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## *General Convention, the Church, and the Body of Christ*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**

**Proper 10 – Year B**

*“God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:9-10)*

*“And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1:22-23)*

It is absolutely wonderful to see all of you this morning! It is wonderful to have our heads about us. (No, I am not going to preach about Salome and John the Baptist this morning!) What I want to talk about this morning is “Church.” Church.

That word, “Church” can mean a lot these days. For some of us (those of us here today!), “Church” is our Sunday routine, the place where we find refreshment and community, usually at least once a week, and often several times a week.

For others, the word “Church” seems to indicate something old and outmoded, behind the times, stuffy and out of date. Supposedly, it is the place people don’t go to anymore.

And some people find the word “Church” to mean something too political, too structured, too administrative.

If you are in this last group, you would not have liked where I have been the past two weeks. I have been in Austin, Texas, for The General Convention of The Episcopal Church. Austin is fine, but I did not see much of it. I was inside the convention center and in meetings about twelve to fifteen hours a day.

The General Convention, which meets only once every three years, is the legislative body of The Episcopal Church, the body which has ultimate authority for how we are organized and how we practice the Christian faith. It sets the budget; and it is also responsible for most of the changes that some people have found controversial in the church!

For instance, it was The General Convention which did things like: allow women to be ordained as priests and bishops, and revise the Book of Common Prayer, and allow persons of the same gender to be married sacramentally. You’ve heard of those things? Did you hear them as controversies? I am thankful that each of those practices has been part of The Episcopal Church for some time.

But I want to say something in particular, this morning, about this year’s General Convention, and the way it provides a way for us to be “Church.” Yes, I know that “Church” is a community gathered in prayer and in scripture around this altar. I know that “Church” gathers around the Body of Christ, as the Body of Christ.

But I want to say, this morning, that good legislative practice and good parliamentary procedure, is also the way we are Church.

It was my honor to be elected as one of four clergy deputies from the Diocese of Atlanta for this past convention. In fact, this was about the eighth General Convention where I have served as deputy. I actually do know the process. I know the people. I know how it works. That experience is probably why I was appointed to lead one of the potentially more

controversial legislative committees of convention. I was chair of the committee that considered resolutions about prayer book revision. It ended up that we were also the committee where same-gender marriage resolutions were sent.

So we had our work cut out for us. In the end, all went well, from my perspective. I am in favor of revising the format and structure and words of how we pray—just as I am always in favor of growing and developing. I love traditional prayer, and I also love prayer that develops as we do. I delivered a speech that reminded us of the words of John Henry Newman: “to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

In addition, I was in favor of a resolution that allowed same-sex couples to be married in their local parishes, with their local rector’s blessing, even if the diocesan bishop is theologically opposed to same-sex marriage. There are about eight dioceses in our wider church who are affected by that situation. Again, I believe we worked out a healthy and honorable compromise, in committee, and in convention.

There were other notable issues that came before General Convention. We discussed how we might, as a Church, appeal to Israel about the plight of Palestinians there, an issue that has come before us for years. And we resolved how we might monitor healthy church practices which protect us from sexual harassment. We resolved further actions on dismantling racism. We welcomed The Church of Cuba, in reunion with The Episcopal Church, one of the most touching moments of convention! Many members of General Convention even had time to travel to the Hutto Detention Center to make a prayer witness in support of detained immigrants. There were other issues and resolutions, and anyone can find those resolutions on the web sites of The Episcopal Church.

But it is the spirit of General Convention, in legislative session, that I want to note this morning. Even with some controversial matters, this year’s spirit was even more grace-filled and honorable than those of recent years. Maybe that is because some people were relieved, thinking that we did not formally vote to revise the actual Book of Common Prayer—even though, in my analysis, I think we did.

No, what makes the General Convention work gracefully are the holy practices of offering and then letting go. Offering and letting go.

Remember, there were around 880 deputies at this year’s convention, and maybe 150 bishops. It is hard, maybe impossible, for that many smart and well-intended and firm people to come to one mind about almost anything, at least with precise words. So, we work in a highly legislative way, with precise rules of parliamentary procedure. Our parliamentarian rightly reminded us this year that “parliamentary procedure” is not something to be afraid of. The word “parliament” comes from the root word, “Parler” which means to talk, to speak.

Good parliamentary procedure is how over eight hundred people are able to talk, civilly, with each other. It works, and it actually provides grace.

Here’s what I mean. Once someone offers a word, or a resolution, to the process, that word—as wonderful as it is—is no longer hers or his. The proposer really has to let go, has to let go of her or his wonderful idea. Because, once it is accepted, a committee starts fiddling with it, fooling with it, supposedly trying to make it better, and ultimately shaping that word into more conformity with what the larger body wants. Then, when the committee changes a resolution and sends it to the House of Deputies, well, then the committee, too, has to let it go. A successful resolution is one that has been considered by wider and wider groups of voices and opinions. And everyone sure does have an opinion, right?

Good parliamentary procedure is about offering one’s idea and proposal, and then letting it go. Once offered, let it go. That great idea—and we all have them—no longer belongs to us. It belongs to the body. Offering and letting go. Offering and letting go.

Slowly, and sometimes with an enormous messy tangle, the process actually works. Somehow, the Holy Spirit shows up in good legislative and parliamentary procedure. I realize that the legislative process is not for everyone! But it sure does work.

Indeed, this is how the Church operates and grows as the Body of Christ.

Ephesians, chapter one, says that God’s plan is to gather up all things in Christ. But, “all things” sure is a lot! Imagine what God is gathering up, all sorts of opinions and ideas, and hopes and dreams. But, as God gathers us together, in Christ, we

become church, which Ephesians later calls explicitly the “Body of Christ.”

General Convention, and the legislative process, gives us a model for how any community grows into the Body of Christ. First, we offer. Then, once we have offered something of ourselves to the body, we have to let go of it, giving our gift over to the greater good. That part we have offered no longer belongs only to ourselves. It belongs to the body, the greater good. Maybe it was our wonderful idea, our proud idea, ours alone. But no more.

In the church, no one of us—no matter who we are—none of us gets only our own way. We get the Church’s way. We get the way of the greater good. We get the way of Christ.

Something else holy happens in this process of spirit-filled legislative action. We learn that the voice of our neighbor is just as legitimate, just as important, as ours. The voice of the Other has just as much honor as our own voice.

So it is, in this holy conversation, that community is formed. So it is that a common voice is formed. So it is that the Body of Christ is formed. It is hard work, it is patient work, it can be messy work, and it is ultimately holy work.

Yes, the Body of Christ sure can be messy and inelegant. Hey, Ephesians said it is all things that are being gathered together! All things! But as God gathers all those things, and all those people, we become holy, we become perfected, just as a resolution is “perfected.” We’re not there yet! But we are becoming perfected, as the Body of Christ.

AMEN.

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