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## *We Build the Body by Talking*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Last Pentecost – Year C**

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“He is the image of the invisible God. ... He is the head of the body, the church.”*

So I spent the last two days at our Annual Council, the gathering of all the churches in the Diocese of Atlanta so that we could talk. And talk. And talk some more.

And there we were as, we always seem to be, sitting around our tables in the large room, debating yet another resolution, people lining up behind the microphones to offer amendments to amendments, to explain how their position, exactly like the position of someone else was actually just a little bit different.

It is in the midst of all of this that I lose all of my patience. I once suggested that we not pass any resolutions that ask anyone else to do anything. If we aren't willing to do it, then we don't need to talk about it. This suggestion did not go very far. And it was in the midst of this kind of debate that I finally turned to our table and said, “Should we call the question?” Which is, of course, a procedure whereby you ask everyone to stop talking and just to vote.

The Dean, Sam Candler, looked at me and said, “Not yet. This is important. It's really not about the resolution. We are talking among ourselves. It's about us.”

I think he was onto something there. We were having a conversation in which all were invited to participate. We were having a conversation in which all were listened to. We were having a conversation in which respect and the dignity of all were really the only real rules.

The Dean was right. It was important. It was not about the resolution. It was about us.

Conversation, I think, is a good metaphor for community. Language, of course, is how we come to understand ourselves. Language is how we express ourselves. Language is how we come to build community.

And we all know what it's like to be left out of a conversation. We all know what it's like not to be heard. To be left out of a conversation is to lose status. To be left out of a conversation is to feel what anger is like. And to run the risk of not being included in a conversation, of course, is to anticipate losing status.

If you think you're about to be left out of a conversation, you're likely to be afraid. Anger and fear: these are the emotions that signal that we are being left out of a conversation.

And when we are left out of a conversation, we lose trust. When we are not part of the conversation, we don't trust it. And over time, we don't trust the people who are having it. We lose trust entirely because it depends, always, on a sense of being heard, seen, included, belonging.

Trust in a conversation is about being heard. Now many of us have a sense that our national conversation is breaking

down. We don't feel like we are being heard or we worry that we won't be heard in the future. Anger. Fear. Loss of trust.

What are we to do? We often feel a restless need to do something, to say something, to act. What should we do? Those gathered right here the Cathedral of St. Philip—what should we do? How can we make a difference?

I think our calling is to be church. That's what we need to do. We need to let church be church. That's the greatest influence that we can have to show the world to witness to what church actually looks like.

We of course our house of prayer for all people. We welcome people here, no matter where they are in their faith journey. But that's not just about finding a safe, comfortable place where you can grow in your personal, individual relationship with God. God has called us to be a Christ-centered community, a place where we learn how to be in relationship with God and with each other. How to enter into a conversation that is not dominated by fear or anger. That's what it means to be church.

Paul speaks to this, I think, powerfully in his letter to the Colossians. He says that Jesus is the head of the body, the church, the image of the invisible God. Now Paul gives more description in his first letter to the Corinthians. It is there, he says, that we are all baptized into one body, Jews and Greeks, slave and free. We are made to drink of one spirit.

He goes on to say that each part of that body has a gift. If the whole body were an eye, where would hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where with a sense of smell be? He goes on to say that if one part of the body suffers, all of the body suffers. If one member is honored, all members are honored.

He is saying, I think, that God has a purpose for us and it will take all of us—each and every one of us—to fulfill that purpose. Because each of us has a gift. We are unique. We are mysterious. Each of us has a gift. And we as a community—a Christ-centered community—cannot honor the purpose of God if each of those gifts are not recognized, acknowledged. We cannot be the house of prayer for all people if everyone's voice is not heard, if all of the mystery of God is not represented.

The second thing Paul is saying, I think, is that we are all dependent on each other. It is not just that we recognize all of the gifts that are represented. That's not enough. We also have to create a community where those gifts can be given. Dignity is not just about having a gift. Dignity is about giving that gift. It's not just about being heard. It is also about being able to speak. And that's why conversation is such a powerful metaphor for a Christ-centered community.

So again, what are we—the Cathedral of St. Philip—supposed to do right now, in the world as it is, to make a difference?

We, I think, are uniquely situated because we don't agree. We don't agree on anything. I once, when speaking to a class, said, "You know, I know that no matter what I say, half of you are going to disagree with it."

Somebody piped up from the back and said, "Oh George, that's not right. It'll be more of us than that."

We are not blue and we are not red; we are purple. We are not Democrat and we are not Republican; we are children of God. We do not believe that the principalities and powers of this world will save us, no matter what policies or prescriptions or structures that we create.

We believe that only God will save us. We believe that we are part of the body of Christ, with certain privileges and certain responsibilities. And because we here are who we are, so different and yet so committed, we can be church in a way that most faith communities cannot. Most faith communities are more homogeneous. They're gathered around a central principle, more so than we are. They tend to agree with each other more readily than we do.

And that is our opportunity. That is our call, I think: to be church, to show the world what a real conversation looks like, to be radically respectful in a way that recognizes the dignity of every human being. Not just recognizing they have a gift, but creating a place where that gift can be given. We are a house of prayer for all people.

And that doesn't mean that it's safe and secure to retreat to your respective corners and work on your individual relationship with God. That means that you are part of the body of Christ, part of a body in which each member has a gift, part of a body in which each of those gifts is given, where everybody speaks in the conversation and all are heard.

I once heard a story about a group in Africa, a group of missionaries who were incredibly successful. Everywhere they went, the church grew and others who saw that success wanted, of course, to know, “How did you do it? What did you do?”

The head of the group said, “It’s not complicated, really. We just ask one of our families to move to a different village. They move into a home and they just begin to live there.”

“What did they say? What tracts they hand out? How do they convince people to follow Jesus?” he was asked.

“Oh, they don’t do anything in particular. They just love each other. They just live as they are called to live. And that seems to be enough. When people see what real love looks like, they want to be part of it. When people see what it means to take care of each other, to rely on each other, to be heard, to belong, they want to be part of it. We don’t say anything in particular. We show them God. We are the body of Christ and that is enough.”

We have a calling, I think, right now, in this time and place, to do something very unique and very powerful: to be the body of Christ, to let our church be church. And that will be enough.

Amen.