

Shadows on Stones (Luke 5.1-11)
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It is easy to lose yourself on the walk by the river. It is easy to let your mind wander as you look down at the worn trail, stepping over large, imbedded rocks, to crunch along the dirt track. It is easy to get distracted by the sight of an eagle or a hawk circling in the blue overhead. It is easy to forget when the wind rustles the pine branches why you have come to this place. It is easy to neglect the cane pole resting on your shoulder, the small basket dangling from your fingers filled with cut squares of bait, and the soft, flowing sound of the water you are following. But perhaps this is one of the reasons you come to a place like Northern New Mexico. Perhaps you come to lose yourself a little, to let your mind wander into places it doesn't always get to go. Mountains are good for that sort of thing. And rivers have this way of whispering.

Once you find a clearing that suits you, it is possible in some places to sit most of the day without seeing anyone else. And the first thing you might do on such a day, before you ever think about baiting a hook and dropping it into the river, the first thing you might do is sit quietly and look. If you look at a small section of mountain river, one of the first things you notice is the current. It moves generally in one direction, from the snowcaps downward to the valley, pushing its meltwater along at a rapid pace. But observation will yield the places where eddies form around stubborn boulders or undertows develop near the fallen trees with rotting branches. And if you watch awhile you'll see that hidden within the consistent flow are the tiny countercurrents that move this way and that before rejoining the river's march. You might also notice that the water's depth changes rather frequently. Although the water itself is clear as glass, in the

center of the river it is difficult to see the bottom. Nearer to the shallow sides and in broad flats that extend outward you can see stones of many colors. The stones are all sizes, but they are of only smooth shapes. For the water's movement over time has worn them down, polished them into slippery ovals and rounded rectangles blurred by the ripples overhead.

As you look at the stones you catch your first glimpse of something. A long shadow, about a foot in length, perhaps, cast over the stones to hint that you may have found what you have come looking for. Actually, there are a number of shadows in a curious formation, each somewhat cylindrical in shape with the flare of a tail at the end and the wisp of a fin on either side. Then, looking just sunward of the shadows, the fish themselves become clear to you. It's a wonder that you saw the shadows first as the trout now seem so bright. When they turn upstream in the sun, you catch the glimmer of rainbow scales and excitedly reach for your pole and basket. But before you set to work trying to catch one of them, you pause once again to take in the whole scene—the blueness of the sky, the shady pines, the bubbling water, and the sublime sight of bright floating fish casting shadows on stones in the cold water.

According to our sacred stories, the first people to follow Jesus' wisdom teachings were fishermen. They did not fish from rocks with cane poles, they fished from boats, most likely with woven nets, but they were fishermen all the same. And as fishermen they must have had some experience with sitting quietly and looking deeply. Perhaps they, too, got a bit lost in it from time to time. Perhaps their minds wandered as they bobbed slowly in the waves, pulled up empty nets, or stared at the surface of the water and caught their own contemplative reflections. Perhaps they were actually the perfect

sort of audience for the rabbi Jesus with his difficult, open-ended teachings that didn't seem to make guarantees any more than the lake would guarantee them a catch. Perhaps fishermen were actually the most well-suited of all to let the rabbi's sayings sink in and then feel the hook of the questions they engendered.

The old writer of Luke says that when Jesus came he invited some early fishermen to go with him into "the deep water," and, as the story goes, it was there that they caught so many fish that they nearly sank themselves before they ever got back to shore again. And while this ridiculous catch of fish is told as something of an ancient "sign" or a "wonder," probably to denote that Jesus was a very special character, the wisdom of the story lies beneath the surface of the seemingly miraculous details. The wisdom of the story, as in all good fishing stories, is that the story isn't actually about the fish. The story is rather about the fishermen themselves. This point seems inherently made by the gospel writer, who spends almost no time on the large catch of fish and doesn't care to record it in detail or really quantify it in any way. As such, the story is not meant to be taken as literal truth, but as metaphorical tale about what can be found when we lower our nets into the deeper waters and begin to seriously contemplate the teachings of Jesus. And in this story, the only one of the teachings that Jesus offers, which is barely a teaching at all, is that he blesses the first fisherman who would go with him and says, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." This is actually the place our lectionary reading stops, and that's a good thing because to move past this story too quickly may be to miss one of the rabbi's better hooks. Returning to the river might help explain it.

Before we ever reached for our bait or dropped a line beneath the surface, we were encouraged to sit quietly and look deeply. That is, our fishing began by paying close

attention. We noticed the sky and the trees, we observed the changes in the current, and we saw the smooth stones and shadows. What we were doing was practicing mindfulness. This practice of mindfulness can open us not only to the many things happening all around us of which we are oftentimes unaware, but also to the things inside us that we may not regularly tend. Having seen beneath the surface of the river, we may also begin to look beneath the surface of ourselves. And we may begin to draw a few analogies. For example, in our own lives, are we not like the stones that only become smoothed by the water with great difficulty over much time? In our own lives, are we not like the fish who are unaware that it is their shadows that betray them to the close observer? In our own lives, are we not like the riverbed that is in some places very deep and serene and in other places much more turbulent and shallow? And in our own lives, are we not like the river itself, moving along the continuum of our days from the mystery of origin into the ineffable sea that awaits? All of these questions lie just beneath the surface for those who would lower their nets, and it is with this in mind that I wonder again about the hook of Jesus' wisdom. What if the rabbi, when speaking to the fisherman about becoming fishers of people, wasn't referring to *other* people at all? What if Jesus was hinting, in essence, that the people they would catch if they followed him were *themselves*?

The more contemplative folks among us, perhaps the fishermen and fisherwomen, may already know what I'm talking about. Because to sit for a length of time with the teachings of rabbi Jesus is to hear his wisdom calling to the deepest places in ourselves. These deep places can hold the best ideas about what it means for us to be human and practice healthy religion. In my own experience, for as long as I can remember the

teachings of Jesus have called out the best ideas I can muster. I hear him more often than not these days as a mystical rabbi, or, as you might have gathered from the images in this meditation, as a Zen-like teacher who offered curious sayings and difficult questions meant to challenge us to live more mindfully and think more radically. As I have sat by the river of Jesus stories for some thirty-five years now, I have been continually challenged to look more deeply into myself and find within myself the way that the rabbi taught—the way of lovingkindness, the way of nonviolence, the way of solidarity with the poor and the suffering, and the way of finding what is sacred in myself, in my neighbors, and in the world we share. And if the truth is told, then I am not very interested in becoming an evangelist who goes out fishing for other people and hoping to catch them. I am much more interested in being authentically caught myself by the teachings of the rabbi that continue to haunt me with their strange and beautiful ideas. And this begs the question...

What teachings of Jesus have hooked you? What teachings of Jesus have hooked us? What of his life, what of his practice, what of his wisdom whispers to us as the river that invites contemplation at the clearing? There are as many answers to these questions as there are stones in the water, but we might at least name a few. Some of us, I think, have been hooked by the way we understand Jesus as one who practiced a form of engaged nonviolence. Some have been hooked by Jesus' admonition that we must always remember the poor. Some have been hooked by his saying that the kingdom of heaven is really spread out on the earth, it is everywhere, and can be found here and now. Some have been hooked by the stories of Jesus hanging out with all the wrong people and befriending those who lived on the margins. Some have simply been hooked by his

teachings on forgiveness for ourselves and others. And the questions that these hooks leave us with are the age-old questions of our religious tradition: What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus? What does it mean to practice nonviolence or remember the poor? What does it mean find heaven on earth, befriend those on the margins, or learn to forgive ourselves? What does it mean to be hooked by a teaching or haunted by a saying as we walk the path together?

The stories leave us with open endings. Jesus says simply to the fisherman that they shouldn't be so afraid but they should instead come along with him and fish some different depths. And the same open ending is left to those of us in the liberal Christian tradition. Each of us, in good conscience, is invited to consider what the rabbi's teachings mean and how we might be transformed by putting them into practice. With that, we might just sit for a moment longer at the clearing by the river. Then we might pack up our baskets and carefully wind up our fishing lines. We might even pause to take it all in one last time—the sky, the trees, the water, the fish, and the stones. We might breathe deeply, feeling connected once again to a greater whole. And then we might end as our lectionary text ends...with a beginning.

We rise from the place where we have been sitting, throw the cane poles over our shoulders, and begin down the trail once again. It is the journey that our lives must make, this movement from the snowcaps to the sea, and while we are on it we ask the questions that would help us live more mindfully, think more radically, and love more freely. For the river moves swiftly and we have little time to lose.

“Do not be afraid,” said the rabbi. “But let us fish the deeper waters.”

May it be so with us.