Rideau Park United Church
Sermon – Orange Shirt Sunday
September 28, 2025

Introduction to the Reading

The *Articles of Faith for the Basis of Union* state that God has chosen to be revealed in nature, in history and in the hearts of humankind. They go on to say that God has spoken through people who were moved by the Holy Spirit - and in time - God was perfectly revealed in the life of Jesus. The *Song of Faith* describes scripture as "our song for the journey, the living word passed on from generation to generation, and that God continues to be revealed to us, by the power of the Spirit's breath. The Bible itself is a collection of books that contain instructions, stories, poetry and prophesies. Some would describe this as a combination history, myth and mystery. Jesus himself often spoke in extended metaphors, known as parables. These stories could be changed and adapted to different situations and they were meant to teach us about God, faith and the coming Kingdom; on earth as it is in heaven.

The very first official Christian Bible was published in the mid-fifteenth century. It gathered together the wisdom teachings of Judaism, which had been collected as early as 1200 years before the birth of Christ, and those of Christianity, which formed most of our New Testament readings by the fourth century A.D. I can only imagine what it must have been like to make **those** decisions, and I'm certainly grateful that I didn't have to serve on **that** committee!

Sometimes though, I do wonder what it would be like, if the church published a new Bible, with the wisdom teachings that have followed since the original edition was published so long ago. After all, God is still living…the Spirit is still moving…and I have to believe that **wisdom** is still inspiring the hearts and words of humankind. Who would be the gospel writers, the prophets, poets, and the St. Pauls of today?

Just this week, I came across some excerpts from a book by Richard Wagamese, and when I shared them with Alyce – our scripture reader for today – she had the same reaction I did…that they are like the words of a Psalm…Proverbs for today…and so we would like to share them with you. The book is called "Embers" and we will be reading from a chapter called "Persistence."

Reading: Persistence

Life is sometimes hard. There are challenges. There are difficulties. There is pain. As a younger man, I sought to avoid pain and difficulty and only caused myself more of the same. These days, I choose to face life head-on—and I have become a comet. I arc across the sky of my life and the hard times are the friction that shaves off the worn and tired bits. The more I travel head-on, the more I am shaped, and the things that no longer work or are unnecessary drop away. It's a good way to travel. I believe eventually I will wear away all resistance, until all that's left of me is light.

ME: When are things going to get easier?
Wise WOMAN: They already are.
ME: Doesn't feel like it. I keep waiting for Creator to step in.
Wise WOMAN: She already has. She always will. Keep faith burning in your heart.
ME: I have. I've been waiting for things to change.

Wise WOMAN: Faith isn't about waiting for things to change. Faith is the constant effort to keep pushing through.
ME: What's on the other side?
Wise WOMAN: You are.

Message: The Task of Reconciliation

In June of 2021 the Government of Canada passed legislation to make September 30 a federal, statutory holiday called the *National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.* It was considered an important step in the reconciliation process as it provides an opportunity to recognize and commemorate the tragic history and ongoing legacy of the residential schools - while honouring the survivors, their families and their communities.

The decision to choose September 30 is connected to Pyllis Webstad and Orange Shirt Day. Most of us have heard the story of how she had her orange shirt taken away when she arrived at a mission school at six years of age.

That experience made her feel worthless and she would learn that it was a legacy shared by her mother and grandmother, who were both also survivors of the residential school system. This is what Billy referred to as generational trauma. As Phyllis describes it, when her son was born, she knew nothing about being a mother. Thankfully, her aunt stepped in and helped her raise her son.

At the age of 27, Phyllis entered a treatment centre to go through the process of healing. Even now, in her 50s, Phyllis sometimes feels as though she doesn't matter…but she decided that she would tell her story so that others might benefit and understand…and so that other survivors might speak out and seek help.

She could not have known that telling her story would open the door to a global conversation on all aspects of Residential Schools. It is an opportunity to listen, and to create meaningful discussion about the effects of the Residential Schools…and when we, as Canadians, participate in the conversation…we can create bridges that will lead to reconciliation.

In the Bible, reconciliation involves an admission of guilt and a confession of wrong-doing on the part of the offender. This opens the door to forgiveness on the part of the one who was offended…but it does not end there…because true reconciliation leads to healing and the restoration of the relationship that was broken.

Indigenous culture also has a process that leads to reconciliation. It begins with the offender admitting responsibility for the hurt they have caused. Once that happens, the elders can work with both parties to bring reconciliation. Without this admission, reconciliation can never happen and the hurt will never heal.

There is a well-known story about reconciliation in the Indigenous community. It tells of two young men who got into a fight. One of the men died and the other was called to meet with the elders of his community. In front of the elders, he acknowledged the hurt he had caused , then he apologized publicly to the other young man's family. His actions had robbed the family of their only hunter and provider, so in an act of reconciliation, his father presented his son to the other family – and they adopted the son as their own.

I remember the first time I heard about reconciliation in the church. It was at a meeting Saskatchewan Conference. The United Church was considering making a formal apology to the Indigenous people of Canada, for the wrongs that were done by colonization. It created a huge conflict in the church. People did not want to be held accountable for the actions of others…they insisted that colonialism was a thing of the past…they were offended that anyone might think that **their** actions were racist…but the most common complaint was "If we admit that we did something wrong, we open ourselves up to law suits that could destroy the church."

Well…we did apologize. At the Thirty-first General Council, held in Sudbury in 1986, Moderator Bob Smith extended an apology on behalf of the United Church of Canada, to the Indigenous Community. The apology named the hurt the Christian Church had caused, it acknowledged the effects of colonialism and ended with an appeal for forgiveness, "so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation may be healed.

The interesting thing is that they, did not accept the apology right away. They received it, said they would consider it, and that they would make a statement at a later date. At the next meeting of Conference, in Victoria in 1988 they acknowledged that the apology was an important step forward. They affirmed the spiritual teachings and values of the Native way of life and asked the United Church to live in peaceful coexistence with them. They ended saying, "In the new spirit the Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us."

The result of the apology was not the destruction of the church, but the creation of the *All Native Circle Conference.* Members of this new, autonomous group still attended meetings of the other Conferences throughout Canada. They offered

workshops and educational resources that highlighted Native Spirituality and enriched not only our relationship…but our identity as a church.

Ten years later, another formal apology was offered by the Rt. Rev. Bill Phipps for the role of the United Church in the residential schools. He acknowledged that the United Church had operated 15 residential schools from 1849 and 1969 and that 6.7 percent of the 80 thousand students who were still living at the time had attended United Church schools.

The apologies of 1986 and 1998 were critical to the Indigenous people, as they were the beginning of the process of Truth and Reconciliation…but they were also important because they led to actions that support Indigenous communities as they reclaim their cultures, languages, and spiritual and traditional knowledge.

Today, we continue to honour our promise to walk with and support Indigenous communities across our country…but I think it is also important to acknowledge that we have much to learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters. This is an important piece of the journey…because as long as we see the knowledge, the action, and the giving only going in one direction…we as a church, are still acting from a place of privilege and power. Reconciliation provides opportunities for healing of that relationship, so that we can be equal partners on the journey.

Richard Wagamese is a renowned Canadian author…he was also part of the sixties scoop. As a result, he lost his language and cultural ways…but he found his way back to them…and when he started writing, a traditional story-teller on Manitoulin Island took him aside and said, “We need new stories as much as the old ones.”

One of my favourite stories is called “Grandfather’s Gift.”

Wagamese speaks of the long nights of winter as the time when families would gather around the fires and tell stories. It was a teaching time. Families were the center of tribal life. Children were treated with as much respect as their elders, and their education was conducted by every member of their band.

His grandfather, John Wagamese, was a man of the bush who never learned to speak English. Richard was born in a tent on the trapline, where he lived with his sister, two brothers, mother, father and grandparents.

When Wagamese was two-years-old, Ontario Hydro built a dam, near where they were living. The resulting flood forced them to abandon their home and lifestyle

and move into town. Not long after, Wagamese ended up in the foster care system and would not be reunited with his family until he was twenty-two.

"As I spent more and more time reuniting myself with the bush, I noticed something strange. Somehow in my wanderings, I could see things. I knew the bear signs, the deer signs, the holes in the water where the pickerel lay, the names of plants and their uses. After twenty years, I knew this bush as though I'd never left it.

Speaking through a translator, Wagamese asked his grandfather about this knowledge, and he says that what his grandfather told him was the greatest gift he ever received.

"He told me that the reason I knew these things was because he had made sure I was introduced to them very early.

Whenever he would head into the bush, during the first two years of my life, he would bundle me up in my cradle-board and strap me to his chest. As he walked through the bush, he would talk to me and tell me about the things we passed…This was the traditional way, he said. A grandfather or father would take a young Ojibwa child out into the world and introduce him or her to it all.

My grandfather told me that he took this time with me, because he wanted to make sure that when I was old enough to explore the world on my own, I wouldn't feel like a stranger.

This is the way with Indians. Giving to the children is the natural process. Passing on knowledge, insights and ways of seeing were and are integral to child-rearing in Indian circles. In these modern times, there is much to be learned from this…it's a process and a way of being."

The Anishinaabe have a tradition called the Seven Grandfather Teachings, that are used to teach children the importance of *love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, humility and wisdom.* One cannot be practiced without the others, and they are a significant part of how we relate to one another in community.

"Each one of us represents the child. We must faithfully apply the teachings of our Seven Grandfathers to our own lives. We must place our trust in the Creator. We must also never forget to be sincere in our actions, character, and words."

Life **is** sometimes hard. There are challenges. There are difficulties. There is pain. But by choosing to face life and truth head on, faith has allowed us to shave

off the worn and tired bits and the things that no longer work. It's a good way to travel as we move forward as a church.

So may we be inspired by the teachings of the grandfathers, to trust in our Creator…may our actions, character and words be congruent to the life of Christ…and may the Spirit of our faith give us courage and reassurance to live in *love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, humility and wisdom* until we get to the other side…with all our relations. Amen.