

Double Standard: Praying Coach Pays the Price for Following Jesus

High school football coach Joe Kennedy was fired for praying and now he wants his job back.

Kennedy, a former Marine Corps gunnery sergeant, has filed a federal lawsuit against the Bremerton School District in Washington State, claiming he was let go because of his religious beliefs.

The school district has yet to respond to the lawsuit.

“They fired him for praying,” said Michael Berry, the coach’s attorney. Berry is with First Liberty Institute, one of the nation’s largest law firms handling religious liberty cases.

“If a school can do this to someone like Coach Kennedy, they can do it to anybody,” Berry told me.

The coach is not asking for a single penny in his lawsuit—he just wants his job back.

“All we really want for him—is to be back on the sideline coaching those kids—and nothing more,” Berry said.

Here’s the back story:

Since 2008, Coach Kennedy has taken a knee at the 50-yard line at the conclusion of every football game to offer a brief, quiet prayer of thanksgiving—for player safety, sportsmanship and spirited competition.

The coach’s petition to the Almighty usually lasted about 30 seconds. He did not proselytize nor did he compel players or anyone else to participate. In other words, it was just a

private prayer, not a Billy Graham Crusade.

He was inspired to pray after watching *Facing the Giants*, a faith-based film about a high school football team.

“Coach Kennedy made a covenant with God that he would give thanks through prayer, at the end of each game, for what the players had accomplished and for the opportunity to be part of their lives through the game of football,” the lawsuit states.

Over time, some of the teenage players asked if they could join him in prayer and the coach replied, “This is a free country. You can do what you want.”

The lawsuit also points out that other coaches engaged in religious expression at the beginning and the end of football games. The lawsuit specifically mentioned David Boynton, an assistant coach who delivered a Buddhist chant near the 50-yard line.

“Coach Boynton has never been suspended, let alone dismissed, on the basis of his religious expression,” the lawsuit states.

It’s not quite clear what led to the school district’s investigation, but on Sept. 17, 2015, Coach Kennedy received a letter informing him that the district was conducting an inquiry into a policy regarding “religious-related activities and practices.”

The district directed the coach to refrain from praying around students—or doing anything that might cause people to think he was praying. He was forbidden from bowing his head or kneeling too.

However, Coach Kennedy chose to defy the district’s demands, and on Oct. 23, 2015, he walked out to the 50-yard line after the football game and prayed. On Oct. 28, 2015 the coach was placed on paid administrative leave and banned from participating in the football program.

"The District stated it had placed Coach Kennedy on administrative leave because he 'engaged in overt, public religious displays on the football field while on duty as a coach,'" the lawsuit states.

In November 2015, Coach Kennedy received a poor performance evaluation—after years of receiving stellar performance reviews.

The evaluation recommended that the coach not be rehired "based on his alleged failure to follow District policy regarding religious expression, and his alleged failure to supervise students after games."

In January 2016, Coach Kennedy's contract was not renewed.

Attorney Berry said they tried to reach out to the school district on a number of occasions but the district's attorney declined to meet.

So on Jan. 30, 2016 the coach filed a discrimination charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In June the Department of Justice issued a right-to-sue letter.

Coach Kennedy told me he has no regrets.

"I wouldn't do anything differently," he said. "I've always taught my guys to stand up for what they believe in—even if it's not popular."

Coach Kennedy is also leading by example—demonstrating that sometimes there is a price to pay for doing the right thing. But as we learned in Sunday school, good will eventually triumph over evil.

And I suspect there are lots of folks in Bremerton who would rather stand alongside a Christian Marine Corps veteran than a bunch of godless school district bureaucrats.

One final note—I really wish the Bremerton school

superintendent would return my telephone calls because there's a question I'd like him to answer:

If it's OK for a Buddhist coach to pray at a football game, why can't a Christian coach pray?