

Doing What Comes Unnaturally

Brett Webb-Mitchell

Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9).

And you become imitators of us and of the Lord (1 Thess. 1:6).

Nothing fills a mother's or father's heart with more pride, the kind that makes buttons pop off when chests are filled, than when a child we love and adore accomplishes a new feat in life. As a son who has brought moments of great pride mixed with a healthy measure of anxiety to his parents, it is a new experience to be the proud father of a gifted daughter. And I have had one of those button-popping, pride-filled moments watching my five-year-old daughter, Adrienne, learn how to swim!

This past summer, Adrienne took swim lessons. I was already proud of her natural, frog-like approach to making it through water even before she took formal lessons. But when it came time to show the teacher that she could already swim, and should therefore be placed in a more advanced class, I was crestfallen when my wife and I saw that she really couldn't swim correctly. When she was asked to use the basic steamboat swim kick, we both watched her flounder and almost sink in the water, unable even to comprehend the style that was being asked for by her instructor. It was hard to watch her fail. It was clear that she had to be broken of the old, awkward frogkicking pattern in order to learn to swim using a new, different, and better stroke and kick.

Adrienne stayed with the beginners class, for this was where the miracle was to take place: the miracle of learning and practicing a new gesture. All five children, who were ages four- to six-years-old, met with the same teacher each day, going over and over the same lesson pattern: bobbing up and down in the water, blowing bubbles, holding their breath in the water, and, finally, practicing the steamboat kick, using this kick to get out to the instructor who was a few feet off from the side of the pool. Constant repetition, daily practice, a loving, caring instructor and giggling friends, and a solitary goal for two weeks provided the educative environment in which all five children learned to kick successfully and swim like a steamboat. All that was missing was the steam!

With this new kick, Adrienne could swim more effortlessly for longer distances in the pool. Watching her break out of her naturally awkward, frog-like swim stroke, then learning, bit by bit to do something that was *unnatural*, doing it often enough for a long period of time, I came to see how practicing a new physical move or gesture that was once alien became quite natural to her. She was thrilled with her accomplishment, and so were we.

Students of life that we are, we all know that there needs to be a break of old habits in order to learn new, better skills. Athletes know that there is the natural tendency to fall into a rut in practice, and that they must break out of the rut in order to have a better golf swing, swim with a cleaner stroke, throw a better game in softball, and work on dribbles to move the ball faster down a basketball court. In the creative arts, a pianist knows that it takes the dedicated practice of necessary skills along with the rich

experiences that come from living, to play the piano. The painter must use different brush strokes, colors, styles, and textures to discover that which is most pleasing or thought-provoking to the artist's eye. In all of these endeavors, the cliché may be correct: they all take "one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." They all demand practice of certain skills, which in combination produce a work of art.

Athletes and creative artists understand dedication and obedience to a discipline in order to counter what we would do "naturally." For that which we might do "naturally" may be deadly for our practice, deterring us from the best performance possible. Like athletes and creative artists, Christians also understand this need to learn not to follow that which comes "naturally" always, because it will often lead us away from God. As the parent who is now proud as a peacock of his daughter's talent, willing to brag to other people his daughter's new, learned ability to swim, I have a new understanding of the Christian life. I have a better understanding of how God the Father can be the boastful God of his servant Job, as well as understand the sorrow of God in watching His Son's death on the cross.

God must be patient as we are watched by our Lord, with a mixture of great hope and anxiety as we try, in our own awkward fashion, to follow and practice Jesus' gestures of compassionate care as we are called to do. In trying to follow Jesus, we learn that we need to practice a new discipline in our life: learning *not* to follow that which is "natural" to us. For if we are left to our natural state of life, "doing what comes naturally" (a line from the musical *Annie Get Your Gun!*), we would naturally turn away from God and cling to our selfish needs, denying the very existence of neighbor. This natural tendency is a result of our being born as one of Adam's children, saved only by the free gift of grace in the one man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15).

The powerful reality of sin, and our natural condition of being embedded in, tempted, and shrouded by sin, is revealed clearly in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, consider the story of the children of Israel who are lonely in their wilderness experience, for Moses has been away from the people and is with God on the mountain, receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32). Without his presence and his constant demand for discipline, exhorting the children of Israel to follow God, they are left to their natural ways. Another way of putting this is to say that they were prone to leave the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to create their own gods. Out of the gold that they had on their persons, they created a golden calf upon a sacrificial altar, saying "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt!" No longer did they worship the one God, Yahweh, but reverted to their natural, base instinct, which was to cleave to that which was simplest: worshipping gods in the manner of religions practiced among other nations.

This inability of God's chosen to stay with God in the wilderness experiences of life is also true when God's children have plenty. For example, consider Jesus' parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 21:1-14). Jesus tells the tale of a great wedding banquet, with God as the host, in which three guests are invited — called to be at God's wedding feast. But they *all* refuse to come. Instead, they choose to do that which is natural: filling their lives with their own pleasures, whether it involves working on one's farm, minding one's business, or even mistreating and killing the host's servants. Naturally, they are too busy and preoccupied with the matters of life; their own agendas are more important than the kind invitation extended to them. That is why Jesus ends this passage with the haunting words: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Too

many still fail to realize what a wondrous gift of grace has been extended to them: an invitation to the Wedding Feast of God's love (Luke 14:15-24).

Christians are called by God and challenged by the Holy Spirit to practice certain gestures that come to us *unnaturally*. These certain gestures will seem peculiar at first to us, because they are unnatural. Like Adrienne who had to unlearn the awkward swim strokes she learned naturally, we, too, need to be broken of and unlearn doing what comes *naturally* in order to learn what it is that we should do in following Jesus. For in practicing the peculiar gestures of Christian faith, Godly hope, and the Holy Spirit's love in the company of the body of Christ, we are truly learning the ways of God. And in the act of practicing these gestures we *become* the very thing we practice: Christians. By listening to and receiving the stories of Jesus' practices, and by attempting to practice and live out the gestures of faith in community with others, we are transformed by the practice. For what at first seemed *unnatural* to one's selfish, individualistic lifestyle, becomes, through time and practice in the context of Christ's community, the very gestures that Christ practiced in this world, letting the world around him know that, indeed, this was and is the Son of God.

Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with rich examples of faith-filled gestures: there is the cliff-hanging scene of Abraham and young Isaac, when Abraham reached "out his hand and took the knife to kill his son" because Abraham was following through with what the Lord commanded (Genesis 22:10). Moses, commanded by God, with a raised arm or with a sweep of a hand called forth miraculous plagues to show Pharaoh who is God (Exodus 7-10). In the New Testament, there is the parable of the Good Samaritan who outwardly practices the grace-filled gesture of neighborly hospitality, who poured wine and oil on wounds, and bandaged them because he was so moved with pity (Luke 10). The practice of this gesture of hospitality is commonly referred to when anyone helps a stranger in need, as we exclaim that the helper is acting as a "Good Samaritan." There is Jesus, giving thanks to God while breaking bread and pouring the wine, all gestures of love and thanksgiving, with the explicit instructions for those who follow in his footsteps to repeat this gesture over bread and wine in community: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Such gestures of faith, hope, and love are possible because all of these people heard God's call to right action, and thus understood the importance of practicing these faith-filled, intentional, dramatic gestures in public. The Apostle Paul could also be included in this list of examples. He wrote the Philippians and the Thessalonians to learn and practice the gestures of a Christian life, with a certain sense of immediacy and urgency in his letters. Paul, having suffered prison for the act of proclaiming God's gospel, was now challenging Christians to learn to respond obediently to the call of God out of a spirit of thanksgiving. The gift of salvation will involve disciplined practice. "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me," writes Paul in Philippians. For if we do as Paul did, imitating him and the Lord as he tells the Thessalonians to do, practicing the peculiar gestures of Christ's body as he exhorted us to do, then we ought to live in harmony with others, learning always to welcome, admonish, greet, wait, be a servant, and bear one another's burdens. If we are at peace, confess our sins, pray, and have fellowship with one another, then we will know that the God of peace is with us. We must practice these primary gestures that Paul taught us about the Christian way, even though they are

awkward to us. The miracle is that in practicing these essential gestures of the Christian faith, doing what first appears strange and *unnatural*, repeating them over and over again in the company of other Christians, with our eyes fixed on God's Kingdom, these once awkward gestures will no longer seem so peculiar to Christian people. Instead, they will seem like second nature in the company of Christians who are called to follow the ways of God in Christ.

As we practice the peculiar gestures of Christ's people, we do so, having accepted the invitation and making our way to and living in the promise of the Kingdom of God. God has sent us people throughout time to demonstrate the peculiar gestures of being God's chosen. The children of Israel had Moses as their prophetic leader. We have Jesus, our Savior, who is the way to God the Father. And there is the Apostle Paul, who tirelessly reinforced all that Jesus taught and showed us. Breaking out of old habits is tough work, and in our response, we will do some of the most peculiar, awkward gestures that make us uncomfortable at first. But we keep on doing them as an act of thanksgiving for God's grace, knowing that these new gestures lead us to know Jesus better, helping us in the faraway land as we travel home to Zion, which gives us cause to do what Paul told us to do, in times of joy and sorrow: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say, rejoice!" And God must be smiling with father-like pride.