

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

The Rev. Calvin Titus Perkins was a Southern Baptist evangelist in Oklahoma, where he had arrived in a covered wagon as a very young boy. According to his granddaughter, Krista Tippett, host of the public radio program “On Being,” Perkins “was a man of passion but also a lover of order, a believer in rules.”¹ To his granddaughter, now aged 60, Perkins epitomized everything she wanted to get away from when she left home to attend college in a distant state.

Although she saw her grandfather as “large-hearted,” funny, and smart, who he was seemed to be a contradiction of the God she heard him preach about, a God she perceived to be mean and petty, in a heaven that was small and closed. Tippett writes that “The Eternal Life that all [of her grandfather’s] theology drove toward was really about the avoidance of death and damnation.”

The pendulum has swung, it seems. Like Krista Tippett, many of us who grew up with a Christianity that seemed oppressive and judgmental have sought a practice of faith that focuses on God’s loving kindness and God’s abundant forgiveness through the gift of God’s only Son, a gift that promises eternal life if we believe in him. Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far. Perhaps we think that it really doesn’t matter what we do or how we act because as long as we believe we’ll be saved.

An article by Kenda Creasy Dean in *The Christian Century* magazine agrees, claiming that “our God is too nice.”² It refers to a study done several years ago by NSYR, the National Study of Youth and Religion, in seven denominations which showed that American teenagers are being taught a well-intentioned but trite view of faith that they accept as something nice to have in case they need it in the future. The NSYR calls it “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” and says that “if teenagers wrote out the creed of this religious outlook, it would sound something like this:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

That’s nice, comforting, and easy to follow—not only for teenagers but for adults as well. And it’s not altogether unfamiliar in the history of God’s people.

In the first chapter of the Prophet Isaiah’s vision, from which we heard this morning, Isaiah accuses Israel of religious infidelity. Speaking for God, Isaiah charges the Israelites with substituting ritual for reason. They practice their religion but they don’t live it. God makes it clear that isn’t enough and threatens to stop listening, even to hide from them. God calls them to become willing and obedient, threatening them if they refuse.

This is the God of our ancestors, people like Rev. Perkins, Krista Tippett’s Southern Baptist evangelist grandfather, and like many of our own parents and grandparents; men and women who feared God. These were folks who wanted so desperately to enter God’s kingdom that their very lives were an effort to please God. They didn’t see living by God’s rules as a means of avoiding

¹ “My Grandfather’s Faith,” by Krista Tippett. In “*The Christian Century*,” July 27, 2010, pp. 10-11.

² “Faith, Nice and Easy,” by Kenda Creasy Dean. In “*The Christian Century*,” August 10, 2010, pp. 22-27.

death and damnation but rather as a means of seeking God's favor and the fulfillment of their hope for eternal life with God.

What changed? What shifted in our practice of faith? I have a theory about that, based on my own spiritual journey and that of others I know: that the rules taught us and the behaviors required by the Church through the ages became so stringent they were impossible to obey, leaving those who failed to follow them with an abundance of guilt and very little hope that their best would ever be enough to please God. We failed to see that these were rules of religion, not God's rules. And slowly the creed of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism which I read to you a moment ago, or something like it, began to be followed in churches far too numerous to count.

As you'll remember, that creed requires nothing of us except happiness and peace, contentment in the assurance of God's love. Oh...and that we be good, nice, and fair to each other, as the Bible teaches us, although being good, nice, and fair isn't as evident as it once was. The National Study of Youth and Religion noted that the teenagers it cited "tend to view religion as a 'Very Nice Thing'—meaning that it may be beneficial and sometimes even pleasant, but it doesn't ask much of them or even concern them greatly."

If we take time to think about it, it's easy to see where that comes from. Sometimes we act as if our practice of faith is the fulfillment of an obligation that asks only an hour or so a week from us. We may not see the need to attend Bible studies or other Christian Formation offerings. The time we might have had to give to church work is often taken up by other commitments. Our spiritual life is private and personal; we prefer it that way because talking about it makes us uncomfortable, just as uncomfortable as when we hear Jesus' words, "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Those can be fearful words!

But we forget that Jesus also said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The lessons of judgment and damnation that religion teach us distort what Jesus teaches us: that God is far less concerned with the rules of religion than with identity and relationship. "God loves us, and it pleases God to give God's self to us...God doesn't ask us to give ourselves to others, or even to the church. God asks us to give ourselves to Christ,"³ willingly and obediently.

There was another national study of congregations in seven denominations, this one called the "Exemplary Youth Ministry Study." It found that churches in which young people exhibit highly devoted faith look and act differently than those which lean toward Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. I suspect the same applies to the adults in those churches. According to the study, the organization of these churches demonstrates their make-up, that is, what is important in their life together. They are more likely to:

- Portray God as living, present and active.
- To place a high value on scripture.
- To explain their church's mission, practices, and relationships as inspired by the life and mission of Jesus Christ.
- To emphasize spiritual growth, discipleship and vocation.
- To promote outreach and mission.
- And finally, to help their members develop a positive, hopeful spirit, live out a life of service, and live a Christian moral life.

That's something for us think about, both individually and collectively as the Parish of St. Francis. Jesus meant it when he said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Amen.

³ Ibid.