

“A Global Community”
Psalm 23 and Ephesians 2: 11-22
Sermon Preached by Rev. Gail H. Kendrick on 10/8/06

Over the years of my life I have had a recurring conversation with God that always includes the words, “You want me to do what?!” The first time I remember this conversation, it was 1989. I asked then, “You want me to become an ordained minister?!” Me, the shy kid in class; me, the one who got to play a dead person in the play “Our Town” because the casting director knew no one would hear me if I was given a speaking part; me, who said she would never ever go back to school after graduating from college the first time. I became an ordained minister. In 1993, I asked, “You want me to take a position as an associate pastor?!” Me, the person who said she would never be an associate; me, who as a student minister, worked with a man who lost his standing in the UCC due to sexual abuse; me, who wanted her own church?! I became an associate pastor. The last time I asked this question was in January of this year. I had just finished four months of chemotherapy and was beginning to get stronger, when our missionaries in South Africa, Jan and Ruthann Hall invited me to go to South Africa to visit the folks in Lamontville and in other congregational churches of the Zulu-Natal area. I was surprised because I remembered when we voted to be part of the partnership with Lamontville. We were told at that time that the partnership was not about visiting one another; it was not about what the Halls called “tourism for Christ”. Now they had invited me to come. I could see no reason to go, but then the familiar conversation with God began again. I was given sign after sign that I should go, and once again I heard myself saying, “You want me to go to South Africa?!” Me,

who said she would never again take a trip that involved traveling through multiple time zones; me, who has no facility with foreign languages; me, who had just learned she was going to live. I went to South Africa.

Two days after arriving in South Africa, I was sure I had mistaken the signs. I was miserable. I was homesick beyond anything I had ever experienced. Just thinking about my husband Cy and our dogs made me cry. But what made it all worse was noticing an enlarged lymph gland on my neck. I was sure the cancer was back and I was 8000 miles from my doctor and 8000 miles from the love and support of those who know me best, my husband and you, the people of this church. I felt bereft of community. I felt alone.

I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Everything was so different in South Africa. South Africa sounded different. Every morning I was awakened by harsh grawking. It was the sound of giant ibis known as hadeda who were drinking from the pool outside my window. It looked different: where the missionaries and I lived it looked something like Miami with high rise hotels and rental cottages and an ocean, in this case the Indian Ocean. But it wasn't Miami. Just on the other side of the road from the hotels were sugar cane fields. The churches and homes we visited were in townships, which had a look all of their own: red dirt roads, stucco homes right on top of one another, and often outhouses. And then there were the areas further away from the city with rolling hills dotted with round thatched roofed huts, and women and children walking with water containers on their heads coming or going to the local source of water, and herds of cattle.

God had wanted me to come to this strange place, and I wondered why. The answers to the why question have been coming, but the one way I want to speak about right now is what I learned during my trip about the truth of today's Scripture reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I learned through my experiences that through Jesus, God has knocked down the dividing wall between people, even people of very different cultures and language.

On the afternoon of my first full day in South Africa I was invited to join a group of women from the Lamontville church as they went to visit the sick and grieving. These women were part of an organization within the Congregational Church of Southern Africa known as Isililo, which means "the hatted ones". The Isililo women are responsible for praying for and with the sick and grieving and they take this responsibility seriously. Two afternoons a week they go visiting the sick and the shut-ins. They bring the church to people who cannot get to church. I visited six homes with them that first afternoon. As we approached each home, the women, 20 of them in all, would start singing hymns. They would keep singing until all were inside the home and then one of the women would be appointed to take the lead in that visit. The chosen individual would select and read a Scripture appropriate to the situation and then she would lead us all in prayer. After that the person we were visiting would be asked to describe their situation. This was translated for me and then I was asked to offer prayers of healing. Lastly I would wrap the person we were visiting in a prayer shawl sent over from their friends in Massachusetts. This usually brought tears of joy. Then the group would start singing again and we said our good-byes and we walked away singing. I recognized

the tune of many of the hymns the women sang and they comforted me. I also felt the prayers that were offered by others even though I understood nary a word. I felt part of the group. The Spirit of Christ had made us one. With the Isililo women I had found community.

On Sunday of that week we visited a church called Sabantu. It, too, felt strange. Church was scheduled for 10 a.m., but people began arriving around 10 and gathered outside the church in the warm sun. This was in late June, but it was winter in South Africa. It was chilly in the unheated church and the sun felt good as we waited for service to begin. Around 10:30 someone started a hymn and we walked inside singing. The speaker that day was Jan who was recruiting the Sabantu church for the partnership program. He showed a video of the Massachusetts churches in the partnership. When Townsend Congregational Church showed up on the screen, I cried out without thinking, "That's my church!" People laughed. Then I started crying as I saw the inside of this sanctuary with many of you and myself worshipping together. Once again I felt a stranger in a strange land, a long way from home. I felt bereft of community.

Not so. Jesus has taken down the dividing wall. After worship, which was 2 and ½ hours, we were invited to partake of a light luncheon with several of the church members. We visited over lunch and found we had much in common, including a love of African grass tea, which I had been drinking at home. I didn't feel so alone anymore.

The next Sunday we went to a church in Umzinyathi which is partnered with the North Leominster UCC church. The service didn't seem as alien this time. I

preached. During prayer time following the sermon, the minister of Umzinyathi told me his congregation wanted to pray for me. They then all prayed their own prayers outloud all at the same time. Their prayers became louder and more fervent as time passed. I felt immersed in prayer. It was powerful. At the close of worship I presented gifts to the folks in Umzinyathi that had been sent with me from the people in their partner church. But when Rev. Makhanya, the minister of Umzinyathi, presented me with gifts for the Congregational Church of Christ in North Leominster, I felt our differences once again. The gifts Umzinyathi sent to Leominster were a full-size Zulu shield, spear, and club! During the presentation, Rev. Makhanya pounded on the shield with the club and said emphatically, “We want our friends in Leominster to know we are Zulu!” Shortly after that a deacon instructed me in the proper way to hold the spear in order to gut the enemy. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. I felt alone.

Not so. After the service the Halls and I were invited to have lunch with the minister and the male deacons. The food was different. It was mostly meat, the favorite food of Zulus. We ate with our hands. But over the food, we shared our love of the church and our concerns for her well-being. Christ had built each of us into the Church and we were one.

That evening there was more table fellowship as I attended a birthday dinner for one of the Lamontville women. This dinner was held in a European style restaurant. We sang Happy Birthday. We sang some hymns. And we had cake together. We were no longer strangers, but sisters in Christ.

Later that week, we had dinner at the home of the minister of Lamontville. There we shared mutual personal concerns and I offered prayers for the minister's son who had just had a stroke and the minister's wife laid hands on me and prayed for my well-being. We ended the evening with hymns. We were united in our faith in a loving God. There was no dividing wall making us strangers.

My last full day in South Africa, I preached in Lamontville. My sermon was about the goodness of God. Regularly throughout the sermon the congregation was to join in a responsive saying of "God is good all the time; all the time God is good." My translator taught the response and for the first two paragraphs of my sermon, the congregation responded appropriately in Zulu when the translator spoke. By the third paragraph, they were responding in to me in English, making me feel right at home! Jesus had broken down the dividing wall. I had found community in a Zulu church 8000 miles from home.

At the end of that service, we had an exchange of gifts. I had brought from you and the greater community 93 prayer shawls, 10 of which I had the joy of delivering in person. The other 83 were given to the Isililo women to share with the sick and grieving in their church and in the new adult day care center that Flo Madlala, our prayer partner in Lamontville, is going to be opening by the end of the year. Upon the presentation of the shawls there was much dancing and spontaneous singing. Then the Isililo women presented me with the stole I am wearing this morning. This stole represents what I am trying to say: Christ has made us one with believers all around the world. On the white side of this stole are Zulu symbols which if that is all we saw would only prove that we are divided: the shield, the

spear, and the club, the beer pot, etc. But Christ has taken down the dividing wall. Christian Zulu's are no longer drinkers of beer, but willing abstainers from all alcohol. Christian Zulu's are not longer warriors, but lovers of peace. The other side of this stole represents our oneness. It has Christian symbols on it. We are believers in Christ who rose from the dead leaving the cross empty. We are people who pray. And we are people who believe in service. This last symbol is the symbol of the United Church of Southern Africa whose motto is, "They will know our faith by our works."

I left South Africa feeling very differently than I did those first few days. I left feeling that I was one with the Christians I had met there, that the Spirit had made us one. Community, Christian community, I learned is wherever two or more are gathered in Christ's name. Community is to be found here in South Africa as surely as community is to be found here. Community is to be found all around the world as believers gather to worship this day, this World Communion Sunday, for we as Christians are the church and wherever we gather we find God in the Spirit who makes us one.

May all thanks and praise be to God, who in the midst of all that divides, makes community of former strangers. May all thanks and praise be to God who brings the kingdom near whenever we gather in Jesus' name and share Christ's love. Amen.