

Why Fly Fishing?

Rev. Dan Schumacher

When the Sabbatical Support Team asked me to give a message about “Why Fly Fishing?” I immediately felt a keen sense of inadequacy. Far more accomplished writers have written far more thoughtfully and eloquently about fly fishing than I ever could. They often have rich histories and childhood memories of growing up along some famous river, and fly fishing as a shared family experience.

I was not born into a fly fishing family. I married into one. I like to tell people that I had to be converted. I’m a good Baptist like that. I was already in my mid-20s before I even attempted to cast a fly rod. It was my father-in-law who taught me. Any my conversion experience came the first time I saw a big brown trout come up and slurp my dry fly into its mouth. It was at that moment that I was hooked! (Pardon the pun.)

We’ve always been a “catch-and-release” family, which is problematic for some, because it means that I fish for sport and not for sustenance. And what that really means is, I fish for the experience of catching a fish and not for food. People who love to eat trout don’t understand how you could put them back. It’s not because I don’t like trout. I like most any food (as my bathroom scale likes to remind me). On occasion, we will keep a trout, wrap it in foil, and throw it in the camp fire, but truth be told, I can count on one hand how many trout I’ve eaten over the years. So I can’t say I like fly fishing for the same reason elk and deer hunters say they like hunting. They often fill the freezer for the year from their hunt, while I come home empty-handed, but completely satiated in a very different way from my excursions.

So what is it about fly fishing that I love? Why fly fishing?

I suspect the answers to those questions will be completely unsatisfactory to you. And yet, I feel as though I will have left my heart on the page from trying to answer it.

The first reason is simple. Most places where you find trout are *beautiful places*. They’re the landscapes of rugged mountains and lush, green forests. If you’re fishing for trout, then you’re likely to be in a canyon cut by a cold, mountain river. As someone who loves being outdoors (and if not *outdoors*, at least *outside*), I relish the opportunity to leave paved roads behind and stand in the beauty of creation. Trout fishing takes me there. In fact, as I stand knee deep in the moving current of a river, I often catch myself singing the words to one of my favorite hymns:

*This is my father's world
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres*

Nature sings of God’s glory, and when I am fly fishing I feel as if I am but one small voice in the chorus of nature that is praising God.

The second “Why?” is a bit more involved. I am someone who is always, always, always focused on the *next* thing. It’s actually what enables me to lead. I’m always looking ahead – thinking, planning, working on the next thing. There is always more to accomplish and part of my job as a leader is to help us accomplish those things.

But that also means that I am always mentally juggling multiple thoughts at once. What else to I need to get done today? Who needs a phone call? Did I write that email to so-and-so? The thoughts are constant in my brain. Even when I wake in the middle of the night, I wake to thoughts of what else I need to add to my to-do list.

The blessing of this persuasion is that I am fairly good at getting things done that need to be done. The curse, on the other hand, is that I am rarely living in the present moment, but rather always focused on the future. Even on vacation – even if vacation is sitting on a beach – I am not present to that moment, but ruminating on the next thing.

But the singular act of fly fishing requires all of my attention. Which direction is the wind blowing? What is the water temperature? Where in the water column will the fish be feeding? What bugs will be hatching at this time of year? Which seam has the most depth? Are there bushes behind me or do I have a clear backcast? The singular act of fly fishing requires so much attention, that in giving all of my attention to that one thing, everything else fades to the back of my mind, and I am at last able to find rest.

In his short story, *A River Runs through It*, Norman Maclean says it like this: “One great thing about fly fishing is that after a while nothing exists of the world but thoughts about fly fishing.” No competing attentions. No worries about tomorrow or next sermon or who needs a visit. Just fly fishing – and in being present to that *one* thing, I am finally also present to the present moment.

The last reason is simple – and liturgical, even! Standing in cold running water feels like a baptism of sorts. All week long, I work to lead people in the ways of Jesus and toward the love of God. But finite and fallible person that I am, I fail more often than I succeed. I say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, offer the wrong help. And so by week’s end, I feel the burden of another week of my own faults and sins – and all of the ways in which I’ve failed to live up to the responsibilities I’ve accepted as your pastor.

When I spend a day standing in the river, I feel as though it is washing my sins away. The river is not my salvation, but it does have a way of reminding me where my salvation rests. And in so doing, it releases me from trying to carry burdens that only God can shoulder.

So there you have it. Those are my answers to the question “Why Fly Fishing?”

...Well those and one more. It’s awfully fun to catch big trout!