“Go Fish” 2-23-25

(Luke 5:1-11) Rev. James Koyama

Beneath the Surface

At the beginning of the Epiphany season, I preached about how the second part of the word, epiphany is like the “phane” in cellophane, and that we can think of ourselves as living in a reality where the sacred is veiled or covered by a thin covering, like the cellophane we use to cover our food.

The word Epiphany reminds us that God comes to us in relation to the mystery that lies beneath surface appearances; a mystery that we see in glimmers. Jesus sits upon that hidden world, where spiritual currents are sweeping people here and there, like so many fish. And that is where his attention is focused. As it says in First Samuel and in the Book of Jeremiah “Our God looks not upon surface appearances, but upon the heart.”

In this morning’s Gospel reading Jesus helps us to think about ministry as the task of paying attention to what lies beneath surface appearances. And he does this by getting us to think like fishermen who pay attention to the surface of the water and what is visible

from above, in order to see more deeply into what is happening below the surface.

The Setting

Several things are going on in this story. Jesus gets into a fishing boat, pushes out a little ways and then begins to speak to the people who are gathered. At the same time, some fishermen are nearby, washing their nets after an unsuccessful night of fishing. And when Jesus finishes speaking, he tells the fishermen to go out again, but this time deeper and to lower their nets. And when they follow his instructions, they are suddenly hauling in more fish than their boats can hold.

This story works nicely as a metaphor for how a congregation can be successful, even wildly successful. We can think of the boats in the story as being like congregations because, like a good congregation, a boat carries its people safely through a world that is often like a turbulent sea. And we can think of the fish in this story as the souls of people who are wandering through the deep in search of rest. And we can think of the fishermen in the boats as faithful church members.

When we look at the story this way, we see that it ties any success to following Jesus's instructions. The story suggests that apart from his instruction, we will be like the fishermen in the story, sadly cleaning their empty nets. But if we follow his instruction, the story suggests that we may take in so many people that we will frighten ourselves into wanting to back out. After all, how could we who are so aware of our own limitations do justice to a situation where we are so overwhelmed by success?

And yet the story helps us to see that if we rely on Jesus's power to see so deeply, we too are capable of seeing a little more deeply. And when we cannot see, we can rely on his direction to guide us.

A Miracle and an Act of Discernment

Because what happens in this story is so surprising and unexpected, it is often thought of as a miracle story, as though there is something magical that Jesus does that is beyond understanding and beyond our imitating. But I think that, if we are too quick to think of this story as describing a miraculous event, we lose sight of the fact that it does not require a miracle for a good fisherman to get a good sense of what is going on under the surface of the water.

When you think about it, it may not have been so much a miracle as it was Jesus's attention to what was happening on and above the surface that tipped him off as to what was happening beneath the surface. And if that is true, then we, who are incapable of making miracles happen, can also learn how to read the signs and fish more skillfully.

Every summer my family used to go on vacation to a lake. And down at the bait shop fishermen would talk about how to find the best places to fish and how to read the weather conditions, timing and all the various ways of getting at when and where to drop a line.

It is easy to think of Jesus first as a divine fisherman who relied on miraculous powers. But we also have to understand him as the human Jesus, someone like us, with human limitations, who had to use all his senses to understand what was hidden below the surface, just like the fishermen at the bait shop.

And this is borne out by the fact that one of the things about Jesus's character that is emphasized in several places in each of the Gospels is how observant he is. Whether he is in a crowd and notices the unusual touch of one person amidst the many or whether he sees the curious Nathaniel standing far away under a

tree, or Zacchaeus up a tree, above the level of the crowd, he is always paying attention. He has a spiritual radar that never misses any of the outward signs that something important is going on inside someone. And so it also stands to reason that, even as Jesus speaks to the people gathered on the shore, he is aware of everything going on around him, including "fishing conditions"

Maybe he sees a light shadow or ripple on the surface of the water or perhaps a bird is circling a particular area or some other subtle cues are telling him that fish are gathering in a place deeper out. And it is very possible that this is what leads him to urge the fishermen to go back out again.

None of these observations need to be thought of as miracles. And if this is true, then this story is really first of all about "discernment," about how we too can interpret surface appearances in order to understand what is happening beneath the surface, because we too have this spiritual radar that Jesus relies on. Ours may be much less reliable than his, and so we should turn to him for guidance, but we do have it. And maybe the fact that Jesus has this radar and that we have it too is the real miracle in the story.

Success as a Church

I am personally not one who measures the value of a church by how many people it is able to pull in. But I do think that numbers are a mark of success if a person who is added to our number, is helped in finding a closer relationship with God.

And if we take our cue from the Gospel story, we can find those people by looking not just at the surface appearances of what is going on in our society, but with an eye to understanding what is going on under the surface; because under the surface, hungry souls like hungry fish are on the move.

And like a fishing boat that is able to move to the location above where the fish are gathering, the church that moves to where the hungry souls are, will make the big haul.

The Solo Fisherman

Today's Gospel story seems to be more focused on what a congregation can do together, as a team of fishermen. But I think that the story also speaks to those among us who tend to be more like solo fishermen than team players; who tend to do our fishing in

some part of the lake where we feel more at home, and where it seems a little easier to read the surface signs.

What my radar picks up from the surface of life that surrounds me right now is a lot of snow and ice that has prevented us from gathering; what I see is a detachment and sometimes irritation, but also a hunger for connection that suggests to me that we are not so far beyond the pandemic and that we may still be susceptible to the negative spiritual currents that threatened to drag us down during that time. Like a bit of déjà vu. And what I see is a growing uncertainty and lack of trust that has been brought on by powerful people.

Sometimes it is easier to read what is happening beneath the surface and sometimes it is hard because of waves and the way light is refracted off the surface. For example, we have been brought up to always behave as though everything is fine with us. And so we very often behave in ways that betray how we really feel. And we can be easily fooled by others into thinking that everything is fine with them too, when it isn't.

But I think it is also true that God gave each of us a very fine radar, perhaps not as good as Jesus's, but good enough to detect small

signs of when something important is going on or that somebody is ready to drop and that our stopping to reach out as he did is the thing that needs to happen in order to restore or bring that person “back into the boat”. Maybe it is a sigh or a strange comment or the stubble on the face of someone who shaves every day or some recent event that is easily overlooked. So many little signs can tip us off as to happening and there are ways that we can drop a line and invite engagement, without being nosey.

And so I think it is not a bad time to remember Jesus our Shepherd also as Jesus our Fisherman. And that it is also a good time to think of what we do as being like fishermen in his image.