

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
Life Lesson from Luke: Praying  
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1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 11:1-13

I was coming around the corner on one of my daily walks when I spotted the deer. There was a large buck and a large doe standing in my front yard. My first thought was not about the fact they had probably just eaten whatever flowers might have been growing there. My first thought was about what magnificent animals they were and perhaps I ought to take a picture. However, before I could lift the camera from my pocket, they were off like horses breaking from the gate and headed straight toward me. I was a bit shocked at their direction until I saw who was behind them. It was Henry. Henry is the large labradoodle that lives across the street. He had spotted the deer and the hunt was on. Then right behind Henry was Henry's boy, Wensley who was running almost as fast. That moment was one of contemplation that just when we think we have domesticated our animals, Henry, not the deer, something happens to remind us that our animals are more than pets. They are at heart still wild and dangerous...hunters just waiting for the right moment.

That image kept coming back to me this week as I read the story of Jesus' teaching on prayer. It occurred to me just how much we have domesticated this prayer. We pray it every Sunday, sometimes with all the depth of a grocery list. Our Father who art in heaven, don't let me forget the avocados. As I have told you in some past sermons, this was the bedtime prayer in my house. My mom would pray it with each of us before we slumbered off. But what if...what if...this domesticated prayer is just as wild and dangerous as Henry? What if this prayer is just waiting to be set free to change us and to change the world? Let me explain what I mean.

This is a wild and dangerous prayer. This is a dangerous prayer because we are praying for the Kingdom of God to be made a reality here on earth. I am not sure what most of us have in mind when we pray for the Kingdom of God, but it would require a radical reorganization of the world if it were to come. Our current economic structure with billionaires at the top and a billion impoverished people in the world would no longer be the way of the world. Instead there would be a sharing of all resources so that no child went hungry, no family went homeless, and no nation sent its armed forces to oppress others based on the whim of a single leader. The world would become what my wife, Cindy, calls "Star Trek World," in which there is not only enough for all but that what is available is shared. That is a wild and dangerous image.

This is a wild and dangerous prayer. This is a dangerous prayer because we pray for our daily bread. I realize that many of you may be wondering, John, how in the world can praying for our daily bread possibly be dangerous? The answer is that this part of the prayer strikes at the center of the human ego and banishes the myth of self-reliance, and the human tendency to believe that we are the captains of our own ships and the masters of our own destinies. One of the great myths that we humans tell ourselves, is that we don't really need God. Or we only need God in emergencies like the fire hose with the words on the glass cover, break in case of emergencies. Other than that, we see ourselves as independent of God and therefore independent of others. We are islands of personal sufficiency. But the moment we pray,

“God give us our daily bread,” we are admitting that we are not in control. We are admitting that we need God and all that God gives, which forces us into humility and gratitude. This is a wild and dangerous prayer.

This is a wild and dangerous prayer. This is a wild and dangerous prayer because when we pray for God to forgive our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us, we run the risk of forcing ourselves to cease judging. What do I mean? I mean that part of human nature is judging others. We look out at the world and decide who is worthy; worthy of God’s love; worthy of our love; worthy of a good job or benefits; worthy of being seen as a human being; worthy to be treated well or poorly. This judgment then causes us to look down on certain people and blame them for all the ills of the world...while we know we don’t deserve any blame because we are inherently worthy. All this comes apart when we ask for forgiveness. When we ask for forgiveness, we realize that maybe we are not as worthy as we had assumed; that we are those who live by grace, just like all other human beings. This is a wild and dangerous prayer because it forces us to cease judging others.

This is a wild and dangerous prayer. This is a dangerous prayer because we ask God not to bring us to the time of trial. This is dangerous because it forces us to see that God is not any more domesticated than Henry. What I mean by that is that often God becomes no more than a giant Santa Claus in the sky, allowing us to sit on his spiritual knees and ask for whatever we want. This is a comfortable God. This is a domesticated God that we guide and direct more than who guides and directs us. But when we pray that God not lead us to a time of trial we are opening the door for a wild and dangerous God to emerge; a God who might push us to our limits; a God who might call us to work for this Kingdom that God is bringing; who might call us to forgive those whom we don’t want to forgive; to admit that we need God. God might call us to work for peace and justice even when it is uncomfortable. This is a wild and dangerous prayer, but the most wild and dangerous thing is about to come, and that is the end of this section of Luke’s story.

What I have noticed about this section of the passage, verses 5-13, is that the church has tended to disconnect it from the previous section containing Jesus' model prayer. We talk about the Lord’s prayer and then we talk about constancy in prayer as if they are completely disconnected. The church has wanted to see this portion of the prayer as saying, if you are willing to pray hard enough, and long enough, God will give you what you ask, including perhaps, even raising someone from the dead as Elijah did. I would argue that that is a mistake. I would argue that Jesus and Luke linked these statements for a reason. The reason is that we are not supposed to spend all our time praying for stuff, but that we are to pray for the things that he taught. I say this because the Kingdom, daily bread, forgiveness, and trials were at the heart of his ministry. For in fact, in Jesus, the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world. In Jesus people were being fed and Jesus asked his followers to feed others on his behalf. In Jesus people were being forgiven and we were to forgive. In Jesus, people were being put in uncomfortable places for the Kingdom of God. We are to continuously pray these prayers so that God will bring them about in our lives.

We are called to pray. The challenge for each of us is to pray Jesus’ wild and dangerous prayer so that we might be transformed, and that the world would be transformed through us. My challenge for all of us this week is this, to ask ourselves, am I willing to pray this wild and dangerous prayer, and allow God to answer it?