

DATELINE: Montreat, North, Carolina. 31-July-2014

Dearly Beloved,

It is hard to describe a youth conference. It is hard to describe the mountain retreat (thus *Montreat*) in Western North Carolina which hosts the conference. There are many moving parts in the former and glories to behold in the latter.

They include morning calisthenics, also known as “energizers,” also known by the over -25- crowd as “awkward-izers (hat-tip to key-noter Jerritt McLaughlin). Worship happens twice a day. The morning key-note addresses are imaginatively presented. The evening preaching is fantastic. Both services are creative and biblical, supported by drama and video clips, and directed to the heart. The speakers hold the attention of the high-school crowd quite well. That goes even for the evening preacher, the ancient Reverend Christopher Edmonston, whose length of years measures a whopping two-score and two! Lively and inspirational music is embraced by the gathered. Along with Eric Wall, the Rev. Jorge Gonzalez leads the music with his vocals and his rocking guitar. (Jorge is formerly Associate Pastor of Louisville’s 2nd Presbyterian Church, and recently called to a new position in Miami, Florida).

Small groups are important elements of the Montreat Youth Conference. Assigned at random, twenty or so kids, from many different churches in many different states (ideally no two kids from any one church) gather. They share fellowship, encouragement, and discuss the worship services and key note addresses. Specially chosen and trained adults lead the small groups.

Small groups engender much of the spiritual growth that occurs during the week. By Thursday, the groups have formed enough trust in each other that faith can be explored openly and honestly. No one is put under pressure, and all may speak without embarrassment or apology.

In both morning and evening services, maybe a dozen kids help lead worship. They make up something called the Jeremiah Project. Members read scripture, fashion the liturgy, assist in the Lord’s Supper, and participate in dramatic sketches.

Worked into the week are a wide variety of other activities: a competitive trivial- pursuit type game; hikes up one or more of the surrounding mountain peaks; a highland games parodying the real Scottish thing; a talent show; an outdoor dance party on one of the athletic fields; trips to nearby towns of Black

Mountain and Asheville. The closing worship service on Friday night is capped off with a beautiful candlelight service that encircles the dark waters of Lake Susan with light softly golden.

This trip to the 2014 Montreat Youth Conference is about two fine young men— Dylan and Robby. Tara Reck and I bring them to this “place apart,” this thin place where the natural beauty and spiritual disciplines combine to make the barrier between the human and the divine worlds paper thin. These are the grounds where lives are changed for the better, where people find their niche in God’s scheme of things, and enter into the one community of the one God. Here their souls are fed and strengthened. Immersed in the steadfast love of God, and uplifted by God’s living grace, they are invited to become more of what they are — young people of faith and character. Our job is to get them here. Once here, we support them and make sure that they are in the right place at the tight time. If they need to talk about a particular issue or experience, we are here to listen.

So the conference is about them: Robby, Dylan, and the 500- plus other young people in attendance. However, it has also affected me. I watch the teenagers, absorb the same holy words they hear, sing the same amazing music, and feel the breeze of the same Spirit that passes over and through them. I can’t help but be touched by it all, profoundly so. I leave this thin place a different person from the one I was before. I am not 100% spiritually well, but this week has moved me in that direction.

Anchorage Presbyterian Church has had an on-again/off-again relationship with the Montreat Youth Conference. Andrew Miller ministry’s ministry among us made Montreat a priority with young people. Since then, interest has waned, and that is unfortunate. All of you who are high school-aged kids, from rising freshmen to graduating seniors, need this place apart and this time apart for your spiritual heath. If you, as a parent or grandparent, or otherwise have any influence over a young person, strongly encourage his or her participation. And, if you, as an adult, are asked to be a chaperone or Montreat leader, jump at the chance. With both feet, jump. Montreat is a gem — maybe the gem — of our denomination. Cultivating lives of faith and character has never been a more important task than at present. Sign-ups for Montreat 2015 will occur in December. That month speeds toward us even now. So make plans. Get ready for the best summer week of your life, or that of a teenager you know.