Sunday, March 18, 1984
WHAT ABOUT PRAYER IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?
Matthew 6:1-8

Although last Sunday I began a series of sermons for this season of Lent based on some of the miracle stories from the life of Jesus, I'm going to depart from that series for this one Sunday to deal with a subject that has been in the news almost every day for the past two weeks and in the news periodically since the Supreme Court decision of 1962, which said in effect that state laws that called for government-organized prayer sessions in public schools are unconstitutional.

In fact, in the present debate about prayer in public schools, most people seem to have forgotten what the Supreme Court said and why. The Board of Regents of the State of New York in 1951 drafted a prayer which was to be used each morning in the public school of that state. Not long after that, five parents in New Hyde Park, New York, protested the action on the grounds that prescribing such a prayer violated the first amendment and the 14th amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The case was heard in the Court of Appeals of the State of New York and finally in the U.S. Supreme Court.

In part, the decision of the Supreme Court of the U.S. said in 1962, "The constitutional prohibition against respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that in this country it is no business of the government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as part of a religious program carried on by government..."

Note especially that the Supreme Court did not say that individuals could not pray in public schools or other places. The Court said that no agency of the state or any of its subdivisions like school boards have any business drafting or prescribing prayers that must be used. In other words, the state cannot require religious devotion in any form.

Now, why do a sermon on this subject of prayer in schools? Because I believe that some very important religious issues are involved, as well as some very important political issues. And I also believe that no matter how well-meaning and sincere the supporters of a constitutional amendment which would allow group prayer in public schools as part of the regular daily schedule, that there are some implications which are dangerous and need to be faced. Thus, I am opposed to any constitutional amendment which would seek to provide for any kind of school-sponsored religious observances.

First, I'm opposed because such an amendment is not needed and will do more harm than good. It cannot be said enough, regardless of what President Reagan and other proponents of the so-called "prayer amendment" maintain, no Supreme Court decision has ever removed God or religion from the public schools. The carefully drafted opinions y the court on these matters do not keep a student from exercising his or her human or constitutional right to pray silently or orally at any time in the school day, so long as that praying does not disrupt educational activities. They do not prohibit individuals from saying "grace" before lunch. They do not prevent study of religion as an important force in American history and in American culture.

I personally get very irritated with some of the statements made by politicians and others, as, for example, when President Reagan said in a speech recently to the National Association of

Evangelicals, “I firmly believe that the loving God who has blessed our land and made us a good and caring people should never have been expelled from America’s classrooms.”

The God I believe in and which Jesus Christ revealed cannot be expelled from anywhere by anyone. Such statements teach a very limited and narrow concept of God, and need to be exposed for what they are — political rhetoric for the purpose of gaining votes — but they have nothing to do with the facts.

Proponents of the prayer amendment have even made such outrageous statements as “the absence of prayer in public schools is the cause of such social evils as drug abuse and sexual promiscuity.” One congressman charged dramatically that the rate of teenage suicides began to climb at approximately the same time that the schools were withdrawn from prayer two decades ago.” Most schools in this country never had prayer as a part of their activity, even before the supreme court decision.

And then Tom Landry, football coach, made the ridiculous statement, “The Supreme Court took God out of every part of our life except Church.” And Coach Joe Gibbs, another religious expert, said, “A constitutional amendment is needed to put God back in his right place in our lives.” Not only is such a statement absurd, but the implications of it are dangerous. That kind of statement calls for the power of government to enforce religious practice. It’s what’s happening in an extreme way in Iran right now, and it always results in terrible persecution. Such statements make a mockery of God and religious faith.

I believe the present debate in congress over a so-called “prayer amendment” is a massive waste of time, particularly when there are pressing issues facing our country. Why we in the United States, the refuge of all religious sects, would want to get into a constitutional argument over prayer in public schools is a mystery. Yet supposedly a Gallup poll last September showed that 81% of respondents who had followed the issue supported such a prayer amendment, while only 14% opposed it. Less than 40% of Americans attend a church regularly, so one could conclude that we want the public schools to take over yet another family and church responsibility.

One news commentator recently wrote, “The Senate debate on prayer in the public schools is almost enough to make a person give up religion for Lent.”

Martin Marty, theologian and church historian, recently wrote: “The arguments presented in the Senate did little more than repeat the House Judiciary Committee hearings on school prayer in 1964. The current round, however, is distinguished by the incivility and ugliness of the debate. It’s less to do with religion than with who is the good American and who isn’t. Lebanon does it with guns. We do it with words. So, this debate which is supposed to bring concord into American life by getting us to think of spiritual things, is rending the fabric of social life.”

Time Magazine reported this week that Joann Bell and Lucille Mc Cord visited the capital to relate at a press conference what happened to them three years ago in Little Axe, Oklahoma, when they filed suit against a “voluntary” prayer program that they thought was coercive. A week after they filed the complaint, Bell’s car was surrounded by an angry crowd and a school cafeteria employee pulled her out of the vehicle, dislocating her arm. Mc Cord said her three sons were humiliated by teachers and beaten up by other children on the school playground. Both families moved to the town of Harrah 20 miles away.

Second, I'm opposed to the proposed amendments for religious reasons. I respect the power and importance of prayer and the role it plays in the lives of millions of people in this country and in our society. And I firmly believe that spiritual nurturing is the responsibility of the family and of religious institutions, particularly the churches, the synagogues, and the institutions of other religious, be they Buddhist, or Moslem, or Hindu.

When the public schools or other public institutions get involved, religion is often brought down to the lowest common denominator so that no one is offended. Or, if people of one type of religion are in an overwhelming majority in an area or school district, then that brand of religion is used as the basis for the prayers, and the religious minorities are offended or overlooked. Religion either becomes so bland it is almost useless or meaningless (a kind of polite nod to God), or it becomes so particular or sectarian that it is divisive.

If a prayer amendment were passed, think of what might happen. If a school district is mostly Buddhist, then a Buddhist prayer might be used, and the Southern Baptists would be offended. If a school district is mostly Mormon, then a Mormon prayer might be used, and the Lutherans would be offended. Pray in Jesus' name and the Jews would be offended.

I don't want a local school board or a principal or a classroom teacher defining prayer. Yet if prayer is to be used as a regular part of the everyday curriculum, someone has to define it or decide what's going to be used.

There's already too much misinformation and misunderstanding as to what prayer is without adding more to the confusion.

What bothers me most of all from a religious point of view is that the way prayer will necessarily be carried out in a public school setting might very well drive more people away from developing a meaningful prayer life as they continue to grow and mature. Too many people already believe that prayer is a kind of magic which can cause God to do something special for them. Too many people already believe that prayer is simply a certain formula or saying some words that happen to mention God's name. True prayer is much more listening than talking. It is an attitude; it is paying attention and becoming attuned to the spiritual within us and around us. It is a way of life.

Prescribed prayer of whatever kind is too much like the false piety which Jesus warned us against. He said in the sermon on the mount: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from God. When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your God in secret. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases, like some who think they will be heard for their many words."

Unfortunately, I believe the issue of prayer in public schools is being used by people for political gain. It's an appeal to popular piety and has little to do with true religion.

The prophet Amos spoke about such things in his time as recorded in the book of Amos in the Old Testament of the Bible. Amos noted that people around him, including those in power, were very much concerned with the forms of religion. They were concerned that people properly carry out religious rituals, but at the same time justice and mercy were lacking.

Said Amos, God is not concerned with such false piety. God says, “I hate, I despise your feats, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps, I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream.”

Prayer in the public school won’t make this country any more truly religious in the right sense of that word, or any more religious than it has been in the past. One great mark of our religion has always been this country’s tolerance of, indeed, our insistence on diversity. The instrument of this tolerance has been the firm distinction between matters of state and matters of conscience.

Thus, contending Protestant denominations have all flourished in the United States. So have Roman Catholics, Jews, Moslems, all believers, and also non-believers. Because these groups have refrained from imposing their faiths on each other and have been constitutionally restrained whenever they lost that restraint, this has made America the envy of every other society.

The Supreme Court has been the faithful custodiam of this essential freedom. In the most difficult effort to find the line between state and faith, it has rightly prevented the government-paid schoolteacher from pressing children who are required to attend classes to pray or read the Bible there. For us to continue to stand by that principle in no way demeans religious practice for anyone. Rather I believe it will continue to strengthen the overall religious values of this nation and of most of our citizens.

If people truly want to learn to pray, let them come to the churches. I am willing to hold classes on prayer every day of the week. Amen.