

“Accountability” by Ken Burton

September 21, 2014

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

In writing this sermon I had more than one occasion to remember the so-called “Prayer of the Preacher”, and no, it is not the familiar one from Psalm 19 that begins “Let the words of my mouth.” Offered in a very different vein, this one is “Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff, and nudge me when I’ve said enough.” So my hope this morning is that you will indeed find my “stuff” to be worthwhile, and that it will not take divine intervention for me to know when to say “Amen” and to sit down.

Today is the second Sunday of our 2014 Recommitment Season, and I would like to focus on one particular aspect of the commitments we make to one another and before God. This is accountability. Although that word does not appear in the members’ commitment statement or the Stewards statement, it comes up in “The Disciplines of the Stewards” as “being accountable for the spiritual journey in a regular written report to the spiritual guide of the [mission] group [of which the Steward is a member].” In our mission groups, this discipline, or practice, has been adopted for all members of the group, whether or not they are Stewards. Mission group members are accountable to the group, through the spiritual guide, for their ongoing spiritual journeys.

A good dictionary definition of

accountability is something like “required to give an account of one’s actions to an authority that may impose a penalty for failure.” But before developing that theme further, I would like to look at a couple of examples of how accountability can be abused, warped into a dark and destructive shadow of itself. One of these almost appears in our Gospel for this Sunday.

The landowner in Jesus’ parable was generous, paying his day laborers for a full day’s work when most of them had worked less than a full day and a few of them only a couple of hours. One of those who had worked all day complained that he should be paid more because he had worked longer than those who had been hired later. This worker tried to hold the landowner accountable for how he used his own money. The landowner called him on this, pointing out that all had been paid as originally promised to them, and furthermore, that the funds in question were his (the landowner’s), and he alone would decide how they should be allocated. This is an example of false accountability: the laborer, unlike the spirit guides in our mission groups, had no grounds for holding the landowner accountable, and the latter refused to be so held. Had the landowner’s response been something like “Well, gee, maybe I should do this differently,” he would have been capitulating to a false assertion of accountability, with negative consequences that I will leave to your imagination.

Jesus goes on to make his famous point about how, in the kingdom of heaven, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” I find this remark, although valuable in its own right, to be at best loosely connected to the story that precedes it. The parable is often interpreted as addressing those of us who have difficulty celebrating the gift that someone else has received. Both of these points are matters for other days and other sermons. My point here is that this parable provides an example of false accountability, a situation

in which another may attempt to assert control by holding me accountable when there are no grounds for doing so.

My second example of the dark side of accountability is drawn from my own story. It is of course appropriate the children be accountable to their parents. Most children, particularly younger ones, lack the experience and judgment to make good decisions themselves, and so must do as they are told. But as children grow older, it is equally on target for them to assume gradually increasing responsibility for their own lives, so that by their late teens and early twenties, they are able to make major life decisions about career, schooling, relationships, and other matters on their own. During this period, the young adult's accountability to parents is greatly diminished; indeed, they may actually become parents themselves. For reasons related to personal psychology and family dynamics, this process did not occur in my life at the appropriate time. As a teen, I remained in most respects fully as accountable to my father as when I was eight or ten. For example, I was well into this period before I realized that the capital "G" at the center of the Masonic symbol stood for "God" and not for "Glendale," my father's first name. I was very much in my father's thrall, and the line from John's Gospel, "I am in my Father and my Father in me" had a meaning for me that was quite foreign to the evangelist's intent.

Although my high school academic record would have made me a candidate for some of the country's top universities, I knew, without being told, that my father wanted me to go to a school that was affiliated with his denomination, and so adjusted my college search. Now is not the time to share all the harmful consequences for me of this false accountability to my father. Suffice it to say that it resulted in some bad decisions made by me in my teens and early twenties that have followed me ever since.

False or misapplied accountability can, indeed, be a major source of pain and life disruption.

Having seen something of the dark side of accountability, I would like to turn our attention to the valuable and positive role that it plays in the life of the spirit generally and at Seekers Church in particular.

Richard Rohr, in his book [*Breathing under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*](#) quotes Step 5: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Rohr [cites a verse from the Epistle of James](#) telling the faithful to "confess your sins and pray for one another, and this will cure you." He [quotes Psalm 32](#):

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day
long.

For day and night your hand was heavy
upon me;
my strength dried up as by the
heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my
transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my
sin.

Step 5 again: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Accountability, indeed.

Elsewhere Rohr suggests that "[the Church], and the Franciscans, still offer me an accountability community for what I say I believe, which I find is

necessary if I am to live with any long-term integrity.” ([*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*](#), p.80.) He suggests that an accountability system forces one out of heady illusions and into concrete behavior. Otherwise put, if you will pardon the cliché, it is accountability that enables us, many of whom are very verbal, to not only talk the talk but to also walk the walk. As much as we “stand in the need of prayer” (and all of us certainly do), we also need the company of one or more of our sisters or brothers with whom we share the joys and sorrows, sadness and hope, missteps and triumphs of our struggle to be faithful to God’s calls on our life. In the words of Elizabeth O’Connor, “We will not make any substantial or sustained commitment ...unless we ask and seek for ourselves a structure of accountability.” ([*The New Community*](#))

So how does this understanding of the importance of accountability for the committed life play out at Seekers Church?

We Seekers understand our church as being “in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour.” This means that just as Gordon and Mary and the other founders of the C of S made important changes in the Baptist tradition that they had inherited, so we have modified the practices of the original C of S with the intention of being more responsive to God’s call on us in this time and place. One of the practices that we have changed is that of accountability through spiritual reports. As I noted earlier, we continue, within our mission groups, to write regular reports to the designated spirit guide for the group. The difference is that we have broadened the scope of these reports to include any and all aspects of our faith journey. In the original model, the only topic in the reports was how well, or not, the reporting member had done with the disciplines of the group. Did you spend

an hour a day in prayer and meditation? Did you read the agreed-upon scripture and or other material? Did you participate in the work of the mission group? And so forth. Here at Seekers we do not segregate the "spiritual" aspects of our lives from everything else. It seems clear to us that a particularly beautiful sunset or an especially difficult interaction with a family member or work colleague or an exciting new idea can be as valuable for our faith journeys as any of the explicitly "spiritual" disciplines or practices. So we have broadened considerably the scope of our spiritual reports to include anything that the writer sees as relevant to the journey. We have thus attempted to address what Rohr calls "the single greatest weakness of many liberal churches," "that they lack any real accountability for what they say they believe."

So how does this work in practice? Does the wider scope of our reports make us more accountable for our faith journeys, or maybe not? At this point I can speak only from my own experience. In my reports, I make extensive use of the freedom to write about anything that may be spirit-relevant, and sometimes, about matters that perhaps are not. One corollary seems to be that I rarely say anything about how I am doing, or not, with the disciplines or practices of my mission group. The truth is that I have a long-standing habit of not doing particularly well with some of them, so I write about my dreams (some of which are absolutely fascinating!), about the strong connection I feel with our cat, about ongoing issues with my father (who has now been dead for forty years), or about a wide variety of other spirit-related topics, easily avoiding, in the several paragraphs I produce each week, any reference to the disciplines. Am I truly being accountable in these reports for what I say I believe? Well, sort of. And does that make me a "sort of" faithful Christian? I think I'll deal with that one in a

future report. While not neglecting in our reports the broad range of spiritual experience, we also need to be specifically accountable for our progress in the journey of faith.

I want to emphasize the highly autobiographical nature of the last paragraph. I don't know if it speaks to the condition of any Seeker other than me. What I do know is that individually and collectively, we need vital and well-functioning structures of accountability if we are going to come close to keeping the commitments we make as stewards and members of Seekers Church. Whether the structure is a spiritual report, a face-to-face conversation, or a phone call or a Skype session, we must be accountable to at least one other person for living out what we say we believe, and this season of Recommitment is a time for each of us to examine how we are doing that. Amen.