

“Stumbling Blocks & Stepping Stones”

September 27, 2020 (Covid 28 – Live Stream 4)
Mathew 18: 1-14

Rev. Kimberly Heath
(Live and In-Person) Wall Street Church

This is Orange Shirt Day — a day to remember students who attended Indian Residential Schools in Canada. The day is inspired by the experience of Phyllis Webstad.



On her first day at residential school in 1973, Phyllis was stripped of her new orange shirt, a shirt that her grandmother gave to her and that she was proud of. Each year on September 30th we wear orange to remember that, as Phyllis says, “*every child matters.*”

As the Kairos webpage says “This is a day, or a week, to share the stories of all residential school students, and help change the legacy of those schools so that former students and their families not only survive but thrive.”

“Every child matters” was certainly something that Jesus taught and believed: “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*” It is hard to imagine a worse evil than what we as a nation and as a church perpetrated against children than what happened with the Residential School System.

“ If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!”

As a nation and as a church we have been that stumbling block. God have mercy on us.

Apologies have been made. The United Church apologized in 1986 for its part in the Residential School system. (Read about it here)

<https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/apologies-response-crest.pdf>.



And, more than 20 years later in 2008, the Government of Canada under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an apology. This is some of what Prime Minister Harper said: *"Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools, ... Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country, ... While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities."*

The awareness of the sins of the past and those that continue today in the present has not been easy. Some don't want to hear it. But it is very difficult to repair and to heal what you are not aware of. Awareness is not easy, but committing to making reparations is even more difficult.

But if we mean the apology, things have to change. When someone apologizes to you for, say throwing garbage on your lawn, the apology doesn't mean much if they won't help you clean it up — or worse if every day, they keep throwing garbage on your lawn. Awareness which leads to apology has to result in a change in behaviour.

I remember the last General Council meeting of the United Church of Canada (that's the big meeting of the whole denomination) that I attended in 2018 when we received the report entitled "CARETAKERS OF OUR INDIGENOUS CIRCLE CALLS TO THE CHURCH". At the time the United Church was making decisions on major restructuring of the denomination, and this report was about how these changes would work for the Indigenous part of our church and how the denomination would continue to live and work in right relation with Indigenous peoples. Part of the report read:

"The UN Declaration [of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, aka UNDRIP] is about establishing and maintaining respectful relationship, Indigenous self-government, and Indigenous land rights in their traditional territories. This means the Indigenous faith community must exercise a truly Indigenous self-determination and possess a sustainable land-based support."

Some of the recommendations coming out of the report included:

"A. Equitable distribution of Mission and Service Funds keeping in mind the whole Indigenous community across the country;

B. A policy be developed that would ensure there is a percentage of the proceeds of property liquidation allocated to Indigenous ministry and justice work.”

As we were learning about this at that General Council meeting, a thought struck me. It was no big wise thought; it was a bit obvious, like a ‘duh!’ thought. The thought I had was ‘This is going to cost us.’ And indeed, it does. In our own Region we have a policy that if a property from a Community of Faith, a church, is sold, “10% must be remitted to the United Church of Canada for the on-going support of Indigenous Ministry.” (Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council Governance Handbook 2019).

It was a funny realization to have, because the truth is the work of making reparations in our lives always costs something. It costs our pride as we admit we made mistakes. It often costs money. If you want to heal from a past grief or trauma you likely are going to need professional counselling – guess what? Getting professional help doesn’t come cheap. It will certainly cost you time and effort. It’s going to cost you!

If you want to lose weight or quit smoking or overcome some other addiction, it is going to cost. You have to cut off and avoid that which previously gave you comfort or worked for you. It is not easy making changes and making reparations. It will cost you.

Jesus said *“If your right arm causes you to stumble, cut it off”*. I’ll state the obvious and say he was not being literal. But making change so that you do not cause yourself or another person to stumble will cost you.

But can’t we just pray and come to church and be changed? I’m a big believer in the power of prayer and I believe in miracles. But most of the time the miracle I see in prayer is that we are given the strength and the courage to change the things we can.

But what about when our problems are complex? Most of our problems are complex. I’d love to have some pixie dust sprinkled to fix my problems and your problems. I’d love to sprinkle some pixie dust and have full healing and reconciliation with all indigenous peoples in Canada. But it was generations of policies aimed at ignoring, assimilating and even eradicating Indigenous peoples that got us to where we are today, and it will likely take generations to repair it.

It’s incredibly complex. All I can say about this situation and perhaps your own personal challenges is that we are called to do the next right step –even if it costs us. The calls to action that came out of the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) along with the United Nations Rights of the Indigenous People lay out a blueprint to bring healing one step at a time.

Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth & Reconciliation said “Start with education”.

As Christians, we should be the first to understand the cost & to support & move towards it. Remember that when Jesus was repairing the brokenness of the world, it didn't come cheap. It cost him something. It cost him everything – his pride, his comfort, his life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a minister and theologian who was sent to and killed in a Concentration camp for opposing Nazi Germany. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book he describes what he calls 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace'. *“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; baptism without church discipline; Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*

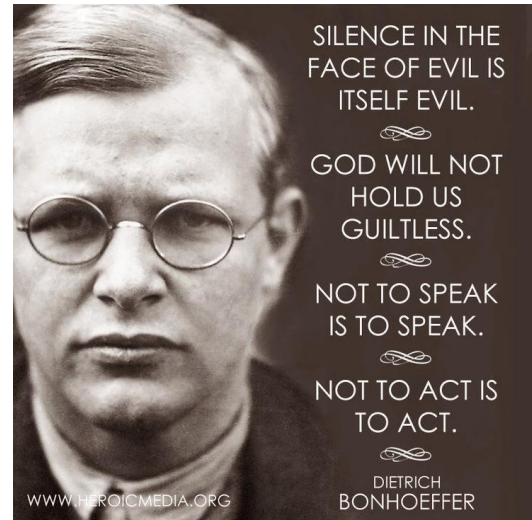
Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price for which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

Most of us have had stumbling blocks put in the paths of our lives. Some, like Indigenous people have had huge ones put there. If you have, I pray that you will take steps towards healing and life regardless of the cost.

And whether we are dealing with a molehill or a mountain of our own garbage, we are called to look beyond ourselves and to do what we can as Christians to remove the stumbling blocks on the road in front of others.

On the same day that Stephen Harper offered the apology, the then Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion spoke and said: *“Today's apology is about a past that should have been completely different, ...but it must be also about the future. It must be about collective reconciliation and fundamental changes.”*

I agree. We have to move beyond apology to repair and reconciliation. This, and all repair work, comes with a cost but it also comes with incredible blessings.



When we allow and encourage Indigenous peoples the right to be who they were fully created on to be, on their own terms, not ours — we will find our country and our own lives greatly enriched.

You see healing creates more healing. One person who has made it through the 12 Steps of AA and lives it fully is a person who has not only made amends for past wrongs, but also someone who will make such a difference to other broken people.

As we commit to the healing of Indigenous Peoples, we will find healing too: healing of our souls, healing of our land – a life renewed. We will also find more life in Christ.

There is something about being aware of our brokenness and making the commitment to make reparations that opens the channels for us to feeling more fully the love and peace of God. Not because we will be loved more ... but because we will have created stepping stones, and helped to build a bridge that allows that love to flow and flood us. May it be so. Thanks be to God.