

Towson Presbyterian Church
Reflections from the Montreat Youth Conference
July 29, 2018
Numbers 27:1-10 and Matthew 15:21-28

Thomas Sheggrud

Hello, my name is Thomas Sheggrud I am a rising sophomore who attended the high school trip to Montreat NC. The site for this conference is breath taking; you can see the mountains from anywhere on campus. The people who attend Montreat make you feel at home with the amazing hospitality and a desire to make new friends and grow in their faith. God was present in Montreat, and I found God on Lookout Mountain through the views and through the animals that I could see. The daily themes at Montreat were God's Voice, Our Voices, Difficult Voices, Silenced Voices, and United Voices. These themes were each connected to scripture lessons, and the themes led to conversations in our small group and in our back-home groups about what we can do to acknowledge these voices, and actively listen so that we can help others.

The main theme throughout the week was “Lift Every Voice.” The preacher, Yena, and other speakers told us to lift our voice for the other people who are not heard, and that we should lift our voice to help in the reclaiming of another person's voice. We were told to use our voices to help minorities, the homeless, low income people, the unemployed, and people struggling with mental illnesses. One thing that stuck with me throughout the week was said in a service by Yena who said that “Humans lean more towards sinful than graceful.” This phrase was present in my mind because when I think about my school there are many choices that are sinful and are not what God wants for his children. Also, in my opinion, when people are asked for a choice on a certain action they would lean more towards the sinful act because humans like risk and they want things done fast instead of slow and correctly.

Yena also said that their needs to be unity in diversity and that we are all the same on the inside, but we have a shell or a label that is attached to us that cannot be shed and we need to see past the shell. During the week we read the scripture lesson for today and I found it interesting how Jesus didn't want to heal the daughter at first, and the faith of the Canaanite Woman convinced him to do this miraculous act and heal the daughter. This stood out because in bible stories about Jesus working miracles, he often performs the miracles without questioning the person's faith, but when Jesus questions the Canaanite women she stood her ground and showed Jesus her great faith. So now I ask would you be like the Canaanite women and lift your voice to God for other people who are homeless? Will you lift your voice for the minorities? Will you lift your voice for the mentally ill?

Elijah Sharp

I can easily say that this past week has been one of the most enjoyable in my life. I met plenty of amazing new people from all over the country; strengthened relationships with friends in the TPC youth group, and grew closer with God. Each day was unique in its activities, whether it be hiking up Lookout Mountain and enjoying the serenity of being on top of the world, or getting up at 7:00 in the morning to take a mile long run, which I can say, with near certainty, will never be happening again.

The entire camp was filled to the brim with loving people gathered with the common purpose of praising God and appreciating his creation, and it made me feel loved and valued unlike any other experience I've had before. The sermons each night were out of this world, and the connections I made in my "Small Group" of 30+ kids from all over the country are ones I will never let go of. Our week at Montreat was guided by a central theme, "Lift Every Voice," and each day had its own sub-theme. Monday was God's Voice, Tuesday was Difficult Voices, Wednesday was Our Voices, Thursday was Silenced Voices, and Friday was United Voices.

While each day spoke volumes to me about where we stand in this world and how many amazing opportunities we have to help others feel as loved and as valued as we do, one day stood out to me in particular: the last day, United Voices. It focused on Diversity within Unity, the fact that, even though we are a diverse set of beliefs, statuses, and backgrounds, we are united by God's love for ALL human beings, not just the rich or the poor, the weak or the powerful, the Christian or non-Christian. We learned that God's love for ALL drowned out any reasoning that we could possibly have for silencing any one group of people. There is no room in this life for prejudice against people of a certain skin tone, religious background, sexual orientation, gender, body, or any other earthly things.

In the end, we are all loved the same by God. For me, this message tied all other daily themes together, assuring us that, despite the struggles posed by conflicting viewpoints, we need to learn to love each other as God loves each of us. The conference at Montreat became the catalyst by which I learned how to find something to love in all people, despite what subjects we may disagree on. For that, I am grateful to this congregation for supporting such a fun and transformative trip, to the adults who went with us on this trip for putting up with our late night shenanigans, and to the staff at Montreat for teaching me that I can and should indeed love ALL people.

Rebecca McKenna

Growing up I was a very chatty kid. My parents can attest to that fact and our home videos serve as proof with footage where I am in the background talking up a storm to no one in particular, while the camera was on something completely different. I never failed to attempt to be heard. So before Montreat I never really thought of "voice" as something special. I had accepted

the fact that some topics were not to be talked about but for the most part I never had to worry about if my voice was being heard.

At Montreat we explored the real meaning behind the word “voice.” Voice is about freedom and the opportunity to be heard. During worship on Thursday the preachers shared stories of those whose voices have been silenced. I felt pain and sorrow for those who do not have the freedom to use their voice in the way God intends, but the topic didn’t really resonate with me personally quite yet. In small group, which is a group of 30-some people from all different churches gathered together, we discussed different types of people who have had their voices hidden or unheard. I sat there desperately trying to connect to this topic in some way. That’s when it hit me. I had silenced my own voice when I was in middle school by letting my internal struggles boil up inside of me with nowhere to be released. I began dwelling on the experiences and pain that I face on a daily basis beginning at 12 years old and I decided right then that I wasn’t going to hide my story anymore. I raised my shaky hand and asked the 30 other people in the room if I could share a personal story. They listened attentively as I attempted to find my voice and share my struggles for the first time in front of a crowd. I took my own voice off mute but the way other people in my small group were inspired to raise their own voices and the amount of messages of support and praise I received afterwards was the epitome of the theme of the week. I had the courage to raise my voice and those 30 people around me, which were almost complete strangers, lifted that voice.

I am standing here before you as proof that raising someone’s voice does make a difference. Montreat is a special place in the world where everyone’s voice and opinion is heard. Everyone is valued for what they can contribute to God’s plan. This environment is what I strive to bring into my daily life. Yes, Montreat was crazy fun and our group lived for the dance parties and games every night but the experience was so life changing because of how Montreat has affected my life wherever I may be. So while I will most definitely be holding the memories of putting the boys’ hair in buns and our crazy dance moves close to my heart, it is the memories of the people I met and voices that I heard and shared that will stick with me forever.

Max Burkett

I don’t think there is any better feeling in the world than being surrounded by the people you love and people that share something in common with you. Being surrounded by my close friends from Towson Presbyterian and 1,000 other teens with the same mindset and common goal of expanding our faith for this past week was no exception. The theme for the week was “Lift Every Voice.” Now I don’t know about you, but when I first heard this I thought it was a somewhat cryptic. I wasn’t sure what it meant to lift a voice. I didn’t know how to lift one’s voice. I started the week thinking that all this meant was listening to what others had to say, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The minister for the week was a woman from South Korea, named Yena. This was a very different experience for me because I have had a male minister for as long as I can remember, no matter what church I attended. She preached a new message every day, such as listening to and recognizing God's voice, considering difficult voices in our lives that make us uncomfortable, raising our own voices, giving silenced voices the opportunity to speak, and what we can accomplish if we unite our voices. As I sat in the pews listening to Yena passionately deliver her sermons, I was forced to reflect on my own life - how the message for the day can be implemented into my life as the topics were never as simple as I thought they were. For example, one day the topic was lifting silenced voices. Going into this day I thought I was already living this calling out in my life as I thought I gave everybody a chance to speak and listened to what they had to say. I found; however, that there was so much more to it than that. As I listened to Mark chapter 2 - the story of how Jesus healed the paralyzed man - and I heard the lengths the friends of the paralyzed man went to, to have their friend healed, I realized that you have to understand and be willing to take risks in order to give the opportunity to speak. I realized that in my life, it is my responsibility to use my privileges to give others the opportunity to be heard.

Yena was a living example of lifting every voice as Asians and women often have silenced voices in the church. I was inspired by Yena and her messages from the week to actively change the way I live my life to better serve God. The Montreat Youth Conference forced me to reflect on my life and ask myself how I can become a better disciple and how I can live out Jesus' call to make disciples of all nations.

Caroline Miller

I'll admit it, I was very skeptical about this trip. An entire week of church? However, my idea of this trip was very wrong. Yes, we had 90 minute worship services each day, but I found myself engaged and enlightened with each one. Between worship, small groups and recreation activities, the theme "Lift Every Voice" came to life.

We discussed ideas of racism, homophobia and how we can use the power of Christ to combat them. For me this was outstanding, because those issues don't really come up in church much, even though they're such huge issues today. It was inspiring to talk so much about how faith can be, and should be, a catalyst for change.

The sermons and ideas we explored were so relevant to everyday life. Discussing ways of lifting silenced voices, looking for God's voice, and unifying all voices is a message I will keep with me forever.