

**7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 20, 2011
4 PM & 5:30 PM Liturgies**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

I am reading a scary book right now. It's called *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. It is written by Professor Kendra Dean from Princeton Theological Seminary and is a reflection on a survey taken a few years ago about adolescent spirituality in America. Both this book and the original survey make for very sobering reading. You will see in a minute why I thought of the book after pondering this week's liturgy readings.

There is a sociological fact that has not changed at all over time—perhaps not really changed in centuries. Children, and especially teenagers, do learn their own notions of God, spirituality, church, religion, and faith from influential adults in their lives. These adults are parents, grandparents, teachers, preachers, and others. In other words, they are us.

So what's so scary? What's scary is *what* American teenagers have learned from us. What's also scary is that they may have learned it really well from us. Teenagers express no overt hostility to faith or religion at all. That's good news—and contrary to what many think is the case. What's bad news is that they really think faith and religions are basically harmless—useful

sometimes (in a pinch), but kind of blandly innocuous most of the time. They are not hostile, just benignly indifferent most of the time.

In fact, Part One of Professor Dean's book is called: "Worshiping at the Church of Benign Whatever-ism." Our youth are becoming "Christian-ish." Almost Christian, but not really. They are what the survey authors called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deists." That's a mouthful.

Moralistic: faith is about being good and doing good when you can. Be nice! *Therapeutic*: faith is finally about feeling good—about yourself and others. *Deism*: God may be out there somewhere (and useful to call on in crisis times—though God rarely really helps), but God has little or nothing to do with everyday life here and now. Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism.

Professor Dean goes so far as to say "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in America." In case you were wondering, lots of different kinds of Christians were surveyed; only the Mormons and fundamentalist/evangelical Christians fared somewhat better than most. Roman Catholics were near the bottom of the totem-pole in most areas.

Listen to one more quote from Dean's analysis. "Teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs

when summoned (“a cosmic lifeguard,” as one youth minister put it), or [a God] who listens non-judgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves (“kind of like my guidance counselor,” as one ninth grader told me).”

Now that’s scary—especially after hearing today’s challenging readings. But does it sound familiar to you? Unfortunately, it does to me.

Now hear Leviticus again: “Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” You shall not bear hatred for any brother or sister. Take no revenge, cherish no grudge against anyone. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Be holy! That God is a far cry from a guidance counselor.

Or hear St. Paul again: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” The temple of God, which you are, is holy. You belong not to yourself but to Christ. And Christ belongs to God. This is a far cry from the “cosmic lifeguard,” or the “feel-good fuzzy.” This is the real God whose plan is laid-out even further in Jesus’ words today.

Non-retaliation and universal love are the real challenges of God’s Kingdom, according the St. Matthew. Non-retaliation even toward evil

persons in our lives and toward evil systems in our culture. That's real Christianity, real faith, not what our teenagers are learning from us that makes too many of them seem "Almost Christian," or kind of "Christian-ish." But it's not the real thing at all. It's not bad; it's just not the real thing.

We will never be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. (That's just a cognitive distortion, an either-or dilemma that really is a mind-trick.) But we do have a spectacular invitation to live as if we were at least trying to live our lives like Jesus lived his life. And far from the non-judgmental God of the Almost Christian, we know that the real God will indeed judge us on just how hard we *tried* to live speaking non-retaliation to power, love to enemies, and peace in justice to a fractured world.

Almost a century ago, C. S. Lewis spoke of "Mere Christianity" being the only true hope for humanity. But Lewis' mere Christianity was at least the real thing. Today's challenge is, perhaps, more frightening. We seem to be raising another generation, just like many of ourselves, to accept being "Almost Christian." Faith is about a lot more than feeling good, and doing nice for a God who may not care much anyway. Real faith, is about becoming a holy temple of a living God who cares perhaps too much. Such is God's love.

Now I suggest both sides of this coin are genuinely scary, but only one is the real thing. Good luck choosing. Peace!