

# Accountable Spirituality

October 17, 2010  
Rev. Mark Belletini

## Opening Words

We are here

*after a week of sun and rain, warmth and chill*

to note both the flight of a single bird,

*and the plight of whole populations,*

with eyes of compassion, a heart of imagination,

*and strength for self-questioning and honest love.*

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection,  
as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that  
we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in  
words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

## **The Sequence**

A lone wild bird against a powder blue sky,  
and a flock of local geese flying south;  
the one and the many are both notes  
in the sacred song called *The Earth is Home*. (sung)

Choirs singing a Mohawk chant or a Buddhist sutra; a recorded *muzzein* calling people to prayer  
from a minaret; a mega-church congregation of almost 4000 singing a spirited song to Jesus with  
the simple lyrics projected on screens; an atheist composing a choral song about the beauty of the  
autumn; eight Quakers over eighty waiting on the Spirit in an old rural Ohio meetinghouse..the  
one and the many... everyone of them notes in the sacred song called *The Earth is Home*. (sung)

A man in worn clothes in downtown Columbus sitting against a brick wall holding up a clever  
sign; five celebrated opera singers from the Met having brunch together at the Russian Tea  
Room in Manhattan; a plane over Paris with turbulence and 158 passengers, two of them crying  
newborns; a teenager discovering that welcoming some silence inside her heart, even when she is  
in a crowded room, is beautiful...the one and the many, each notes in the sacred song called *The  
Earth Is Home*...(sung)

*silence*

And every person in my life and your lives are notes in the sacred song sung by our lives as by a  
choir...those we miss, those we love, those whose love for us gets us through the day, those with  
whom we struggle. Each of them is a note in our common song. Now we are free to name them  
to ourselves, privately in our heart, or aloud into the safe space of this place, while not forgetting  
that you and I too are notes on the staff of life, and part of the song.

*naming*

There are many choirs singing the song of our home the earth...the autumn leaves blowing down the street, the autumn stars spinning in the sky, the choral singers in a great metropolitan congregation.

**The First Reading** *comes from the blog of Rev. Michael Spencer, a retired evangelical minister with a heartfelt and broadminded approach to scripture. He wrote these words in an essay three years ago.*

If a person does not believe that prudence and wisdom need to accompany generosity, consider this situation: John and Jenny are at the movies. They come out and a panhandler asks for \$20 for gas. Jenny gives it to him and they skip dinner together. The next day, Jenny and John are enrolling in college. A panhandler meets Jenny on the steps of the administration building and asks for \$2000 to fly to his mother's funeral in the Solomon Islands. Jenny has the money in her checkbook. Should she write the check?

If not, why not? If prudence and wisdom should come into play with \$2000, then it should also come into play with \$20.

**The Second Reading** *this morning is the beautiful poem Song by Deena Metzger, written 21 years ago. I am going to ask Steve to read it twice, since it's short. I am hoping to memorize it, myself.*

There are those who are trying  
to set fire to the world.  
We are in danger.  
There is time only to work slowly.  
There is no time not to love.

## **Sermon**

My godson Adam has a friend name Kaveh who makes films. Award-winning films. When I was visiting Adam and Kaveh in Montreal a few years ago, he told us about a project he was working on to shoot a documentary about a man who had been living in the main Paris airport (Charles DeGaulle) for over ten years. This fellow never left the airport, he ate there, slept there, and used their bathrooms. Ten years. Unlike the fellow and his son in this morning's story, this man was quite open about his situation, and didn't try to hide the fact he was there.

The short film was completed, and it's called Sayeh. Maybe you'll get to see it sometime. The man in the airport whom Kaveh filmed was not an easy subject. He was deeply emotional, and was beginning to crack apart...living in an airport for ten years may keep you warm in winter, cool in summer and dry in spring and autumn, but this man's total lack of options was wearing him to a frazzle. Yes, his was a political situation, apparently, he was a refugee from another

country who had no easy answers to his dilemma. But then, I have to imagine that the man in the story we heard earlier this morning was not really in a situation that was terribly different.

No, don't get me wrong. I know people who have chosen to leave the shelters and homes they have lived in for life on the streets. My neighbor Oliver in Oakland did it. He felt his mother's house...right across the street from me... was too crowded...she was always "taking in strays" as he put it, and felt that privacy under a bridge at night was better than the commotion at home. I know folks who prefer the street to the shelters for other reasons: some of them feel they are threatening places filled with desperate and violent types. But most people on the street who are not professional beggar (and yes, they do exist, I know that)...are *not* there because they think it's a better place to be than a nice warm home someplace.

Some are emotionally disturbed folks who have fallen through the cracks in our system, for which the funding diminishes daily, I'm sad to say. Some are folks going through a terrible but temporary crisis in their lives. Many, like the man in the story this morning, actually *have* jobs, but are not able to afford quarters in a neighborhood with a good school for their children. Many others do not have work, and live on meals such as folks in our church cook for Faith Mission or another shelter program, then spend the night in group dorms.

Some of these folks make their way to our building, in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. Our doors are unlocked most of the day. Sometimes folks come in when I am here and knock at the office door. Sometimes they come in when Eric is here, and he responds to them. Sometimes they come in when you are here, and neither Eric or I are. Perhaps someone will come into your meeting, your covenant group, your potluck supper and talk to *you*.

Perhaps this someone may ask for money. What will you do then? Will you reach into your wallet or purse or pocket and hand over some change? Some bills? Why or why not? We say, "All are welcome here" often, but does that only mean people who have divergent ideas as to the meaning of God or the teachings of Jesus, or does that mean someone who asks you for some cash?

These, I say, are all spiritual questions. Questions of spiritual accountability. To be accountable is to be *answerable*...to someone, or some group, or some ideal we profess that makes demands of us. But is our answer, when we are answerable, yes or no? Or something else? Why? Again, more spiritual questions.

I have talked with folks in the congregation, and have heard different answers expressed in conversations. Some say, "*Give; after all, it's better to give than receive, and I have more than the person who asks, so it's only fair.*" Some say, "*Don't ever give; how can you know if they really need something good for them, like food or shelter, or want money for drugs or alcohol?*" Some say, "*I'm afraid, so I give to make them go away, so I'll feel safe.*" Others say, "*I'm afraid for my children when they are here. Who knows if there is danger or not? I have to protect my child.*" Still others say, "*There is nothing to be afraid of...those who feel afraid are really saying they don't like to see people so down and out because it makes them feel uncomfortable.*" Some say, "*I feel guilty when someone asks me for money, so I give so as not to feel guilty, even*

*if the story they are telling me is an out and out lie.” Others say, “Feeling guilty is a waste of time. It’s simply not right to give money away just like that because someone asks. If you give money to one, they will tell others that this church is an easy mark, and the next day the flood gates will be open and all of a sudden we’re a social service agency, without a penny of state funding, not a church.”*

This last one is interesting to me because it’s been brought up for almost 1800 years. The ancient Roman writer, Lucian of Antioch, wrote a story satirizing the renegade Christian Marcion, where he depicted him as a devious man who pretended to be in great need. The local church community he joined believed his stories, and heaped lavish gifts on him, giving him food and money, till, Lucian says, he was richer than all of them. When they figured that out, they got mad, and they chased him away. Then, guess what? He then became a Cynic philosopher, giving away all of his possessions and living on the street.

And the reading offered us by Michael Spencer is interesting to me too. He speaks of *prudence* and *wisdom* being part of our answer, our accountability, to any request made of us. If someone asks us for 20 dollars, and we give it, why won’t we give 2000 when someone asks that of us? He is comparing and contrasting the two situations, and asking them if it’s only the amount of the ask that makes the difference. This too is, as far as I am concerned, a deeply spiritual question.

I know that when I am asked for money, sometimes I am annoyed that *my* day is being interrupted by someone telling me a story, a story I cannot verify. Your car broke down? Your daughter needs a meal? You need to go to your mother’s funeral? How do I know that? And yet, it could be true, couldn’t it? And maybe I *do* have 20 bucks in my pocket at the time. But I have a lot of things to do...a hospital visit, an important meeting, a counseling session for someone who is depressed and miserable, or even this sermon to compose. Can I take time away from my commitments to try and decide whether there is a funeral or not by checking records on the computer?

At my former congregation, someone drove up the drive and asked me for gas money to get to his mother’s funeral up in Spokane. He needed exactly 37 dollars and 26 cents he said, to get there and back. He told me he had calculated that it would take exactly that much. He didn’t want to be greedy, he said, and ask for more.

So, convinced by his sad story, I gave him the money. Next week, someone else came up the driveway. Mother. Funeral. Spokane. \$37.26. Same details. I didn’t have any cash on me... honestly... and told him so. But the week later, same story, same details, but another man. I just sent him away and said, “This church has a policy of not giving any of our budget away to individuals, but only to social causes.” After that, no one came back to ask for gas money to get to a funeral in Spokane. And at that moment, I realized that there is some truth in what is said about not allowing the beat on the street to be that this church is an easy mark... “Tell them a sob story, and you’ll get anything you ask for.” This holy hesitation is what Michael Spencer calls “wisdom and prudence.” Sadly, I learned this “wisdom and prudence” I think, not at my university, but rather at the often far more important School of Hard Knocks.

Of course, the needs are real, and not everyone has got a con story. Most of the stories I hear, I dare say, are real as rock. But am I the best person to respond to individuals? Or should my focus be on organizations who help mitigate the terrible problems of people who have fallen through the cracks of our very well-cracked social system? Again, these are spiritual questions. Questions about how I face reality. And I can think of no easy answers to any of these spiritual questions I have raised.

The man at the airport in our story this morning is a fictional character based on a non-fictional, real person. But this week I helped a real person, my friend Warren, move into an apartment, the first apartment he has lived in for five years. He's been on the street for that time. Living in shelters, sleeping on couches. And yes, he's a real friend of mine, not a case that I am working on, not a charity. I care deeply about Warren, and he has stayed in my house many times. He had some problems with alcohol for a while, and I had to keep him out of my life for a very long time, but our friendship is real, and has survived this sad, destructive way of coping with his very difficult situation.

Other friends have asked me why I have a homeless friend. "Isn't that a bit odd?" they ask. I say, "No. I am friends with Warren for the same reason I am your friend...because I love you... I love Warren too."

It may seem to some to be an over-used word, Love, but never for me. *There is no time not to love*, writes Deena Metzger. No time not to love. Rev. Spencer tells us that love needs to be wise and prudent, not profligate and senseless. I agree.

But I like what Deena Metzger says just before she tells us that there is no time not to love. She reminds us there is danger in the world. There are those, she says, who *are* trying to set fire to the world.

But I for one don't think she is talking about the folks who might walk into this building looking for a hand out. I think the really dangerous ones are the people who tell me that they can offer me something for nothing, that they can give me a big deal if I will only trust them. I think the really dangerous ones are not the ones who need food and shelter and sometimes tell big whopping lies to try and get them, but the ones who have large homes and plenty of food, but who try to tell me that they have the one true scheme that will make my life *instantaneously* better, if only I will give them huge sums of money and time. Like the television ads go on and on broadcasting... "It's my money and I want it now!" A thousand get rich quick schemes, lotteries, casinos, instant loan sharks, free trips to the Bahamas, the TV evangelists who tell you that God will favor you by doubling your bank account if you only plant a three thousand dollar "seed" in *their* garden. None of these people love you. None of them love me. They are not my friends, nor your friends. They are not speaking of honest needs like food or shelter. For me, anyone who preaches that you can get something for nothing is the real danger, not the homeless people who come into this building asking for food or money. It's hard for me to get upset even if someone comes here trying to swindle me with a tall tale. After all, the world of Wall Street and Madison Avenue and many major Corporations is *packed* with far more terrible swindlers of

a more voracious and guilt-free sort, as the sinking economy these last two years has proven with painful clarity.

Deena Metzger tells us, *There is time only to work slowly*. So it is with the spiritual questions I asked earlier in the sermon. If you think I am going to offer any of us a cipher to answer the question *Do we give when asked, or do we not?* you neither know me well, nor our religious heritage yet. Being answerable is not having final and universally applied answers; being accountable is not setting up account charts of yes and no. It's to be part of a story that is open-ended, that has elements that will always be unknown, but which, Deena Metzger reminded us in the Affirmation, can be transformed. How? By our slow work, our patience, our continuing conversations about this exact topic. By our willingness to be compassionate, not just toward those who come to us, but toward *ourselves*: when we make mistakes, get taken, or get frustrated by the whole situation that there ARE two classes of people in America, the housed and the homeless.

We can't know the entire story of anyone's life, including our own. There are always new learnings, deeper understandings that can break through if we are open-ended. It's best NOT to know the entire story, says Metzger, because, if we think we do, if we think we know the right answer in every case, we're *outside* the story. I think that's brilliant.

But in our religious tradition, the housed and the homeless are both part of the unfolding, unfinished story. Warren and I are *in the same story*. You and I and even the homeless fellow we had to ask to leave the building because he blew up the microwave in our kitchen, are all part of the same story, the story of people yearning to love more, be loved more, live justly, find joy, find freedom. Like the bird in the story Jennifer told the children this morning. Remember how it ended?

*Then I remembered the bird. It took a while, but a door opened. And when the bird left, when it flew free, I know it was singing.*

I don't know if that filmmaker Kaveh would ever find a reason to make a documentary about this congregation, but I bet if he did, when he heard us keeping the conversation going about real people, the housed and homeless, the questioning and the answering, figuring out how to live our common story together fairly, justly and honestly, with care and love, I think he'd have a bonafide film-festival award winner on his hands. I bet you his title would be "*The Earth is Home.*" (sung)

## **Offering**

### **Prayer in Times of Less Light**

The light is less now.

The dark blue of evening comes sooner.

The chill comes earlier.

But, you, oh Love, are there, steady, reliable;

the small trustworthy star that steadily guides me  
even when the garish sunlight has faded,  
even when the clouds hide you.

The light is less now.

Brash voices tell me it's because they have hoarded all the light to themselves,  
but I see no light.

I see only you, Love, darker, deep, ever-present summons  
to honesty, tenderness, strength in my vision,  
fire in my heart. The light is less. But it is surely, surely enough.