of you.

You are love, so go ahead and love – says Jesus.
With the strength I give you, you're now big enough to stand for yourself when needed.
Cry or yell at times, but go ahead and love because love is your true nature,
as it is the Father's nature.

To believe we are anything but love this is the true imposture, the sin, *the primordial lie* as Jesus
sometimes calls it.

So how do we love, in a world that has forgotten it was made out of love?

Jesus tells us to love our enemies. He does not tell us to marry them
- And I mean it, literally, *do not marry them* -
(if that's the only way to get a healthier relationship, divorce them if needed)
But as Christians we have to take the initiative to build or try re-build or release bad relationships
because this is the only way our hearts can be happy.
We just need to trust enough to take one step ahead.

In my ministry with the homeless, we often question this passage of our Gospel today:
"Give to everyone who begs from you".

We ask: How can we trust a homeless not to use the money for wrong,
how can we know we don't increase their dependency?

How can we know what people are going to do with our trust? Well, we don't know.
We don't, but today, this very day, God is going to trust us with his beloved Son
in the Eucharist.

Knowing all our thoughts, knowing us. He trusts us with Jesus.

And so this how we are our Father's children: We don't trust a homeless with two bucks
because we worry he might
use it for a drink? Come on.

Don't throw yourself in the hands of your enemy, but just take the first step,
or even walk an extra mile with him.

See where you can go together from here.

Maybe you will be interested in this video you can find on line: Amaryllis Fox

who says that all that she learned from her time at the CIA is that
we just keep believing our enemy is our enemy, without ever trying to listen
not realizing, we are just all afraid of one another.

Defensive people can be dangerous, but in this world there are much more defensive people
than real enemies.

Maybe we will look like fools if we start loving – This is actually what Paul promises us today:
The wisdom of this world, with all its calculations,

is foolishness to God.

The problem in this world is certainly not people showing too much kindness.

Toughening up might be useful to survive, but if what you seek is to survive spiritually

Don't let your enemies bring out the worst in you

Stop being an impostor pretending to be tough.

Don't become your own enemy shutting off the light inside of you.

Go ahead and love. As God's children, we are made out of love,
our very nature is to love, we just need to remember it.