

Random Thoughts and Educated Guesses
Revelation 1:1-8
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 12, 2007

Tony Campolo is a gifted speaker, a distinguished professor, and a deeply committed Christian. He is an author of many books. He has counseled presidents. But as the grandson of Cirino Carlentini, I can't ignore the fact that his most important attribute just may be that he is Italian. Anyone who has a name ending in a vowel is all right by me. Anyway, this talented *piasano* has suggested that, "For every complex problem there is a simple, easy-to-understand answer *that is wrong*."¹ I really like that. Tony is very concerned about the tendency of our society to seek bumper sticker solutions to this country's many ills, to look for simple answers to complex problems. Take the many problems faced by our young people, for instance. He reminds us that they live in a culture in which drugs and violence are an accepted part of life, where teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases continue to rise at an alarming rate, and where crimes done by and to youth are almost epidemic. Gun violence and gang activity in Omaha, of all places, is at an all time high—and it is only a matter of time before its effects are felt right here in Elkhorn. Growing up is tough almost anywhere. Today's young people face dilemmas that most of us adults can't even begin to imagine. We all want something to be done to right the ship. What is the solution? Mimicking the attitude of so many across our country, Tony says, "Well, let's just put prayer back into public school." Right?

It may surprise you to learn that, along with my fellow spaghetti-bender, I think that approach may be a bit off the mark. And so does our United Methodist Church. Now before you get upset and tune me out, give me a chance to explain. First and foremost, I believe in prayer. Our Doctrinal Standards affirm that for United Methodists, "'Life in the Spirit' involves diligent use of the means of grace such as praying, fasting, attending upon the sacraments, and inward searching in solitude."² If we are going to lead a successful Christian life, prayer needs to be a vital part of it. I like what Richard Foster

¹ Tony Campolo, *Is Jesus a Republican or Democrat?*, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1995, p. 66

² The 2004 United Methodist Book of Discipline, Paragraph 101, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, p. 43

has written. One of the great spiritual writers of our day, he has said that God wants us to come home. Foster writes that God “invites us into the living room of his heart...the dining room of his strength...the study of his wisdom...the workshop of his creativity...and the bedroom of his rest.”³ It is in the home we find in God, Foster tells us, that we can be completely ourselves. It is in the home of God, he writes, where we can know and be known to the fullest. It is a place large enough for all of us. And the key to God’s home is nothing more or nothing less than prayer.

Now in case you didn’t hear, please listen again: I believe in prayer. So does our church. It has been the bedrock of the life of faith ever since Abraham and Sarah took those first few fearful steps out of Haran and began their journey to the new land and life that God had promised. Moses prayed. Jeremiah prayed. Jesus prayed. In addition to regular daily prayer, our Lord and Savior often found the need to find that place apart, to fall to his knees, and to lose himself in the world of prayer. Throughout time, prayer has been the pathway to the heart of God. It is through prayer that we come home. There is nothing more essential to the lives of faithful men and women than prayer. I even believe that students need to pray—even on those days when they don’t have tests. But is putting prayer “back” into public school the answer to our country’s many ills?

It probably won’t surprise you to learn that, as a United Methodist pastor, I rather like what our United Methodist Church has to say about this issue. Within our Social Principles, we find these important words:

“The state should not use its authority to promote particular religious beliefs (including atheism), nor should it require prayer or worship in public schools, but it should leave students free to practice their own religious convictions. The state should not prohibit the free exercise of voluntary prayer in public schools or at other public occasions. It is vital that we not misinterpret the rightful separation of church and state as the abolition of all religious expressions from public view.”⁴

³ Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp. 1-2

⁴ The United Methodist Book of Discipline, Paragraph 164C, op. cit. p. 119

Our United Methodist Church makes a very important distinction with that statement, one that I hope every one of you heard very clearly. While we oppose the imposition of mandatory, school-sponsored prayer, we enthusiastically affirm the right of all students to voluntarily pray at anytime during the school day. Once again, I hope that you heard that. Unfortunately, in our headline-grabbing world, there are those who seize upon the first part of that statement and then pompously proclaim that our denomination is far too liberal for its own good. Those individuals and groups piously moan that The United Methodist Church has strayed from its historic moorings. Yet if those people were honest with the facts, and if you listened to them closely, then I believe that everyone would and should arrive at a completely different conclusion. Let me try to explain.

United Methodists believe that any attempt to put prayer “back” in public schools has two major problems. First, as already mentioned, we feel that is a simplistic answer to a complex problem. The General Rules of our denomination clearly affirm the importance of prayer. Yet to imply that the issues of school violence, student mental health, a rampant drug culture, the influence of the media, the brokenness of the family, the stress of terrorism’s threat, the effects that a consumer society place upon students of all economic situations, and the unbelievable pressure that so many parents place on their children can all be solved by a short prayer or a moment of silence at the beginning of the school day is naïve at best. We face many difficult problems in our country, some of which have roots that reach back long before the Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s. While a time of prayer or a moment of silence in the classroom might strike a popular chord with many, not to mention garner votes for those who support it, it ultimately fails to address the many difficult situations that our young people are forced to face every single day of their lives.

Yet that is only the beginning. The second and perhaps more important problem that United Methodists have with the movement to put prayer “back” in school is one that often gets swept under the rug by those who yell so loudly. Before we get to that, however, I want to go back to that passage you heard read from the Revelation of John.

That passage was not read to be a proof text for this or any other specific issue, but to remind us of the context in which it was written. The early Christians lived in difficult times. The policies and practices of the Roman Empire did not always make it easy to be a person of faith. As a matter of fact, it was downright dangerous. It was illegal to worship Christ. Christians were the persecuted minority in the land in which they had no choice but to live. Yet while it was the Roman Empire in which they were forced to reside, John's Revelation reminded them that their ultimate loyalty lay somewhere else. And it was that ultimate loyalty to "the one who is and who was and who is to come" that gave them an entirely different perspective on how to relate to the Empire. They were "resident aliens," as one has put it; citizens of the coming kingdom of Christ who were forced to live in the present kingdom of Caesar. And their clear calling during that time of waiting was not to alter the laws of Caesar, but to offer the love of Christ—a love that had the power to hasten that day when "every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

That understanding was important then and it is just as important now. As United Methodist Christians, we unashamedly confess that our ultimate loyalty and allegiance belongs to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. That comes before everything else. That loyalty and allegiance gives us both a present task and a future hope. It also helps us to recognize that until that kingdom finally comes "on earth as it is in heaven," we must practice our faith as residents of the country in which we live—just as those early Christians had to do in the various countries in which they lived. And living as a resident of this country, there are certain laws that govern us. The Supreme Court has been very clear in its decisions. It is only mandatory, school-sponsored prayer that has been prohibited. The logic of the court is clear. As the First Amendment Center states: "Teachers and school administrators, when acting in those capacities, are representatives of the state and are prohibited by the Establishment clause from soliciting or encouraging religious activity, and from participating in such activity with students."⁵ If our educators are to be servants of all the people, which seems to me is what we all want them to be, if they are going to

⁵ [Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org), found at the www.firstamendmentcenter.org website, p. 128

create an environment in which all students are free to learn and grow, then they cannot favor the values or beliefs of one group over another.

For better or worse, we live in a country in which a multitude of religions and cultures exist. As a matter of fact, the United States is the most religiously diverse society on earth and, among developed countries, is the most religious. I did some checking the other day. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 79.8% Americans identified themselves as Christian. That is 8.5% down from 1990, when 88.3% of us identified ourselves as Christian. Of that 2000 total, 25.9% are Roman Catholic, 17.2% are Baptist, and 8.2% are some form of Methodist or another. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Mormons and the like all fall in line somewhere behind us. Now of those Americans who do not identify with Christianity, 1.8% are Jewish, 0.6% are Muslim, and 0.5% are Buddhist. A long list of other religions makes up the rest. Then there is that full 15% of our citizens who not identify with any religion at all. And the vast majority of all these Americans send their children to public school. Now which religion gets to offer their prayer in school? Is it simply a matter of who has the biggest numbers? Christians have the most so do they “win?” Is that how a democracy works? I like what my Italian brother writes: “A democracy is not so much the rule of the majority as it is a society where it is safe to be in the minority.”⁶

Yet even the very real concern over who gets to pray what kind of prayer may be a red herring. What is even more important to understand about the issue, and that which our church clearly recognizes, is that while the courts have forbid teachers and school administrators from conducting religious exercises in school, they have just as clearly upheld the right of students to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during lunch or any other non-instructional time of the day. There are no laws on the books that forbid a student from living out his or her faith in the public school. Any student is free to say a silent prayer before school begins or to say grace before lunch. The Equal Access Act passed in 1984 and reaffirmed many times by the courts since then allows student religious groups at public high schools the same right of access

⁶ Tony Campolo, op. cit., p. 68

to those facilities as other student groups. Student-led groups are free to gather before or after the school day for prayer, Bible study, or worship. From what I know about our own community, students at Elkhorn High are invited on a regular basis to become a part of Campus Life, join the local Fellowship of Christian Athletes huddle, or “Rally ‘Round the Pole.” I think it is rather dishonest for those who try to take advantage of the situation for whatever reason to fail to acknowledge that. While an official prayer time cannot be scheduled into the school day, students have always been free to live out their faith as they receive their education. As a pastor, I want to encourage all of the students in this room this morning to do just that. I want to encourage every one of them to live every day of their lives in such a way that the love of Jesus Christ shines through them. And I hope all of their parents and grandparents will encourage them to do the same.

I am a product of the Omaha Public Schools. Whatever you think of my ability to think and speak clearly, well, I guess you can blame it on the teachers at Mount View Elementary, Nathan Hale Junior High, and Benson High School—the home, of course, of the Mighty Benson Bunnies. (“Beware of the Hare!”) In the 13 years I attended public school, the only time I ever remember being asked to pray was on November 23, 1963. Right after lunch my teacher came into the classroom with tears streaming down her face, told us that President Kennedy had just been assassinated, asked us to bow our heads, and then led us in prayer. At no other time do I ever remember being asked to pray.

But that does not mean that prayer was not an important part of my life—both in and out of school. My parents, you see, taught my brother, sister, and me of its importance. My church reminded me of its value. And when my 9th grade coach asked me to throw my 98 lb. bony body in front of that 220 lb. on-coming, head-lowered fullback, you can bet that prayer became a very integral part of my life. Faith is not something that can be taught like math. Religious and moral values are not that which can be legislated into a person’s life. The advantage that prayer gives to life can only be understood by our young people when they see it lived and hear it shared by those they love and respect. Parents and grandparents, you may have taught your children and grandchildren the trick of casting a fishing line or the secret of throwing a fastball, but if

you have not taught your young ones to pray, then you have not done your job. If you think that a prayer at the beginning of the school day will help your young person get a better handle on life, then get your family up 15 minutes early, sit around the breakfast table, and pray with them. If you are unable to do that, then bring them here. I get to church every morning at 7:00. I would be honored to pray with your young person. They won't even have to bring a sharpened No. 2 pencil for me to do so! And if you and your family want to get the school year started off on the right foot, then I invite all of you—students, teachers, parents, and grandparents—to attend our “Back to School Blessing” on August 21, a week from this Tuesday evening.

“For every complex problem, there is a simple easy-to-understand answer that is wrong.” As strange as it may sound coming from your pastor and our church, “Let's just put mandatory, school-sponsored, teacher-led prayer back in public schools” is one of those wrong answers. It's not the regulation of law but the imitation of Christ that changes lives. But that's not to say that it isn't important to pray. No one has or ever will be able to take either prayer or God out of our schools. No one can ever prevent you from living your faith. Next week we are going to talk about how to do that in school. We are going to do it in a most unusual manner. I hope that you will attend. Until then, let us pray: