
That's What I'm Talking About!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
Atlanta, Georgia
The Sixth Sunday of Easter - Year B**

I have an interesting habit.

I like to talk - a lot.

In fact, I'll pretty much talk to anybody, at any time, in any place, for any reason. I'll talk to people I pass on the street. I'll talk to servers in the restaurant. I'll talk to cashiers at the store.

The kids have tried to save me. They've tried nonverbal cues - like rolling their eyes, or letting out long, audible sighs. They've even tried a little post-experience counseling. "You know, Dad, she didn't think you were funny."

I've heard my wife say more than once, "George, we're just going in for a minute. Don't wander off looking for someone you know to talk to."

Last summer, I found myself in an energetic conversation with a Baptist preacher I had just met. We were at Chastain Park waiting for the group in front of us to clear the fairway. When he found out that I was a preacher too, he let loose a long invective about our President's attitude toward Christianity.

I thought his views might benefit from some clarification.

When I got back in the cart, my son shook his head and, in a tone of familiar resignation, said, "So, Dad, did you think you were going to convince him on the first tee?"

I have learned, though, that I come by this "gift" naturally.

I got it from my mother.

Mom has never met a stranger. She is genuinely interested in people and always seems to have the energy to listen to their stories. She can make a new friend between the fresh vegetables and dairy section of the grocery store. We were always the very last ones to leave church on Sunday. And, she's just as happy to talk about Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy, as she is about where to get the best seafood in downtown Savannah.

We could always count on a guest at the dinner table on Christmas Eve. Someone Mom had met who might otherwise have been eating alone.

The kids call their experience of my mother's gregariousness the "Maxwell Phenomenon."

Mom and Dad moved around a lot in the early years of their marriage. Just about the time Mom would get settled into a new town, it would be time to move. My father was an Episcopal priest, so he had the Church waiting for him.

Mom would have to find new friends. She always did, of course, and now they seem to be everywhere. The kids are convinced that, anywhere they go in the South, there will be somebody there who knows their grandmother.

As I watch my mother now, though, I realize that, in talking to people, she is doing more than just making new friends. She is doing more than just being interested, or patient, or empathetic, or confident, or hopeful. She is doing more than just listening to people, valuing them appropriately, or doing good deeds for them.

She is creating community.

I don't know that she would describe it this way, but it's as if she can just look at someone and imagine how they might fit into the community. Then, she quietly goes about doing what needs to be done to make those connections happen. I don't think she plans it. It's just who she is.

I've had a chance to see this part of my mother in a new light recently.

My mother is a member of Christ Church in Savannah. Dad was the Rector there for twenty years. He retired in the early 1990s.

Almost five years ago, a number of members of Christ Church voted to break away from the Episcopal Church and associate themselves with the Church of Uganda. The Diocese of Georgia sued the break-away congregation to recover the church buildings, endowment and other property.

The lawsuit went as almost all of the other similar cases around the country have gone. The law in most states is pretty clear. You can leave the Episcopal Church, but you can't take the property with you. It belongs to the Church.

The story is in what happened to the community.

Mother and the other remaining members of Christ Church were forced to meet in another building until the litigation could be resolved. They didn't have an ordained priest. They didn't have any staff. They didn't have any money. They didn't even have the silver, linens, and books that they had always used to celebrate the Eucharist.

But, they did know how to talk - to each other and to the world.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Louise Shipp wrote them all down when she designed a new seal for the Church. The body of the seal is an image of The Lamb of God with halo on azure blue field, holding the Primatial staff with the Resurrection banner emblazoned with the cross of Saint George. Centered beneath this image is a single Cherokee Rose.

The seal seems to function like a sacrament. It serves to reveal the presence of Christ in places we might have missed it otherwise.

No sooner had it been created, than it began to appear all over town. You'd see it on cars, in windows and, of course, in every possible form of electronic media.

It even seemed to possess a sense of playfulness that I often associate with the presence of Christ. Sightings of the seal began to flood my inbox. There it was on "Good Morning America," at the Vatican, in Alaska, around Paris, and across Eastern Europe.

In each case, it had persuaded a smiling face to hold it up before the camera.

It was not all so easy, though.

I watched Mom and her friends make clear statements about who they were. They took out an ad in the paper to affirm their belief in traditional Anglican doctrine. They hired a priest and a deacon, who would later become the first woman and the first African-American priest in the history of the parish. They invited back to the Church people who had left in reaction to the theology and social positions of the former Rector and his staff.

They chose their words carefully. They talked about those that left as their "brothers and sisters in Christ," rather than the "break-away" congregation or the "Ugandans." They talked about "prevailing in the litigation," rather than about winning the fight.

The senior warden told people to "smile for Jesus" when taking pictures, and this became a mantra for the

community. Soon, parishioners were "scrubbing floors for Jesus," and "changing light bulbs for Jesus."

They found the courage to say those things that needed to be said. When it came to the law suit, they named the wrongs that had been committed, and the people who had committed them. This was painful, of course. It fractured friendships and split families.

But, they exercised the judgment not to say the things those things that didn't need to be said. They refused to talk about the litigation in their worship space. They refused to respond to repeated public attacks on their character - claims that they weren't really Christians, or that they didn't believe in the divinity of Christ. They refused to demonize those who had left the Church.

In each case, there was something about their language. Whatever the topic, the language always seemed to reflect an understanding that it wasn't entirely about them. They had experienced the love of God and it was this love that they were so committed to sharing with others.

And so, they kept on talking.

It occurs to me that they weren't talking to people just to make new friends, or to show that they were interested, or patient, or empathetic, or confident, or hopeful.

They weren't talking to people just to show that they valued them appropriately, or as a way of doing something good for them.

They were talking to people because they were creating a community, a community in which Christ would be at the center. And, they knew that how they talked would determine what kind of community they would have.

They knew they had to choose. A community can't have Christ as its center and be over against someone else at the same time.

When all of this started, Mom was in a prayer group. These women had been meeting for longer than I can remember. I'm convinced that they know more about me than I do. They prayed me through college. They prayed me through law school. They prayed me through seminary. Wherever I was in my life, I knew that they were praying for me.

They didn't all agree on which direction the Church should take, though. Some of them went with the break-away group. Some of them stayed with Christ Church. Some of them went to the Methodist Church.

But, they did find a way to keep talking to each other. They did find a way to keep sharing their lives with each other. They did find a way to keep praying for each other.

They didn't do it just to be nice. They did it, I suspect, because they knew that they had something special. They had created a community with Christ at its center, and they simply refused to give it up.

And so, they just kept on talking.

As I said, I have an interesting habit.

I like to talk - a lot.

I got it from my Mom.

As I watch her use it, I am realizing how valuable it can be in creating community.

So, if you see me talking to the guy on the street, or the server in the restaurant, or the cashier in the store, that's what I'm talking about!

Amen