
Orange Shirt Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 27, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Ezekiel 34:17-22 and John 21:15-17

I sometimes speak with people who tell me that they are a bit confused by some of the things we celebrate in this church. And perhaps the first confusion is simply around the word “celebrate”. Because in the United Church “celebrate” is a broad term that usually means marking or commemorating an event. In fact - in the church - “celebrate” almost never means a party. For example, we celebrate Remembrance Day here. You know we do not hand out champagne, right? By “celebrate” we mean that we remember, we honour, we commemorate. But also, we tell truths even if they are painful. And we remind ourselves that we can do better. As individuals, as Christians, as a society, and as global humanity.

Don’t worry - if we ever have a celebration here where you need to bring a party hat and streamers - you will be warned well in advance.

I did not realize how often I use the word “celebrate” until recently. Last week I told you about the Tashlich ritual I was invited to participate in the week before. If you missed it, the Tashlich ritual is a Jewish ritual that is part of Rosh Hashanah. I was invited to the ritual as a Jewish ally. Last week’s sermon contained my reaction to the ritual, along with some history. So after I had prepared a draft of that sermon, I shared it with the person who had invited me to the event. She reacted strongly to my frequent use of “celebrate”. She said that Jews do not “celebrate” rituals. They commemorate, they mark the day. That led to a good conversation between us. And last week I did not use the word “celebrate” in reference to the Tashlich ritual. But in United Church Circles - we celebrate. Everything.

Today we celebrate Orange Shirt Sunday. And that term - “Orange Shirt Sunday” brings its own confusion with it. We have likely all heard of “Orange Shirt Day”. But what is “Orange Shirt Sunday?” According to the United Church of Canada web site: “Orange Shirt Sunday, the Sunday before the Orange Shirt Day/National Day for Truth

and Reconciliation (September 30) is a time to remember and honour Indigenous children who were taken from their communities and families to residential institutions.”¹

So, Orange Shirt Sunday is just the Sunday before Orange Shirt Day. Which is always on September 30. And this year, that is this coming Wednesday.

[image: campfire sculpture and details]

Which is why I am inviting people to join with me at noon on Wednesday September 30 at the Campfire Sculpture at Humber Bay Shores Park. That is just west of the Humber River, right down by the lake. And if you know of a closer local celebration, please let me know. But this is the only Indigenous-led celebration that I found this year.

[image: orangeshirtday.org web site]

According to the orangeshirtday.org web site, “The orange shirt has become a symbol of hope, reconciliation, and commitment to a better future. By wearing an orange shirt on September 30th, you make a statement to support truth & reconciliation and commit to the enduring truth that “EVERY CHILD MATTERS”.”

So please - whether or not you can join with me at the Campfire Sculpture - wear an orange shirt on Wednesday to remind us all that every child matters.

The web site further states:²

Inspired by Phyllis Webstad’s story of having her orange shirt taken away on her first day at Indian residential school, we uplift the voices of Survivors and invite all people in Canada to walk the path of truth & reconciliation together.

The Orange Shirt Society was established in 2015 to:

- Support Indian residential school reconciliation
- Create awareness of the individual, family, and community intergenerational impacts of Indian residential schools through Orange Shirt Society activities
- Create awareness of the concept of “Every Child Matters”

Orange Shirt Day - Every Child Matters was created in 2013 in Williams Lake, BC. In 2021, the Canadian federal government officially established September 30th as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (NDTR). NDTR did not replace Orange Shirt

¹ <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/orange-shirt-sunday>

² <https://orangeshirtday.org/>

Day, it is both.

So if you have been a bit confused by what Orange Shirt Day is all about, I get it. But it is not really that complicated. Because The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Orange Shirt Day, and Every Child Matters are about honouring the victims and survivors of Indigenous Residential Schools. The t-shirts may look different. But the message is the same.

And I'm not sure what I should be lifting up today, because we have already discussed this topic extensively. You can find my old sermons online at paulshepherd.ca. Since I've been with you here we have discussed indigenous justice many times. And residential schools in particular.

[image: slide of the following]

- Jan 28, 2024: Towards a National Indigenous Organization.
- April 28, 2024: Land Acknowledgements: What are we saying?
- June 16, 2024: Truth and Reconciliation. (Extensive history)
- June 1, 2025: Jesus left us the church. Some assembly required.
- Sept 28, 2025: Restoring Justice.
- June 14, 2026: Are we there yet?

So I'm not completely sure how to add to that conversation today. But I do know what I want to do - with you. Last year we visited the Woodland Cultural Centre, located at the former Mohawk Institute - a former residential school - in Brantford. When we were there, they had a museum that was open and an outdoor Indigenous market which we enjoyed. But the residential school building itself was closed and under renovations. That school building is now open and ready for visitors. So what I want to do is to return and visit the school. With as many of you as are interested. And we will do that.

[image: grassy narrows poster]

So today, I want to discuss a related, but different issue. As you may have noticed in Chit-Chat, in the fall we seem to have a lot of opportunities to go to events that focus on a social justice issue. Last Wednesday was the Grassy Narrows River Run. I've participated in that event many times. And I noticed this year that when I told people about the event, many people - both in the church and outside - said they were not really

sure what that is all about.

So I'd like to explain it a bit, because it's related to how we understand right-relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

I suppose the obvious first question would be - who or what or where is "Grassy Narrows"?

[image: grassy narrows map]

Grassy Narrows is the name of an Indigenous community located in "Grassy Narrows". Which is located north east of Kenora. So it's in Northwestern Ontario. It is part of the First Nation of Asubpeeschoseewagong.

[image: grassy narrows village]

It is currently home to about 800 people. So what is happening there you ask? Between 1962 and 1970, a paper mill dumped 10 tonnes of mercury and other contaminants into the Wabigoon River. That mill is upstream from Grassy Narrows. Those neurotoxins contaminated the water, and poisoned the fish. The residents of Grassy Narrows relied heavily on the river for both water and fish.

The mercury has led to very significant health impacts for the community. And they - even today - lack a reliable source of drinking water. When concerns were raised by residents, they were told that the river would - over time - clean itself naturally.

A report from 2016 made it clear that government officials knew in the 1990's that mercury was still visible in the soil at the mill site. To quote from the Toronto Star:

"During the intervening years, as the residents of Grassy Narrows and scientists sounded the alarm that the neurotoxin was poisoning the fish and the people who eat it, government official after government official kept repeating that there was no ongoing source of mercury in the Wabigoon River that is the lifeblood of Grassy Narrows."³

Quoting from Chief Simon Frobisher, "For decades I have been seeking justice for my people for mercury poisoning, searching for answers, searching for help. Never once was I told that mercury poison is still under the mill, right next to our river. I was told over and over that the mill site was cleaned up and that the problem ended in the

³ https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/ontario-knew-about-grassy-narrows-mercury-site-for-decades-but-kept-it-secret/article_f8a92cb6-6c92-5861-93ab-f5fb4f7cabf5.html

'70s. I now see that was a deception and my people have paid the price with their health.”

[image: grassy narrows march]

Grassy Narrows River Run is an annual event that works to bring awareness of this issue to Canadians, and to demand justice from our government. This year that included a march from Grange Park to Queen's Park, where we delivered a message to the Provincial Government.

The story of Grassy Narrows is a tragedy. Partly because of the health impacts on the community. But also because it reveals things about the nature of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians that all know are wrong.

Actually - that broken relationship - in the case of Grassy Narrows - involves an additional partner. A corporation. Because in Canada we have numerous stories of corporations that create environmental messes - like dumping mercury into the ground - and then go bankrupt and leave the taxpayer to pay for the environmental cleanup.

I selected the text from Ezekiel 34 this morning because it describes the same issue. Referring to a sheep by a river: “Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?”⁴

We let corporations muddy the water - leaving massive environmental damage - and then they walk away without paying to clean up the mess they have created. Leaving the rest of us to deal with the horrific health issues and the environmental contamination.

[image: david suzuki]

David Suzuki was interviewed on “Aboriginal Peoples Television Network” and had this to say about Grassy Narrows. “We have got to change the way we act. You can't keep using air, and water, and soil as a garbage can and not think we are going to pay a price for that. The Grassy Narrows people are paying the price of our misuse of our surroundings, our water, and our land.” Suzuki then referred to a then recent announcement saying, “one of every two Canadians is going to develop cancer. That is not normal. And I say, listen people, for God's sakes, when you dump toxic chemicals into the air, the water, and soil, what makes you think that's not going to end up in you?”

⁴ Ezekiel 34:18b-19.

“Everywhere you live you breath the air, you drink the water, you eat the food, and that’s going to end up in us. Cancer is caused by the way we treat Mother Earth. And we’d better learn from that.”

“Indigenous people around the world have lived in their territory for thousands of years. So they must have something going for them. We’ve only been in this new land here for 500 years and we’ve totally mucked it up.” “We have to Indigenize our thinking.”

Which brings me back to what I want to share today. Which why I have participated in the Grassy Narrows River Run for many years. And I encourage others to join me - every year.

[image: gn moderator]

First of all. I met some great people. I was honoured to march with our moderator, Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath. That gave me a chance to personally thank her for being so pro-active on a number of important social justice issues.

[image: gn: street]

I also met many people I knew. Social justice allies from the United Church. From an ecumenical group called Kairos. I was thrilled to meet Jewish social justice fighters I have worked with before.

In a way, I could break-down the conversations I had with people that day into two categories. We all agreed on the tragedy of Grassy Narrows and what needs to be done to fix the situation. But the conversations still broke into two type of conversation.

[image: gn speakers]

One attitude is that we have to fix this problem FOR the people of Grassy Narrows. The other attitude is that we are collectively broken. And that we are invited to fix this problem WITH the people of Grassy Narrows.

On the one hand, we should fix this problem FOR the people of Grassy Narrows because it was caused by people who live in the centres of power and treated Mother Earth like a garbage can - as David Suzuki so eloquently said.

[image: gn queen’s park]

But most of the conversations I had were about how we can stand WITH the

people of Grassy Narrows. We can work to demand justice from our government for the specific problems in Grassy Narrows. But we can also learn from our Indigenous siblings and partners. The River Run is not just a guilt trip. It is about creating and nurturing relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. If you only read about Grassy Narrows in the news you might miss that. When you come to River Run, you get to be in relationship.

In John, Jesus kept asking Simon Peter - do you love me? And when Simon Peter answered in the affirmative, Jesus said, "Feed my lambs", "Take care of my sheep". "Feed my sheep".

[image: gn friend]

How do we hear those words today? How do we hear "Feed my sheep" today? When it comes to dealing with Indigenous issues, the first step must be to be in relationship with our Indigenous siblings. To provide help where possible. But also, so that they know that they are not alone. We are one.

Amen.