

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sometime around 2011 or 2012, I read a book by Kenda Creasy Dean entitled *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, 2010). Dr Dean is the Mary D. Synnott Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her book was addressing a problem that we have when it comes to youth ministry. The problem is called *Moral Therapeutic Deism* which she defines as a “background set of assumptions about religion in American culture” that are “culturally and civically shared” in sort of an “interpersonal equivalent to American civil religion.”¹

Does this set of spiritual beliefs sound familiar?

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.²

¹ “A Conversation with Kenda Creasy Dean” page 2, from the website Resources for American Christianity <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org> accessed on September 7, 2019.

² Summary from *Moral Therapeutic Deism* at wikipedia.com accessed on September 7, 2019

These are all good sentiments for the most part, but these sentiments fall far short of the Orthodox Christian Faith as passed down through the centuries. It is a “homogenized” outlook about God and religion that is intended to avoid conflict. It’s a view that tells us that faith is something that is nice to have, but that it’s not really necessary to my life. It’s also a view that isn’t really isolated to our children and our youth, it’s an idea that is reflected in the way that we adults view our faith as well. So, in reality, it’s “the faith” as we are passing it on to our children... and it doesn’t hold up in practice.

Really, it’s not a new problem. John Wesley commented upon a faith without depth in at least two of his sermons: *The Almost Christian* (1741) and *The More Excellent Way* (1787). And other church fathers have spoken out about shallow, inconsequential, almost secular faith... faith that doesn’t require much of us. The kind of faith that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was speaking of before World War II when he talked about cheap grace.

Some Christian leaders would tell you that there is a threat to Christian faith here in America. They see it in the decline in church attendance and a decline in the number of people, especially young people, who declare that they have no religious affiliation, as we have seen in the Pew Research Center’s surveys on Religion and Public Life. But I believe that the biggest threat to the Christian faith in America is not secularism or the growing number of “nones” and “dones” (folks who have given up on religion for one reason or another). Rather, the biggest threat to vibrant faith is nominal Christianity. Shallow and noncommittal faith does not breed vital believers and congregations. Martin Thielen quotes one young man as saying, “If all my religion is going to change is my Sunday schedule, then I’m not interested. I want something that is going to change my finances, miser life, the way I work, the way I treat my family, the way I treat others, and the way that I use my time.”³

³ A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C. Kelley, Jessica Miller, Ed, (2016). Louisville: Westminster John Knox, p 287.

This young man understands something important. Authentic faith impacts every part of our lives: how we spend our money; how we work; how we treat our family, our friends, our co-workers; how we use our time. Authentic faith impacts how we treat the environment, how we treat the poor, and how we treat the stranger among us. Authentic faith impacts our character, ethics, and values. Christian disciples are called to take their faith extremely seriously.⁴

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is demanding all of us. He is demanding all of our effort and all of our being. He tells us to count the cost of discipleship. He's not telling anyone that it's going to be easy. He's not acting like a used car salesman trying to convince us that this Christian life is going to be all simple and rosy. He's not promising a rose garden to anyone. As God in the flesh, He is demanding that if we want to be disciples, then nothing less than loving and serving him with all of our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength will suffice. Jesus who is about to give his all for us is making it plain that we can give no less than our all for him if we want to be his disciples.

Now, I think it's fair to say that in this passage, he is especially aiming this parable at those who hanging out and following him around from place to place as he is ministering among the people. Just like with the rich young ruler, Jesus is saying that "if you want to be closest to me, then you need to understand that the cost for doing so is significant. There is no such thing as fair. weather disciples. And there will be no giving up when the going gets tough. All in is the only way in if you want to be with me."

So, how do we combat nominal faith? How do we attract people to go all in for Jesus?

I agree with Dr Dean that the church should "intentionally and thoughtfully build people's lives around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁵ If

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Conversation, p 3.

we say that we follow Jesus, then we need to build communities that show us what that looks like. I think that there are some things that y'all have been doing here at McFarland that are moving in that direction. The Free Store and the Wednesday night supper and bible study came about because y'all decided that you needed to put up or shut up about being in ministry to the community. The connections with the Rossville schools and the summer reading program, Rossville Reads are extensions of that same desire to live out and share the faith. And I have heard a youngish adult comment that these programs are attractive to them and their contemporaries because it shows that we are willing to be "doers of the word, and not just hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22, NRSV).

But we cannot rest on our laurels. I know that we are getting older. I know that it is exhausting. But, we cannot give up. We cannot concede. We must continually search for God's guidance through prayer and participation in whatever new thing there is that God is doing here in Rossville and the surrounding community. And we need to keep inviting people to be a part of that work, inviting them to join us as we strive to authentically live out our faith in Jesus, the living Word.

And, we must be willing to do the courageous thing, not necessarily the easiest thing. Yes, there is a cost to discipleship. But there are incredible rewards, including a life of meaning, purpose, service, and vitality.

I once heard a story about a seventh-grade girl in Texas. She ran on the junior-high girls' track team at her school. Due to bad weather an important Saturday track meet got postponed to the next Saturday. However, this girl had already committed to be on a church mission trip on that Saturday. She went to her track coach and told him about the conflict. The coach told her, "your teammates are counting on you, and you can't let them down. You are either here for the tack meet, or you can turn in your uniform." After many tears and

much deliberation, she went to her coach, handed him her uniform, and walked away. That evening she explained her decision to her family. She said, “this is about God. And God is more important than sports.”

This seventh-grade girl gets it. She gets the point of discipleship. She understands that faith is primary and our commitment to God outweighs every other priority in our life. She decided to be “all in” and she paid the price for that decision. For her, God offered not a proposition to believe in, but a relationship to experience.

Over the next few months we will be exploring how disciples live out their faith. As we explore together, I hope that we will decide to be “all in” too.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.