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**“Lift Every Voice”**

**Proverbs 31:8-9**

**Rev. Andy Acton**

**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**

**July 15, 2018**

When the Montreat Youth Conference Planning Team gathered two years ago to select a theme and craft a goal statement for this year’s six summer youth conferences, there was one topic that kept reoccurring in their conversations: *long silenced voices, including youth voices, being heard and taken seriously.*

 The planning team believed that the challenge of the theme “Lift Every Voice” was prophetic and rooted in the gospel message. They noted that responding to such a task meant, “supporting those who had 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. And using them for the glory of God is part of our calling.”

 As Rev. Shavon Starling-Louis, the preacher for Week I, said: “We live in a time when many voices are silenced and our internal voice at times get silenced. Our theme allows us to celebrate that there is room at the table for all and space to be heard.”

 The team was inspired by the beloved hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” number 399 in the *Glory to God Presbyterian Hymnal*. Frequently referred to as “The Black National Anthem,” the footnote states: “Initially a poem for a school assembly at which Booker T. Washington spoke on Lincoln’s birthday in 1900, this text and tune have gained national recognition and devotion.” The planning team concluded that the hymn’s text and history reflect the support and courage that are still necessary today for those of us who follow Jesus and love our neighbors.

 In that spirit, they set the goal that the “Montreat Youth Conferences will strive to be a place where authenticity, community, connection and God’s truth thrive” and that “it will be an inclusive place where each voice can be heard and where each heart can be modeled; where change is invited, challenge is expected and where all are embraced.” The youth and adults from Pleasant Hill Presbyterian and El Nazareno Fellowship Presbyterian who attended the conference during Week I in early June can wholeheartedly affirm that Montreat achieved its goal.

During the experience, we faithfully wrestled with the questions posed by the keynoter, the Rev. Mihee Kim Kort: “How do we understand our own voices? How do we understand others around us and their voices? How do we make space for those voices we don’t hear or listen to on a regular basis? How do we listen for the voices on the margins?”

 Mihee, Shavon, the music and recreation leaders, small group leaders and folks from other churches, including our own, helped us remember how God’s voice breathes life into us and allows us to be who we were made to be—people created to serve God by showing compassion and love to others through word and deed.

 We learned that it’s not always easy to listen for the voice of God who tells us that we are beloved, fearfully and wonderfully made while we are surrounded by a cacophony of critical, judgmental voices that regularly tell us, youth in particular, that we’re ugly; that we’re not good enough; that we’re unworthy or inferior. The conference leadership told conferees that there’s no way to avoid the voices that criticize us, the voices we disagree with, the voices that annoy us or even the voices that convict us of our own wrongdoing. Instead of drowning in that sea of voices, however, we can listen to another person’s view and accept them for their differences. We can also listen more clearly to God’s voice that tells us over and over that we are loved no matter what, and we can practice the art of forgiveness and reconciliation with voices that clash with our own views and beliefs.

 Our group also discovered that there is no benefit from being silent when others are facing oppression and suffering. All silence creates is more fear and dehumanization of another human being, Mihee Kim Kort told us during one of her morning keynotes. “Sometimes all people need to hear,” she said, “is that they are human.”

 During keynotes, worship, music, recreation, Bible study, back-home gatherings and meals, we heard from each other that we are human. While playing ridiculous board games; taking an early morning hike up Lookout Mountain to see the sunrise; spending a lazy afternoon swinging in hammocks and swaying in rocking chairs; going on walks to explore nature and talk about life; eating ice cream and drinking coffee at the Huck, we basked in what it means to be human and to enjoy the time God has given us. Through the laughter and tears and late night talks around the island counter in the kitchen listening to one youth bear his soul, we discovered once again how God connects each one of us. In the testimonies from some in our group who experienced voices that were homophobic or racist or just plain critical, we realized that we matter together as human beings called to be the body of Christ—we suffer together, we love together, and we embody God’s presence together when our voices are united.

 Shavon Sterling-Louis, in a sermon on Proverbs 31:8-9 expanded on this realization further toward the end of the conference. “Our call is to be bearers of grace in the world. Each us has been blessed and our call is to lift our voices,” she said. “Your voice will be amazing and it will be unlike anything anyone has heard before. That’s who you are. We don’t sit quietly and watch rights be taken from others. Lift the voices of the needy, the poor and the suffering…This is the call, this is the prayer.”

**“Living Abundantly”**

**John 10:1-10**

**Rev. Jennie Sankey**

**July 15, 2018**

During our week with Asheville Youth Mission (AYM), we sought to fulfill that prayer and call with our feet, hands, and words. Every summer on our trips, we experience abundance. There is always an abundance of good music on the bus, an abundance of snacks, an abundance of laughter, an abundance of play. The AYM leadership challenged us to consider what the abundant life Jesus promises us really means. Does it mean enjoying the biggest ice cream sandwiches we’d ever seen? Certainly. But we learned through experience, conversation and reflection that abundance isn’t about excess or having everything we want. We walked alongside people who have lives that seemed to be less abundant than our own. Our passage from John today tells us that Jesus came that all may have life and have it abundantly. We worked to find out what that promise means day to day, as we tried to live out our faith.

On the first morning of our first work day, we were sure we caught a glimpse of what abundant living looks like. Blue. We arrived at the Irene Wortham Center, a place that specializes in helping children and adults with developmental and/or socioeconomic challenges. The volunteer coordinator handed us paper plates, paint brushes, red, white and blue paint, and a picture printed off of Pinterest of adorable American flag painted paper plates and then set us loose on a playground with about twenty four-year-olds. It was a bit ambitious of a craft for any young child, and we quickly abandoned the American flag idea for just trying to keep some of the paint on the plates. As children finished up their very thickly painted creations, they took off running, with Donovan or Noah or Dylan behind them, shrieking and giggling. We saw that morning that having abundant life means being able to get messy and have fun in a safe place.

The next day we saw what happens when abundance gets spoiled. We spent time at the Veterans Restoration Quarters, an agency that provides transitional housing, job training, medical care and case management for veterans of war. We were led into a room where thousands of articles of donated clothing were turning into trash. The roof in the room all these donated items had been piled up in a room almost as large as our fellowship hall, waist high, had leaked. Not just a little leak, but a major water damage kind of leak, and much of the clothing had gotten wet. Because there was such an abundance of it, volunteers couldn’t get through it all fast enough before it started molding. We picked through piles of damp, smelly assorted clothes, everything from underwear to suits, crumpled and rotting. We weren’t the first group to work on sorting out this mess, and we wouldn’t be the last. It certainly was taking an abundance of people to get through this mess. We hoped that our work would make life more abundant for those who got access to all of this clothing.

At the Haywood Street Congregation, we finished an afternoon of work sitting around big round tables rolling silverware into white cloth napkins, finished off with a silver napkin ring for a free meal that would be served at the meal the next day. This meal was catered by a restaurant in Asheville where the average plate costs $30 a person, and would be served to anyone who showed up and was hungry for free. This meal, known in Asheville as the Downtown welcome table, “rests on the assumption that food is a primary means of grace, a way to love and connect. It is**a homemade meal** **served on abundant plates** by an attentive wait staff. **Lunch and dinner are served family style** and folks are invited to linger over the meal as in a nice restaurant or dinner at home. **Cloth napkins, flowers on the table, and china plates** send the message “you deserve the very best” and are meant to counter the notion often held by those living on the streets that handouts, hand-me-downs and leftovers are all I deserve.**[[1]](#footnote-1)** As we rolled our silverware sets, we learned that abundant living is putting out the good stuff, even when it’s not Thanksgiving.

Towards the end of the week, we were asked to reflect on our experiences that week and write as a group an affirmation of faith. We started by brainstorming a list of “I believe” statements and then considered what God might be calling us to do about the things we believed. Based on our experiences playing with children who have had a difficult start, pulling weeds, sorting household items that would go to people moving from homelessness to apartments, triaging moldy clothes, hole digging for a new bridge, cleaning air vents, organizing storage closets, picking up trash, building benches and painting a gazebo for campers to enjoy, here’s what the youth of Pleasant Hill came up with as their affirmation of faith for the week:

“We believe all people should be treated equally.

We believe we need more organizations to help the homeless.

We believe we need more housing for less money.

We believe everybody can and should be helped.

We believe we should open our doors to help those in need.

We believe we can keep dreaming on how to help.

We believe there should be more people willing to give back and make an effort.

We believe no one deserves to suffer.

We believe every voice should be heard.

We also believe God is calling us to take action by:

Volunteering more often with housing organizations

Open our arms, eyes, ears and hearts to people

Be selfless

Be creative in addressing these issues

We believe God is calling us to lead with imagination, energy, intelligence and love!”

God wants us to live an abundant life and to work so that others can have abundant life as well, and these youth get that. In the passage from John we read today, the theme scripture for the week at AYM, Jesus doesn’t say he’s the shepherd but that he is the gate. So maybe we don’t always need to be the sheep. We can step up and be a shepherd, leading with love, calling by name, lifting our voices on behalf of and alongside those who have been silenced, so we can all meet at the Gate to life abundant, Jesus Christ.

1. http://haywoodstreet.org/downtown-welcome-table/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)