

“Finding Fish”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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Lunar New Year Service

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 138

Luke 5:1-11

I asked in an informal survey on our church’s Facebook page about where people preferred to buy their fish. The top choice was H-Mart, which makes sense because it’s local and as I understand it, they bring in fish from the famous Fulton Fish Market. But there were a smattering of other preferences: 99 Ranch, which is a Chinese grocery store, Whole Foods, Shoprite, with props to the counter man for recipe tips, Seafood Gourmet in Maywood, and a couple of restaurants were mentioned as well. I know some of our Japanese church members insist you cannot find fish fresher in this area than the fish at Matsuwa.

I am in my second year of teaching the English Conversation Family Class at our church. We alternate between singing an English song, and sharing a question that one member of the class asks the others in English. One of the most common questions we get early in the semester is “Where do you go to buy food?” I can assure you, especially when you are far from your hometown, finding the foods that feel familiar is one of the most important tasks to feeling settled in your new community. Not only figuring out which store has the best fish, but also how to get there, and how to speak to the people who work there if their language is not your own is one of your first challenges to survival in a new city.

The truth is, most people who immigrate to the United States at this point in time are fishing for something, and their hopes have been big enough to risk casting their nets further from home: better jobs, education, freedom from violence or persecution, love. Some find what they were fishing for, and some don’t-- at least not right way.

If you follow Jesus, you aren’t going to sail in the usual places, or catch the usual yield of fish. I learned in seminary that Luke’s gospel and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person. One of the main struggles for the early church in Acts is whether the Jesus movement will expand to allow uncircumcised Gentiles to be part of the community. So the casting of nets in the deeper water was a sign that God’s community would not come from the expected places or expected ways of knowing

God. There are far more fish out there than the disciples ever imagined, and only by following Jesus will you find them. Did you know that the first symbol the early Christians used to identify themselves was a fish? The cross wasn't used as a symbol for Christianity until the 4th century, but Christians were already using the fish to identify themselves in the more recent years after Jesus died.

The gospel story also teaches a trust in God's abundance, so much that you can walk away from it all. So much of what we do from day to day, whether it is shopping for just the right fish, or hopping on a bus to spend another day at work, or bringing home good grades, is centered around providing for our household, pleasing those inside of it, and building a pathway to a future that is even more prosperous. These are fine goals to have, and they are goals I have for my household. But Jesus seems to be saying that there is an *even bigger goal* to value than prosperity for yourself and your family. If we trust Jesus enough to not just focus on providing for our own household, but provide for a community larger than those we live with, our nets will be very full.

I asked my friend Dionna Pimms about the fishing traditions on the Yakima Indian Reservation. Some of you remember Dionna if you went with our Mission Trip in 2017 to Campbell Farm, on the reservation, which is a Presbyterian ministry among the Yakima people. Dionna and her mom Carmanita run the program. I had remembered Dionna telling me that the salmon had a spiritual significance to the people and were central to their livelihood. And so I asked her yesterday to tell me more. Here is what she told me:

Salmon runs happen twice a year: fall and spring, when mature salmon swim from the ocean up river to spawn, or lay eggs, in the same waters where their lives began. These seasons mark the time for gathering-- of roots and salmon in the spring, and for berries and salmon in the fall. Dionna tells me that before you go out on any kind of salmon hunt or even root or berry expedition, you *must* offer the first of the season's berries, the first of the roots, the first of the salmon at Feast in the longhouse, which is the spiritual and cultural center of communal traditions for the tribe. At Feast, you prepare yourself: you give thanks, you humble yourself before the Creator, and only then you are permitted to go out to hunt or gather. Whatever is left over at Feast that cannot be eaten-- bones and guts of the fish-- is thrown back into the river as an offering to ensure that future salmon runs will be strong. Salmon hunting belongs to every family; traditionally, fishing is not a specialized trade. If you were able-bodied, you'd go out to fish. Fishing is not in a boat, but on scaffolding platforms along the river. You'd drop your nets in, and whatever you'd pull out would go to feed your family, and the tribal people; the table is welcome and wide. What you can't eat now, you dry or ground up

to eat later. Sharing with vulnerable members of the community, people who don't have someone at home who can go and fish, is common and encouraged. Whatever is left over can then be traded or sold. As Dionna shared these fishing traditions with me, I was struck at how much honor the people hold for these fish and the waters they travel.

These days, there are very strict laws about the fishing of salmon in North American waters, with good reason. Commercial fishing practices have dramatically decreased numbers of wild salmon. Warmer water temperature invites pests like sea lice endangering the life of salmon and even making some groups of wild salmon extinct. Dionna said that while the traditional time for fishing was in the early spring and early fall, because of global warming the seasons have shifted to late fall and early winter. In the past 3-4 years she has noticed a difference: the salmon run in the fall brings more fish than in the spring, whereas their history had it the other way around. Neither fall nor spring brings in as many fish as it used to.

Even though Washington State has strict guidelines for the fishing of salmon, persons belonging to indigenous tribes rightfully have no restrictions placed on their fishing. This allowance aims to honor their right to the land and waterways as first inhabitants. And, their methods of fishing have long honored the earth's rhythms and their practices encourage the sustaining of the fish populations they cherish.

We as disciples of Jesus Christ, fishers of people, can learn something about evangelism from the sustainable fishing practices of the Yakima, and also from today's gospel. Whatever we fish for, we must not be too greedy. Notice the disciples, as they followed Jesus in search of people, did not drag their overflowing nets of fish along with them. No, they left these at the shore, presumably where some other fishers would rejoice at the easy haul. Can you imagine if they tried to follow Jesus with all those fish? Before they could do anything, they would have to try to get it to market and make some money off of it, or maybe preserve it. If that had been the case, what would they have missed? The healing of a man with leprosy? Jesus sharing a meal with a tax collector? The Sermon on the Mount?

In the history of Christian missions, too often people calling themselves disciples have tried to fish people for Jesus Christ, while also taking far more than their share of the abundance of fish at the same time. We have converted many cultures and lands to Christianity, while also taking their gold, oil, land, and sometimes even their people.

Once we have found fish-- whether at H-Mart, Mitsuwa, or the Yakima river, the question remains how we will prepare the fish to be served. Will we serve it raw, as in

sashimi, or cook it? Will we stick to the old family favorites, tried and true, or will we try something new? I am thankful that Chris cooked the dish from our household today, Philippine style chicken adobo, because I do not know so well as Chris how to cook Filipino food. I also know that she cooked it under pressure-- not with the Instapot, but with the presence of her parents who are staying with us this weekend, You see, they carry with them an understanding of just exactly how chicken adobo should be made, and how it should taste.

In an essay called "Recreating Our Mothers' Dishes: Asian and Asian North American Women's Pedagogy," Korean American Boyung Lee spoke of this anxiety as she describes making traditional Korean foods. Even following the Korean cookbooks, she could not get the taste just right. Her mother said that just as important as the ingredients and quantities is something you cannot find in a book. It is something that in Korean is called "*sonmat*," which literally means the taste of one's hands... a cook's hands decide the flavor of the food."¹

Just as we might ask how we will prepare the fish we find, we must also ask the question how we will prepare the people we find as Christianity is shared. Some Christians would say that it is wrong, it is heresy, to have in a Christian sanctuary a celebration of Lunar New Year, for the rituals around the new year center around other gods, ancestor worship, and other practices that might not seem Christian.

However, if we are to prepare our disciples with *sonmat*, that is, the flavor of the hands that are within the community, it makes good sense to share something that is so deep and rich within a culture with who we are as Christians. The drumbeat of Manhattan Taiko is as much a sharing of our hearts with God as singing a hymn by Martin Luther. Jesus does not cause us to catch just one kind of fish, nor does Jesus call us to fish for one kind of people.

I believe the feast might be ready, and I can assure you that there will be many, many different flavors. May our thoughts and words, songs and drumbeat, be the preparation we need to be ready for the feast. Amen.

¹ Mihee Kim-Kort references this essay in *Making Paper Cranes: Toward an Asian American Feminist Theology* St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012, p.66