

Dangerous Prayers

John Wesley's Covenant Prayer, revised and updated by Rev. Jeremy Smith

I am not my own self-made, self-reliant human being.
In truth, O God, I am Yours.
Make me into what You will.
Make me a neighbor with those whom You will.
Guide me on the easy path for You.
Guide me on the rocky road for You.
Whether I am to step up for You or step aside for You;
Whether I am to be lifted high for You or brought low for You;
Whether I become full or empty, with all things or with nothing;
I give all that I have and all that I am for You.
So be it.
And may I always remember that you, O God, and I belong to each other.

On last week's Connection Card, I invited you to write down how you learned to pray. Who taught you, where you learned the practice of speaking to God. I asked because...well, we have to learn somewhere, right? Some of us grew up in families that were intentional about teaching us, with bedtime prayers or grace before meals. Some of us watched devout grandmothers who prayed as part of a daily routine of comfort. Some of us have listened to well-crafted publicly-spoken prayers in church and thought we were supposed to have that kind of eloquence at our disposal. And some of us got the message somewhere along the way that prayer can be casual, that God is as near as hands or feet, always ready for snatches of conversation.

But let's tell the truth. Talking to someone you can't see, pouring out your heart to someone who rarely answers audibly, is a little awkward. Addressing one-sided conversations to someone whose name is 'Creator of the Universe' can feel really intimidating. Even Jesus' disciples, after they'd watched him live in regular, intimate connection with God, didn't quite get it. 'What do you say in those conversations?' they asked Jesus. 'What words do you use?'

I've had the blessing in my life of listening to people who were not shy about speaking their prayers out loud and letting others overhear them. Some pastors, some writers and poets, some simply people whose faith I admire. They've let me listen to prayers they were not embarrassed to speak in public, even though they were deeply personal. And I'll tell you a secret: I often copy their thoughts in my prayers. I take the way they express their devotion, the posture they put themselves in, and I try to mirror it, like learning a new dance step.

Sometimes—and this is what works best for me—I study the prayers those people of faith have written down. I pour over those prayers; I take their words and mull them around inside of me. I mix them up with whatever is going on in my head and my heart at the moment, and then I wait for new words to come out. Literally, I paraphrase other people's prayers. This is how I have learned to put words to the connection between my life and who God is. And the good news is, there are hundreds, thousands, of those prayers to work from. The Book of Psalms in the

Hebrew Scriptures is 150 prayers all by itself. Rewriting those psalms, sometimes again and again, is a practice that could take you a long way into your own growth and connection to God.

Re-wording an ancient prayer is the practice that gave us the dangerous prayer we read a few minutes ago. This one was written by Jeremy Smith, who's a United Methodist pastor in Washington. He blogs at a site called *Hacking Christianity*. He's paraphrased a prayer that was originally written in 1780, by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. People always recognized in Wesley's *Covenant Prayer* something extraordinarily powerful. It's one of Wesley's best known pieces of writing, more memorable than most of his sermons. You've probably heard this prayer spoken and sung before; Dirk and Carol have used it as the frame for Starfire shows; it's the center of whole liturgies that we often use in the Methodist Church to mark the beginning of a new year.

Wesley's prayer in its original language is beautiful.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

But to our ears that language is stilted. All those *thine's* and *wilt's* were part of the English language when Wesley spoke it, but they aren't the way we talk today. And I need to hear this prayer in the language I speak so that it can grab me and shake me, so that I can hear its profound humility, its radical faith. I need this prayer to shape the way I see what's happening now in my life, and in the world. I think this prayer might just have the power to change something. To change me.

There's a technique for reading Scripture, the Bible, that is designed to startle us, to open our eyes so that we can see something we haven't seen before. Just like re-phrasing old prayers, reading this way is a way of sloughing off extra layers of religious language and foreign context that fuzz up the Bible's meaning. It unburies the sharp point of what we're meant to see. Here's how it works. You pick up your Bible and take it somewhere you wouldn't normally do spiritual stuff; and then you sit down and read. You don't try to blank out the sights, sounds, smells, people around you; you put them right up next to the words. Read "He leads me beside still waters" in the middle of an airport. Read "You cannot serve God and wealth" outside a Tiffany's store, or sitting in the lobby of a bank. Read "they shall mount up with wings like eagles" while you're visiting someone in a nursing home. (You can't do these things now, of course, but soon!) The idea is to create an experience where the Bible's words can startle you the way they were supposed to, disorient the way you thought God had accommodated himself to the world.

I want to try something similar with Wesley's *Covenant Prayer* this morning. Sitting exactly where you are now, I invite you to hear and join this prayer in the context of your life, today.

Imagine yourself in Washington, DC this coming week, perhaps standing right beside the new President of this divided, conflict-ridden United States as he is being sworn into office, and you hear these words:

(Pastor Jeremy)

I am not my own self-made, self-reliant human being.
In truth, O God, I am Yours.
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Make me a neighbor with those whom You will.
Guide me on the easy path for You.
Guide me on the rocky road for You.
Whether I am to step up for You or step aside for You;
Whether I am to be lifted high for You or brought low for You;
Whether I become full or empty, with all things or with nothing;
I give all that I have and all that I am for You.
So be it.
And may I always remember that you, O God, and I belong to each other.
Amen

Imagine yourself praying in the face of a diagnosis you did not want to hear, of cancer, or perhaps Covid.

(Pastor Jeong)

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Amen

Imagine you're invested in a new vision and purpose for your life. Maybe you see yourself as a changemaker. Maybe you are leading something that *should* make a difference; you have risked something big for an outcome that is not at all certain.

(Pastor Sam)

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Amen

(Pastor Kathi)

This is me, having said out loud that I will retire in June of 2022, leave the work I know how to do, the community I have loved, the position that has told me who I am; because I sense that my life is beckoning me toward something not yet fully visible.

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And may I always remember that you, O God, and I belong to each other.
Amen

(Pastor Dirk)

And this is us, the LAUMC congregation, knowing that an uninvited change is coming, not yet sure what the future will look like. A little bit sad, a little bit afraid.

We are not our own self-made, self-reliant human beings.
In truth, O God, we are Yours.
Make us into what You will.
Make us neighbors with those whom You will.
Guide us on the easy path for You.
Guide us on the rocky road for You.
Whether we are to step up for You or step aside for You;
Whether we are to be lifted high for You or brought low for You;
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So be it.
And may we always remember that you, O God, and we belong to each other.
Amen

This prayer isn't so much about asking God for something as it is about assuming a posture. It's an offering of ourselves, a willingness to trust that whatever ledge we are standing on, whatever edge we are asked to approach, we will go, because the One who holds us will not let *us* go.

May it be so for you. May it be so for us.