

Story and Meditation: Weird Wisdom

September 12, 2021

Proverbs 1:20-33

Mark 8:27-38

by Eric Anderson

The pollywog enjoyed his life. It was a simple life, with enough variety to keep things interesting without making things so interesting that, well, it got dangerous. He lived in a smallish pond that predatory creatures pretty much ignored during that crucial time that he was very small. The little pond still seemed big to him, and he explored its edges, its depths, and its little nooks and underwater openings from dawn to dusk.

There was plenty to eat and he had plenty of company, other pollywogs from the same egg cluster. There were games, and jokes, and long discussions on the best way to eat a worm, or the most tasty bugs. They swam, they played, they talked – and they grew.

It was one of the other growing tadpoles (when does a pollywog become a tadpole? At about this point in the story) that first developed the strange bumps on its sides. Over the next few days more and more of them did, bumps that kept extending, bumps that developed strange joints where they bent. First there were bumps either side of the head, and then another pair of bumps either side of the tail. To everyone's astonishment, their tails began to shrink, little by little, even as these... limbs? Legs? They had to invent words for them as these legs grew.

Our pollywog become a tadpole heading toward being a... well he didn't have a word for that, either... was also seeing his companions' faces changing shape. Some of them began to go more and more often to the surface where they actually pushed their mouths and noses up above the water for long periods. Our tadpole thought this was dangerous behavior. Water, after all, was how you breathed. Take the water in through the mouth, push it out through the gills, and all is well. Air, though – air was how you drowned.

One day, though, one of the toads – we've got to call them that now – one of the frogs pulled itself up out of the water at the pond's edge and vanished. They waited for her to come back, but she didn't. Another slipped her head up and looked around. Air filled her lungs and she, too, hopped her way onto shore.

She turned back briefly to say, "Come on! This is the way to go!"

Several of the other young toads made their way to the pond's edge and vanished above the water's surface. Our pollywog/tadpole/toad was horrified.

"I'm not going up there," he said. "I'm not going to drown."

"Seriously," said the second toad who'd called the others, "nobody is drowning up here. We're hopping about and finding bugs to eat. It's fine. This is the way to go."

To our poly/tad/toad, this sounded like the biggest folly he'd ever heard of, and he said so.

"How is *your* breathing?" asked the toad on the shore.

Truthfully, his gills weren't working that well. He was feeling rather oxygen-deprived. So of course he lied. "Fine," he said.

She was not fooled. She'd had all the feelings he was having, and she wasn't having any of his deceptions.

"No, it isn't," she said. "I can see you gasping. Poke your nose up."

"This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard of," he protested.

"Maybe," she said. "It's weird for sure, but it's also wise. Get your head above water and breathe."

Christianity would be so much easier without Jesus. He had – he has – the weirdest wisdom to offer. We could make do quite nicely with the wisdom of Proverbs. I grant you that today's lesson is about the value of wisdom, not its content, but the rest of Proverbs gives you plenty. Follow the commandments against theft and murder and adultery, keep the commandments about honoring your parents and keeping your word, live the commandments to worship God in loyalty and in truth.

I grant you that these aren't always the easiest things to do, but they're comprehensible. I can imagine a society based on theft but I can't imagine enjoying it. I can imagine a society that ignores parents but I can't imagine it doing very well.

Then along comes Jesus saying, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Let's be clear. Jesus was not referring to cross-shaped jewelry. In the first century, there was one and only one meaning to "take up their cross," and that was the horrific procession from the place of judgement to the place of execution, in which the condemned carried either the crossbeam or the entire cross to where they would be fixed to it and raised upon it. About forty years after Jesus' crucifixion, Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero said, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him, an abomination. To slay him is virtually an act of murder. To crucify him is—what? No fitting word can possibly describe a deed so horrible."

Romans reserved the cross for rebels and foreigners, people like, well, like Jesus and his followers.

That's why Peter's reaction was so strong. It is true that many of the great leaders of Israel's history had gone through a lot. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Jeremiah and Esther. That was to be expected in the life and work of a Messiah, who would lead the people in a spiritual, military, and political restoration of the ancient nation of Israel. Crucially, the truth of the Messiah, God's Anointed One, could be found only in that person's success. If the Romans weren't driven out, if the people weren't free, if the kingdom weren't restored, then it couldn't be God's Messiah. A Messiah executed by the Romans for rebellion could not, by definition, be the Messiah people expected.

Cheryl Lindsay writes very insightfully at ucc.org: "Peter's rebuke assumes that Jesus was expressing a desire for this path when the truth is that Jesus, in the moment at the very least, didn't want to do it.

"Even knowing what was on the other side, Jesus wants to avoid the hardest thing. Even recognizing the profound impact on humanity, Jesus doesn't want to do it. Many of us can empathize with the reluctance to submit to such pain and suffering. The way of the cross is choosing to do the hardest thing."

It's choosing to do the hardest thing.

It's choosing to do the hardest thing that brings grace and peace and life to people around us. The way of the cross is not acceptance of meaningless victimization. What it is is the searching eye that seeks out the needs of the neighbor, the careful thought about what might serve those needs, the counting of the cost for it all, and the choice to bear that cost for others' good.

Do we do this? On balance, not enough. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Who do I say Jesus is? The Son of God. The Savior. The Redeemer. The Christ. But do I have my own agenda when it comes to what Messiah-ship means? An agenda shaped around my own comfort? My own lifestyle? My own priorities and preferences? Do I look away in embarrassment when God challenges that agenda?"

To answer the question for myself: Yes.

There are two contexts in which Jesus' weird wisdom makes sense. The first is the context that Peter and Jesus' other followers did not, probably could not, understand when Jesus first said it: the context of Jesus' resurrection. As the Apostle Paul put it in First Corinthians, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." We might also put it, if we live not just for this life but for the next, we are most to be reassured. We know from Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane – "Let this cup pass from me" – that he did not seek death. He accepted death rather than give up the course of doing God's will, proclaiming God's

message, serving God's people, in the reassurance that beyond this life there is another, and that in the end, God's love prevails.

That's the first context. In the second context, I must admit, weird wisdom works... maybe. It certainly does sometimes. At other times, well, it's hard to tell. Because this setting is the daily life we know. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried."

Well, nearly untried. There are times that we use Jesus' weird wisdom. It is the basis of parenting, particularly for young children. Some of our professions are based on it: the medical professions, social work, teaching. We've seen people create communities dedicated to it, and not just Christian. There have been monasteries and convents, communes, kibbutzes. They're not always a success, of course. Among Louisa May Alcott's books is one titled *Transcendental Wild Oats* about the short time her family lived on a communal farm. The experiment lasted only seven months, in part because the philosophically inclined men couldn't step outside themselves quite often enough to plant and weed and produce an adequate harvest.

If we lived by weird wisdom, however, imagine the wars and destruction we'd have missed. If we lived by weird wisdom, imagine how many fewer friends and family we'd have lost to COVID-19. If we lived by weird wisdom, imagine how few would be hungry or homeless and for how short a time.

Wouldn't that be a better way to live?

How can Jesus' weird wisdom summon us in this day? How can we step out of ourselves and reach out to one another? How can we live our lives in reassurance of the life to come? How can we in our living and our doing bear witness to the love of God?

Amen.