

September 9, 2012

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Both of our readings today come from ancient Israel. In that era, Jews had no concept of the afterlife in their belief system. What would live on after death was one's reputation. One's name was considered far more precious than wealth. It mattered not if a person was rich or poor, all were equal before God and all were called to live with honour, faithfulness and generosity. Cheating was never acceptable because it was thought to pervert God's notion of justice. How do these passages speak to you today?

¹A sterling reputation is better than striking it rich;
a gracious spirit is better than money in the bank.

²The rich and the poor shake hands as equals—
God made them both!

⁸Whoever sows sin reaps weeds,
and bullying anger sputters into nothing.

⁹Generous hands are blessed hands
because they give bread to the poor.

²²Don't walk on the poor just because they're poor,
and don't use your position to crush the weak,

²³Because GOD will come to their defense;
the life you took, he'll take from you and give back to them.

Psalm 125: 4-5, 12-13, 15

⁴Show me how you work, God; School me in your ways.

⁵Take me by the hand; Lead me down the path of truth. You are my Savior aren't you?

¹²My question: What are God-worshippers like? Your answer: Arrows aimed at God's bull's-eye.

¹³They settle down in a promising place; their kids inherit a prosperous farm.

¹⁵If I keep my eyes on God, I won't trip over my own feet.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – Getting a leg up in a challenging world: To cheat or not to cheat?

Friday I was driving to work and the radio host announced the next item which included an interview with a childhood friend who is now a columnist with the Toronto Sun.

Topic of discussion is conflict of interest trial of Toronto mayor Rob Ford. Here's a summary, somewhat tongue-in-cheek from Toronto Star columnist Royson James 6/09/12.

Imagine if you used company letterhead to solicit money from company suppliers to boost your terrific charity? If for some reason you lapsed and did, and a client complained, and your company ombudsman came calling, a reasonable response would be to cease and desist.

Mayor Ford, though, lives by his own rules.

He laudably refused to use taxpayer's money to pay for his office supplies. But he also refused to understand why the rules would require him to report how much he spent, and on what. And when he used said stationery to solicit funds for his football foundation, and was told this was inappropriate, he balked, arguing it was his money that paid for the stationery so he could use it as he pleased. Finally, after much prodding from Janet Leiper, the city's integrity commissioner, he heeded, grudgingly.

But Ford didn't much listen to the woman charged to help city councilors stay on the straight and narrow.

When a citizen complained that Ford was using the muscle of his office to hit him up for cash, on city letterhead, Leiper told Ford the citizen had a legitimate beef.

In addition, Ford used the same tactic with lobbyists doing business with the city. One who gave a donation won a multi-million-dollar contract with the city. Leiper said council rules forbid such solicitations. Lobbyists might think they had to donate just to stay on Ford's good side. And those who didn't donate and didn't get the contract might think that was the reason for their failure.

Ford, of course, conceded nothing. He didn't apologize. He refused Leiper's demands that he pay back the money, ignoring six warning letters. Leiper took the matter to council and council voted that Ford should repay the money. He didn't.

By the time Leiper returned to ask council to enforce its ruling, Ford was the mayor. His new team of allies overturned the earlier vote, after Ford spoke on the issue and voted on it. The amount in question was \$3,100 – enough for the mayor to fight to retain.

That's a clear conflict of interest, period. The mayor spent four hours on the witness stand Wednesday, embarrassing himself, adding logs to two burning

fires: one to smoke him out of office and another to fire up his campaign for re-election.

And local democracy turns to ash.

Here's the statement from Royson James that really hit home for me:

The rest of us just want good government. And a little civility, common sense, and integrity.

This is a modern spin in the ancient proverb we read today.

A sterling reputation is better than money in the bank.

What the proverb says about the poor is a reminder that as people of faith we are not to use our wealth or power to pervert justice therefore we are not to cheat even if we think we can get away with it.

Let's watch a short video that illustrates this point.

(show Olympics 2012 – women's badminton doubles)

Four teams expelled but this seems only the tip of the iceberg.

Cheating in sports highlighted by Lance Armstrong's recent loss of his 7 cycling Tour de France victories for doping.

But even more, our culture seems to be going through a sea change to a place where cheating is somehow more socially acceptable.

In a recent CBC "The Current" program, a father was admonishing his child because he took a classmate's pen.

"If you ever need a pen, you tell daddy and he will bring one home from work."

I found 2 fascinating articles on workplace dishonesty:

"Dishonesty in the workplace", Maria Collins,
Helium.com 2012

"What constitutes Workplace Dishonesty", Tanya Robertson,
Demand Media, Chron.com

- Fiddling with travel or overtime expenses,
 - Embellishing your resume.
 - Taking credit for the work of others.
 - Allowing someone else to suffer for your mistake
- This and so much more are a part of cheating at work.

On my sabbatical, I heard from many professors how frustrated they were by the cheating of their students.

From plagiarism to buying essays and Ph D. dissertations to concealing notes on a smart phone taken in to an exam.

The situation is even worse among international students at Canadian universities revealed in a recent Globe and Mail article by James Bradshaw and Tamara Buluja 2/09/12 - "Why many international students get a failing grade in academic integrity".

A British Study found 45,000 cases of cheating at universities in 2011 (Brian Brady, The Independent, 11/03/12)

Perhaps most startling was a study of kids sports done by the Josephson Institute (thestar.com – Stuart Laidlaw, 5/03/07)

2 year study showed kids involved in sports more likely to cheat in school.

Conclusion: "There is reason to worry that the sports fields... are becoming the training grounds for the next generation of corporate and political villains and thieves," the report says.

I know this is not the usual "Welcome to our church!" sermon that typically marks the start of a new season of worship, SS, outreach etc. But this is a new school year, new sports season...

No better time to listen and learn from scripture that is overflowing in timeless wisdom.

As Christians the message is clear

- Cheating is unfaithful, reprehensible.
- We have a responsibility to demonstrate virtue in our lives so that others, including our children and grandchildren, get to see what a life of honour and justice looks like.

This is your reputation, your name, your legacy.