



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Unity in Diversity”
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – July 21, 2024
Ephesians 2:11-22

A Homily by the Reverend Jo P. Popham

There is just enough room in the world for all the people in it, but there is no room for the fences that separate them.¹ When Ericca spoke about her experience at General Convention 81 just a couple weeks ago, I was transported back to 2018 when I was blessed to be on the floor representing this diocese at General Convention 79 in Austin, Texas. There are always two or three camps of thought in the church and in society, and certainly in politics. The gathering in 2018 and most recently at General Convention 81 – Episcopalians from all over this country and beyond – lived into the spirit of the letter to the church in Ephesus, a spirit of reconciliation, of collegiality, of compromise, of knocking down walls that divided us. Years ago I learned that fence-sitting is not only a legitimate and Anglican way – the way of the *via media* – the middle way, NO, fence-sitting is what our Lord Jesus came to our world to teach us and that the church in Ephesus needed to learn, to break down the diving wall between two groups of people. Paul wrote to a number of churches he had planted teaching this same lesson taken from Jesus's teachings, that there is no longer Jew or Gentile but only one people. In the Temple, there was a physical barrier (a low wall) between the Court of Israel and that of the Gentiles. And Gentiles crossed this line on pain of death. But Christ Jesus united people who had been separated, so that all could be united in the household of God. No more was there a diving wall, no more was there to be a fence separating the people.

Rita Snowden, was a prolific author, prison chaplain, and Methodist church woman. She tells a story of an event during the second world war. In France some soldiers with their sergeant brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery to have him buried. The priest told them gently that he was bound to ask if their comrade had been a baptized adherent of the Roman Catholic Church. They said that they did not know. The

priest said that he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit burial in his churchyard. So the soldiers took their comrade sadly and buried him just outside the fence. The next day they came back to see that the grave was all right and to their astonishment could not find it. Search as they might they could find no trace of the freshly dug soil. As they were about to leave in bewilderment the priest came up. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their dead comrade to be buried in the churchyard; so, early in the morning, he had risen from his bed and with his own hands had moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.² That is what love can do. The rules and the regulations put up the fence; but love moved it. Jesus removed the fences between people because he abolished all religion founded on rules and regulations and brought to all a religion whose foundation is love.³

Each session on the floor of the House of Deputies of the General Convention in 2018 our chaplain began by leading us in prayer. He is from South Africa, but now does ministry in Los Angeles. It was a call and response prayer. He called out *Sawubona*. And we answered *Ngikhona*. *Sawubona* – I see you – even, I see the divine in you. *Ngikhona* – I am here. *Ngikhona* – I stand before you with my needs, my dreams, my joy, my sadness, my fear, and my love. *Sawubona... Ngikhona... Sawubona* – when you are seen it feels like being born; it is a relief and joy. The answer is *Ngikhona*. I am here.⁴ In the true spirit of *Ngikhona*, we were there for each other and for the church. Let's try it. I see you and am here for you and call out *Sawubona...* And you answer that you are here with what you have to offer... and you answer *Ngikhona*. In the true spirit of *Ngikhona*, we were there for each other and for the church. Let try it again: *Sawubona... Ngikhona...*

Clemens Frede is a performance psychologist for leaders – and an athlete and yoga instructor. In yoga we might begin our practice with the word '*Namaste*', which means '*I bow to you*', but is sometimes also translated as '*I see the divine in you, that is also in me*'. In Zulu they say '*Sawubona*' – '*I see you*'. When you say it consciously it has an incredible power. I see you. Not like asking 'How are you?' without actually expecting an answer. But really seeing someone. To say 'My whole attention is with you. I want to

understand you. I see your needs, your wants, your joy, your sadness, your fear and your love.’ Doesn’t everyone want to be seen like that? In our common discussions it seems that we listen to respond, not to understand. We present our case over and over. Rarely do we stop and say ‘I understand’ or even just ask something about what the other person said. Yet, when we do, suddenly, instead of opposition there is understanding; we find solutions, because we see each other. Too rarely do we surrender to what the other person is trying to say. We are simply not willing to see them. We only see our own position and don’t understand why we are not being heard. So we repeat it over and over. We don’t feel acknowledged... Until someone says: ‘*Sawubona*’. I see you.⁵

My prayer is that the church, that in our families, that the people of Destin, that our country, our legislature, that all people can live into being “one new humanity.” The hard work of reconciliation between people has already been done for us! Christ through his death has made disparate “groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between” people.

Paul told the new Christian Gentiles that they were – and we are – “one new humanity”... the divisions are gone – the fence is down. Christ brought the people together “in one body” – one humanity. The distinction between people and points of view is a thing of the past. We really are “one new humanity.”

Divisions that this church suffered in the past have been healing and still are healing. There can be unity in diversity! By the cross, Christ has given us this gift. My friends, the beautiful and thorny dilemma of how to deal with division among us in every faction of our lives leads us back to grace – and to be at peace with the fact that – we can be unified in and by our diversity rather than in spite of our diversity. The Holy Spirit can take care of those things that might divide us. And we should already be reconciled with our neighbors in spite of – and because of – the diverse culture in the church.

The Zulu greeting *Sawubona* – I see you – and our grateful response *Ngikhona* – I am

here – embraces in the sense that until you saw me, I didn't exist.

In WWII a priest moved the fence so that all could be together in sacred ground. In the ancient world, the Gentiles feared for their lives if they crossed the line that divided them from their Jewish peers. But no more – no longer! We should not be divided! Even in our disunity that threatens to keep us apart from one another, surely must not be when and where we come together to worship God – the loving, liberating, life-giving God. The unifying force for us is worship. We come to worship together praising God in prayer, and story, and song, and sharing bread and wine – hearing stories that tear down fences and bring us together as one family. My sisters and brothers, the real message of the Letter to the Ephesians is that we need to embrace the hard work of reconciliation of all God's people, and we need to accept that the work has already been done for us by Jesus Christ. We are “one new humanity” for we have the assurance of unity in diversity. We just need to live into our new humanity. Sawubona: I see you... Ngikhona: I am here for you ...

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ William Barclay's Study Bible on Ephesians, Chapter 2. See <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/ephesians-2.html>. Rita Snowden was a writer, preacher, public speaker, prison visitor, and traveler from Australia and New Zealand. She served God in all these capacities. Her passion was people; her favorite sport was conversation. She wrote a total of 84 books.

² Annie Dillard, “Holy the Firm” in *Cries Of The Spirit*, ed. By Marilyn Sewell (Boston Press, 1991), p. 199. Rita Snowden shared this story.

³ *Supra*. See William Barclay's Study Bible on Ephesians.

⁴ Meaning of Sawubona and Ngikhona: See <https://www.clemensfrede.com/sawubona-ngikhona>.

⁵ Again see Clemens Frede's blog at <https://www.clemensfrede.com/sawubona-ngikhona>.