

Guardians of the Soul

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented May 7th, 2017,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related 1 Peter 2:25

Let's begin by getting down to cases in the public arena on the subject of integrity. Need I define "integrity" to you? *Wikipedia* puts it this way: "*Integrity is the qualifications of being honest and having strong moral principles...The word integrity evolved from the Latin adjective integer, meaning whole or complete...As such, one may judge that others 'have integrity' to the extent that they act according to the values, beliefs and principles they claim to hold.*"

Two current news items are too obvious to ignore when thinking of integrity. The first has to do with the member of the Canadian Senate, Donald Meredith, who is also a Pentecostal Minister, and the second is our national Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan.

Let's deal with the ordained minister first, then we will get to the Defense Minister.

Dateline: Toronto Star, May 6, OTTAWA — Headline: ***Historic punishment for an historic disgrace*** - *Senator Don Meredith should be expelled from Canada's upper chamber of The Senate for his sexual affair with a teenage girl, which constitutes "one of the most egregious breaches" of a senator's role and the public trust". "He has abused his privileged position of authority and trust by engaging in behaviour that is incompatible with his office," the report reads. "He has brought disrepute to himself and the institution."*

Now to Harjit Sajjan...OTTAWA — *Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan has formally apologized for embellishing what he called his role as the architect in a key Afghan offensive even as evidence emerged that he had made the false claim before. Sajjan said he had "made a mistake" in describing his role. "I wish to retract that description and apologize for it. I am truly sorry. While I am proud of the role I played during my deployments to Afghanistan, my comments were in no way intended to diminish the roles of my former superiors and fellow soldiers. To them I offer my sincere apologies," Sajjan said.*

It was not, however, the first time Sajjan had made the claim. "I think the damage is done, unfortunately. He never apologized until he got cornered on this. Manitoba Conservative MP James Bezan told *The Toronto Star* in a telephone interview Saturday. "He has to start telling the truth because right now, the military doesn't trust him, and Canadians can't believe him" said Bezan.

To wantonly disregard a position of trust, to demean your colleagues with lies, to misuse and abuse a privilege of power and authority is to treat others with disdain; it is the worst of abuse. It destroys the soul. And it goes on right under our noses all the time.

Who will set the standards of behaviour when it comes to integrity in public service and who will hold public figures' feet to the fire? I suggest that to be the vital role of the Church. That role began with the prophets of The Old Testament, was nurtured by the New Testament, and passed on to The Church.

Peter's First Letter brings us down to cases, and the problems faced in this section are shocking in their realism. Pastors who are aware of the structures of power which often oppress the helpless will quickly recognize that these verses deal with circumstances in which people are often disregarded, humiliated and degraded. Read casually, this whole section may appear to be a form of the bad counsel that abused people (slaves, servants, and wives) should simply accept abuse as if they deserved it. But this Letter is rather a message of worth and encouragement for people who might otherwise only feel bad about themselves. This letter does not advocate mere quietism or denial of cruel violence, which has been one of the legacies of people of authority who have been afraid to confront such evils even when something could be done. This is a clarion call of dignity and divinely assured worth for those who may be tempted to accept the accusation that they are to be disregarded and of little more value than dirt. These believers are actually much more in control than they might first realize, for they know the truth that has been revealed in Christ Jesus, and they even regard their apparently humiliating circumstances as opportunities to bear witness to the grace of God which holds and sustains them.

We, the Church, maintain the standard of integrity – we know where the lines are. After all, we drew them. No one can take this mercy, this integrity, or this mission from the Church, for we have already “been returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” (2:25). Because of the instruction concerning the work of Christ which has already been conveyed, a new assurance of integrity, a courage in the face of blows, and even a bold evangelistic strategy are possible.

The Church proclaims that every child of God may rightly claim that God made us – made me, and God does not make junk. And those who have been baptized into the death of Christ have a particular claim to a “good conscience,” no matter what they may have endured from an abusive, angry world. Thus Peter is not so much discussing the importance of maintaining moral purity, although it does make a difference why people are abused and humiliated. But this is an invitation for Christians to look beyond ourselves.

We need not justify our existence or attempt the improbable task of proving that we have always been above reproach in every way. But we can appeal to God for a good conscience, “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21), and this good conscience may thus be displayed to all the world as a confidence, a blessing which has been given by God, not merely as a personal attribute or performance. In this way through our gentleness and reverence and courageous good behavior, Christians may even put their abusers to shame.

The baptized have been washed and forgiven and are to be no longer victims of power structures. No oppressive government, no abusive employers, parents, or spouses, political or religious powerbrokers may besmirch or demean us unrighteously, especially for our faith.

We are not to be taken lightly. We hold honesty and integrity to be beacons of great value. Our Lord who is now master of heaven and earth (3:22) and has already endured such humiliation and been vindicated. Even our suffering may be an occasion to bear witness to this truth and freedom from hypocrisy. For we, The Church of Jesus Christ, are the guardians of integrity and thereby Guardians of The Soul. *In the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit. Amen.*