

Title: Wonder, Wander, and Building God's Peace Together

8/9 Sermon for Montreat and Massanetta Sunday

Rev. Lindsey Odom

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 43:18–21

Readings from the New Testament: Romans 14:19 and Luke 24: 13 – 35

Prayer of Illumination: Holy God, as we hear your Word read and proclaimed this day, we ask that you open our hearts and minds by the power of your Spirit. Help us to listen, to understand, and to follow where you are leading. Amen.

Sermon:

Before I begin this morning, I want to take a moment to thank all of our youth who are participating in worship today. What makes today so meaningful is not that anyone was asked or assigned to do these things, but that so many of our youth willingly stepped forward to serve. That kind of joyful leadership is a beautiful witness to the Holy Spirit at work, and a reminder that the Church is at its best when every generation comes together to offer its gifts for the glory of God, so thank you.

There is truly something sacred about experiencing Christian faith through the eyes of young people. Over the past few weeks, I had the privilege of attending both the Massanetta Middle School Conference and the Montreat High School Conference. Every year I return from these retreats reminded why the Church must continue to invest in the faith formation of our children and youth. Retreats remind me that children and youth are not simply the future of the Church; they are the heartbeat of it right here, right now. We need their joy, their love, their doubts, their ideas, and their questions. God's table includes all. God saves a seat for our children and youth, and so must we.

At first glance, the themes of our two retreats seemed quite different. At Massanetta, our middle school students explored the theme Peace by Piece, while at Montreat our high school students reflected on the theme, Wonder and Wander. But the more I reflected on these two themes, the more I realized they were telling one story and were two movements of our journey of faith.

Massanetta invited us to ask, *Who are we called to become?* The theme reminded us that it is peacemakers that we are called to become who participate in God's vision of *shalom*, which is God's dream of wholeness, reconciliation, justice, and flourishing for all creation. One line from the conference theme song titled "Peace by Piece" that has stayed with me all summer is "all God's children come along. This is a place we all belong. Piecing together piece by piece. Bring your peace and I will bring my piece. Alone we are undone, wholly more than one. With one voice we lift up your name and join in song." Friends, this is a beautiful picture of the Church that God calls us to be

together. None of us build God's peace alone. Christ gathers our individual gifts and weaves them together into something far more beautiful than any of us could ever create ourselves.

At Montreat, our high school youth and their adult leaders were asked this question: *How does God form us into those people that embody peace?* The answer was through wondering, wandering, trusting God in uncertainty, and discovering God's presence along the journey. Together, these conferences proclaimed one profound truth: **Christ walks beside us in our wondering and wandering so that we may become peacemakers who faithfully walk beside others.**

That truth comes to life in our Scripture passage today. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples believed all hope had been lost after Jesus died on the cross and was no longer with them. Yet before they ever recognized Jesus, Christ was already walking beside them. As Presbyterians, we believe God always takes the first step. Before the disciples recognized him, Christ walked beside them, listened to them, opened the Scriptures with them, and shared a meal with them. Friends, that is God's grace and power at work. God always takes the first step, and even when we cannot yet recognize Christ, Christ has already drawn near to us. That powerful truth was affirmed and lived out many times during our retreat experiences this past summer.

One afternoon at Massanetta, I met someone who embodied that truth. Her name was Janet, and she has volunteered in youth ministry at First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, NC for more than twenty-five years. She told me she first became a youth advisor because her three sons were in youth group. Today those boys are in their upper thirties, yet Janet is still serving. Then she smiled and said something I will never forget: "I'll quit when they tell me I'm too old." I remember thinking, Lord, give us more Janets. I wonder how many of us can point to someone like that in our own lives, a pastor, youth advisor, choir director, teacher, grandparent, family member, or friend who faithfully walked beside us and helped shape our faith. Janet reminded me that discipleship is often less about having all the right answers and more about faithfully walking beside another person to help them grow. That is exactly what we promise whenever we baptize a child or youth in our congregation. We promise to love them, pray for them, teach them, nurture them, and walk beside them as they grow into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Those promises are not just words we say during worship, nor do they expire when children grow older. They become real whenever adults faithfully show up in the lives of young people. I witnessed that kind of partnership all summer. I saw adult volunteers walking beside our youth on both retreats. I saw older youth encouraging younger youth. I saw friendships deepen, questions asked honestly, and faith that grew in beautiful ways. By the end of each week, it felt less like a youth group and more like a close knit family.

On our final evening at Montreat, after the candlelight service around Lake Susan, our youth gathered together one last time. For nearly two hours our youth simply shared what was on their hearts. They reflected on where they encountered God throughout the week, encouraged one another, laughed, cried, and thanked our graduating seniors for the ways they had shaped this youth group and expressed how much they would be missed. There were very few dry eyes in the room, including mine. During this time, our youth spontaneously put their arms around one another and began singing *Lean on Me*. Singing these familiar words became one of the holiest moments of the week. It reminded me that the Church is at its best when we live exactly that way, bearing one another's burdens, making space for one another, and walking together in faith like Christ promises to walk alongside us even when we don't recognize it like the disciples on their way to Emmaus. On our last night at Montreat, our high school youth were reminding one another that none of us walk alone. In those moments, I realized I was witnessing the body of Christ, the church that Christ calls us to be and God at work in the lives of our youth and adults. The last night at Montreat was one of those holy moments that could not be planned or manufactured. It was simply the Holy Spirit at work.

Perhaps today you may find yourself wondering like the disciples were on the road to Emmaus. You might have questions. You might feel like you are in a place of waiting. You might feel like you are discerning what comes next. Or perhaps today you feel like you're wandering. Life has taken an unexpected turn. You might be carrying grief, anxiety, or uncertainty. If that is where you are today, hear the good news of the gospel: Christ is already walking beside you and knows exactly what you need. And if today you are neither wondering nor wandering, perhaps Christ is inviting you to walk beside someone who is. Because that is how the Church lives out being the body of Christ. We each bring our piece—the gifts God has given us. Others bring theirs. Christ binds us together into one body and takes those small acts of faithfulness to create something far more beautiful than any of us could create alone. Piece by piece, God is making all things new until the day when all creation is gathered into God's perfect peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.