

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C Epiphany 5
February 6, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I want us to consider the empty boat today, friends.

The emptiness of a boat after a long night of work on the water.

It couldn't have been the first time Peter, James and John had had a hard day, or night, at work, one which was disappointing on multiple levels, leaving them to clean nets at the end of their night shift, nets which had not worked in their favor.

But we enter the gospel today with the emptiness of a boat.

I sometimes forget that fishing for the almost-disciples wasn't just a pastime or done for the benefit of their immediate communities—that when they would have a bad night, it simply meant less fish at the outdoor market to sell locally, an ancient CSA of sorts. The fishing economy in the time of Jesus was a highly regulated one, one where the fish caught by Peter and Co. that night wouldn't have fed the local community, but would have been part of an extensive quota system under Roman rule. Expensive licenses, lease of boats, and required raw materials meant there was a lot at stake every time the disciples set out into the water.

To come back empty couldn't be written off as a bad day at work. It meant the pressure grew for the next day. It meant that low wages would turn into no wages, or into increased debt. It meant that their families would be impacted by this net zero night.

All of that was in that empty boat, on the shore of Gennesaret.

And we've all had that empty boat, ourselves. We've all had a moment, or season, or lifetime, of standing by a boat filled with nothing but frustration, shame, failure, and the niggling fear of what that emptiness means for us and ours.

We don't talk about failure so much in church, because hope is where we usually land, being a people and posture of the resurrection. Failure, also, in our highly capitalistic and achievement-oriented cultural economy, is a topic which usually lands just above sex and money in conversation stoppers. Our highly individualized egos frame failure with being 'less than', and thereby a source of shame.

Just think of those ubiquitous job interview or college essay questions: "When have you failed at something, and what did you learn from it?" The assumption being that failure is only valuable

when it produces something itself. I highly doubt that many score second interviews by sharing stories of failure which ended in just failure, or failure which affected one's livelihood.

A colleague of mine from the south believes that our sensitivity to failure is highly regional and actually climate-based. He would remind his northern-based colleagues that we especially have inherited a harried, fear-based pattern from our ancestors: that if you didn't get the crops in on time here in New England, a single night of frost could ruin the harvest. When there is a limited time to gather food and fuel, the fear of failure increases, because the repercussions are so high and life-threatening. I'd call that take more art than science, but it rings true given the whole primal 'milk and bread and wine' lines at stores before a blizzard.

When you think back to the memories which abide with you—in the dark of night, perhaps—they are the memories of the ways we have stood by our empty boat. And cleaned the nets which had failed us.

It would be easy to turn this story into one where we add, 'And then Jesus came along and there was fish aplenty! Jesus will give you so many fish that your boat will keel over and you have to call in help, and all will be well!' My math skills, honed by months of pandemic first grade-level addition, are still good enough to know that the equation 'bad situation + Jesus = all is good!' doesn't actually add up, as easy a sermon that might be to preach, or a hopeful one to hear.

When Jesus sets out with Peter again, a true sign of either hope by Peter, or the fact that he was too exhausted to refuse, they find their nets overflowing. Overflowing so much that they have to call in partners to assist them in hauling it in. Overflowing so much that their boats begin to flounder and sink. Peter, overwhelmed, tells Jesus that he isn't worthy of this bounty, this miracle, that he is a 'sinful man'.

But Jesus doesn't absolve him of his sins. He doesn't say, 'No, Peter, you're a good egg with a good heart. You deserve this.' Jesus says to Peter, 'Do not be afraid.'

Do not be afraid.

This line, this is our God revealed this week in the Gospel, church. Jesus doesn't tell us that he is the answer to all of our problems. But he does tell us that fear is what will keep us apart from God.

The story today ends with a netful of fish, but the fishermen don't stay around to enjoy the fruits of this harvest—they don't bring them to the fishing authorities, clear their debt, pay in advance for their boat leases, consider it a hashtag 'blessed' windfall and now they are going to Disneyland—they leave their jobs and livelihoods and follow Jesus.

Because it wasn't about the fish. It wasn't about the catch. It was about the emptiness of a boat.

If your boat is always full of fish, if you have no sense of what it means to be empty—to have emptiness, failure, as part of your story and experience—then there will be no room left for

anything else, including God, including Jesus. We have come to see emptiness, or failure, as marks of shame. Indeed, for years failure was associated with sinfulness—we yearn to find a rationale for why some people have it hard and some have it less so, and in the midst of that we cultivate theology which places circumstance and privilege in our hands, that we are masters of our own fates. That what we have, or don't have, is a mark of our ability, or our favor with God.

But our God is not like us—that is the whole message of this Epiphany season, revealing week by week the God who will accompany us into the wilderness of Lent. God doesn't see emptiness as lack—doesn't see failure as judgment. Our God reveals that emptiness allows space; failure allows grace. And Jesus' words to Peter, are those of God's to God's people every time God is about to start something new, to create and knit and form and birth something in love—and God says to Peter, and to us—Do not be afraid.

The God of the cross and Calvary and Good Friday knows something about empty boats. Belief in Jesus doesn't protect you from failure, or from emptiness. Jesus does, however, point those with empty boats to see beyond the emptiness into the real sin—fear. Fear of what others might say, fear of letting one's family and support system down, fear of others judging you and dictating your worth, fear that nothing will get better. I keep thinking that Peter, James and John didn't just leave fishing—they left the crushing fear behind them as they left their leased and quota-ed nets.

Our collect today reads: “Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.” What if our sins weren't the list of bad things we do, or good things we don't—but our tendency to let an empty boat dictate our worth, our loveliness to God? What if our fear of an empty boat makes us fill it up so much that there is no room left for anything other than ourselves and our stuff? What if we'd rather have a boatful of fish, and a friendly handshake relationship with the oppression coming from the Empire, than abundance? What if we'd rather than an oppression over us which is known, rather than the unknown and new liberty?

What in us needs to be emptied out so that the abundance of God's love and grace finds space to enter in and abide?

Your empty boat is holy, church. Even if you hide it, even if you are ashamed of it. God looks at emptiness and sees potential, not failure. God sees room, where we see lack. Where we see sin, God sees our fear, and bids us to imagine differently, whispering again and again to God's people about to do something new and brave and foolhardy, ‘Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid’.

Amen.