

"Montreat Sunday"

High School Youth Gabbie Frech and Rev. Rachel Vogado
September 30, 2018

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

My name is Gabbie Frech, and I have been a part of the First Presbyterian Concord youth group for 3 years. Every year, we attend the Montreat Youth Conference, and this was my 3rd year going. For those of you who haven't attended a Montreat Youth Conference before, it might be helpful for me to share with you what we do. On a typical morning, we wake up early in Walter and Susan Hannah's beautiful house which has a great view of the mountains. We have breakfast as a group and then head to worship at Anderson Auditorium. When we arrive at the auditorium, there is upbeat pop music playing, and there are youth groups from all over the country gathered in this one space. To start off morning worship, we do fun energizers to help us wake up. We then hear from a Keynote speaker who talks about a certain topic that contributes to the overall theme. These presentations usually include interactive elements, skits, powerful storytelling and visual representations designed to appeal to your heart. The speakers and their presentations invite us to see scriptures in ways we haven't considered before.

From there, we meet in small groups that are pre-selected and include youth that we have never met from all over the country. The small group experience is terrifying at first, because there is a fear of the unknown. But as the week goes on and you spend more and



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more time with this random group of people, you start talking. The small group leaders helped guide the conversation in a way that helped everyone feel heard despite each others differences. This conversation can lead you to opening up about things that you've never shared with anyone before. You make beautiful connections with these people you have never met and may never see again. After meeting up with your small group, you then head to lunch with your church group and get to discuss what went on in your small group. You may also have time to sneak in a nap, because you are tired from staying up too late talking to your roommates the night before.

Once lunch time has ended, you then meet up with your small group again to participate in additional games and team-building activities. After this second session of small-group has ended, other afternoon activities might include free time with your church group, a big recreation event, or walks around Lake Susan and the traditional scoop of ice cream from the Huckleberry. We then gather back home to have dinner with our church group, and we indulge in lovingly prepared meals from you guys. After dinner, we have worship back in Anderson Auditorium which includes creative liturgy, art created by small groups, diverse musical selections and powerful preaching. When worship has ended, there are usually conference-wide activities that are set-up carnival style on Anderson lawn. After these nighttime activities, we return home with our church to discuss the messages we heard and process them, and then we fall into bed exhausted around 11:00 pm or so. And that is a day in the life of Montreat.

This year was more powerful to me than any other year, because of the people that I met and the speakers that I heard. I heard from a woman that was Chinese and was bullied as a child because of it. I heard from a teenager who is bisexual and shared her inspirational coming-out story. I heard from our music leader who talked about how he was stereotyped by his friends after he came out. They defined him by his sexuality instead of the other character traits that defined his identity. We talked about the "me too" movement and how so many brave women are claiming their stories about sexual assault. What made these stories so powerful was that they came from voices we don't normally hear from. These voices are from people who are often excluded from the church but have finally find a voice within the church. One of our speakers talked about Brene Brown's belief that there is power in naming our stories. She says if we own our story, we get to write our ending. If we don't name our story, then our story names us.

If we don't allow everyone to have a voice, then their story names them, and we lose an important part of our collective story. First Corinthians 12 says that every part of the body has a role to play and each is just as important as the other. We are an incomplete body if we don't hear from and lift up every voice. Sometimes we want to shut out voices that are different from ours or that make us uncomfortable because their words invite us to change or do things differently. And we don't like change. No one does. But as one of our speakers said, "The church is not called to do easy things, we are called to do God things." I have learned from Montreat the importance of creating safe space to figure out exactly what those God things are together.

Montreat is important to me because it includes a style of worship that I have never experienced before. It doesn't matter how you dress or where you sit. It doesn't matter what the sanctuary looks like or how much money it holds. What matters is that you can come to this place and lift up your own voice and trust that what you say won't leave the room or be gossiped about by others behind your back. You have the opportunity to lift up other people's

voices and give them a chance to feel heard. I want to bring this back not just to First Presbyterian Church but to every community I'm a part of. This week this message has felt particularly relevant to me, because there is a brave woman who has been lifting her voice to our nation even though she knows people don't or won't believe her. How can our church create a safe space to inspire others who feel hurt and broken or just need someone to hear and help name their story? What voices are missing from our congregation? Amen.

Written and preached by High School Junior Gabbie Frech

It is a thing of wonder to experience the power and joy of a Montreat Youth Conference, not only as a youth, but also as an adult. I, like many of you, have incredible memories of going to Montreat as a youth. Remembering the 10 hour van ride from Florida that was where the good bonding happened for my youth group. Or the shift that occurred from a week spent as a small group, where we moved from strangers to friends. Sometimes I find myself singing conference songs that I learned years and years ago. As an adult, my household still often shares the weekly ritual of Taco Tuesday, and I am glad to tell you that tradition hasn't changed at Montreat whether in homes or the dining hall. I can still remember the first time that someone used my name during communion, breaking off a piece of bread and hearing, Rachel, this is the body of Christ broken for you. That was the first time that I really felt invited to share such a joyful feast, and my understanding of communion was forever changed. I still know the moves to the energizers, and I will gleefully learn a new one anytime I can. My memory box holds tokens from friends and prayer partners from years ago, rocks collected from the creek, and small group journals with notes from conferences past. Those years shaped my faith, helped me discover who and whose I am, and drew me closer into the body of Christ.

As an adult, it is every bit as powerful. It is an absolute gift to accompany our youth to Montreat, to join with 1000 other youth from all over the country for a week, and to see them feel, experience, and process scriptures, themes, and ideas to engage their faith and the world around them. Montreat has been committed to diversity, both in their leadership and who they have present at their conferences. It is refreshing to look around a sanctuary and see all types worshiping together. And Montreat is committed to modeling how both the church and the kingdom of God can and should look like.

When we gathered together for the week, we were introduced to the theme Lift Every Voice. When sharing their vision, the planning team, which works together for over a year to plan for youth to arrive, said this about the theme. "During our theme selection process, a topic that reoccurred was long silenced voices, including youth voices, being heard and taken seriously. We believed that the challenge to Lift Every Voice was prophetic and rooted in the gospel message. We noted that lifting every voice requires supporting those who have been silenced, listening to their stories, creating spaces for others' voices to rise, and, sometimes, summoning the courage to find and raise one's own voice. Voices are a gift from God imparted to each person. Using them for the glory of God is part of our calling." Together this planning team set a goal for the summer- to be a place where authenticity, community, connection, and God's truth thrive. The conference will seek to be an inclusive place where each voice can be heard and where each heart can be molded; where change is invited, challenge is expected, and where all are embraced.

And it only takes a moment of reflection to see just how important a space like this is, not only for our youth, but for all of us. The world around us is full of division, distortion, name-calling, and shouting over one another. We are constantly bombarded by voices that grow louder and louder, creating a static buzz of noise, that makes it harder and harder to hear God's voice. We scroll through our social media feeds to see insults hurled like rocks, and we see the dividing line growing wider as we fail to listen to one another and how to respectfully disagree or offer a different opinion. And what is so important about Montreat is that Montreat doesn't resist talking about the things that are going on in the world, it doesn't shut itself off from current events or news that often feels too hard to watch, but it leads us to talk about them in a way that is framed by the Gospel, using the lens of Christ's love.

This year's theme, of Lift Every Voice, could not have been more timely. As we moved through each day of the conference, the theme built on the day before as we dug a little deeper through worship, keynote, and small groups. On Monday we heard the scripture shared this morning, Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones, and we learned how God's voice is liberating and has the power to make even the driest of bones come back to life. On Tuesday, we talked about difficult voices, and learned that there are lessons to be learned from a variety of voices, the ones we disagree with or are different from our own. On Wednesday we talked about our own voices, and the ways that we are discerning and developing our own voices in a bold and faithful way. On Thursday we talked about silenced voices and learned that there are unheard voices that need to be lifted up. And on Friday, our last day together, we talked about united voices. We talked about how our voices and our story is tied up in one another's voice and story and when we make room for others, when we lift up each other's voices and gifts, we create the fullest, richest, most vibrant vision of the Kingdom of God, and that is what God is calling us to do. They shared with us the concept of Ubuntu, which means I am because we are and we are because I am. It means that my humanity is inextricably bound with my neighbors, and it speaks to the very essence of being human. It calls on us to mirror our humanity for each other, and to live in a way that is generous, hospitable, caring, and compassionate.

As people, but especially as a church, we have a responsibility for the larger body. This is exactly what Paul's letter to the Corinthians was saying. As our passage this morning says, God has arranged the members of the body, each one of them, just as God chose. And in creating us, and naming the ways that we are diverse but called to work together, we receive the gift of oneness of the Christian community: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Our oneness is a matter of God's design. From creation God has "mixed us all together," that we might suffer and rejoice together in a mutual harmony. Yet we often confuse unity with uniformity, but we don't have to give up our uniqueness to belong to the body, but rather it is our unique stories, opinions, and voices, when working together, that gives us the glimpses of what the kingdom of God is to be.

Montreat not only preached and talked about these ideas throughout our week together, but they also modeled it. They created spaces to share our stories, knowing that some stories are hard to hear, some we disagree with, some we can claim as our own. They taught us how to be empathetic listeners of other people's stories, and to find the courage to tell our own story. In keynote one morning, they actually taught us and led us through an active listening exercise, where they invited two people up with disagreeing viewpoints, and

they modeled how we can have honest and real conversations with people without name-calling, without hurting feelings, and in a way so that both people can be heard and valued. Granted, the leaders modeling it were arguing which energizer was better, but it wasn't hard to translate it into a real world argument.

I often, as one who gets the honor to work with young people, remind people that the youth are watching. They are watching how we interact with one another, they are watching how we as a church live out our faith in mission and in worship, they are watching how we take what we say here out into the world, into our homes, our places of work, and our community. But now, I would like to remind you to watch them. Watch for the ways that they are seeking to use technology as a tool to connect rather than tear apart. Watch for the ways that they are using their voices to speak truth to power. Watch for the ways that they are inspiring the church in matters of faith, for the ways that they are modeling how to welcome and connect with others, regardless of race, sexual orientation, faith background, income level, or political leanings. And please, don't just watch them, but listen to them. Hear their voices when they cry out for change. Listen to the ideas and hopes that they share not only for this church, but for the Church, capital C. Listen and learn from them; empower them, not just by letting them help, but by letting them lead. Together, all of us, young and old, male and female, when we lift our voices and sing, we can all hear a song of faith and of hope.

Thanks be to God for the ways that you are supporting our youth. Thanks be to God for the Spirit's nudging to make more spaces to listen to their voices. Thanks be to God for their courage to lead us. And thanks be to God for our courage to listen.

Written and preached by Rev. Rachel Vogado