

Encounters with the Holy at Annual Conference 2007
Trinity Sunday/Disciple Recognition
Proverbs 8:1-4, Romans 5: 1-5, John 16: 12-15
June 3, 2007

On this Trinity Sunday as we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” and reflect on the awe that we feel for the Triune God I want to begin with one of the holiest symbols in my life. I have to come down here to snatch it from Katie’s hand but I want to hold up her engagement ring. In the center of it is a beautiful diamond. As I give it back to her I want to teach you a little about the formation of a diamond. Diamonds are pure carbon. Although I bought that diamond for Katie thirteen years ago it is hundreds of millions of years old. You see diamonds form in the mantle of the earth, at least seventy miles below the surface of the earth under extreme heat and pressure. Pure carbon is compressed and then slowly flows to the earth’s crust in little volcanic rivers. Finally it is deposited near the surface of the earth, hidden away in rock structures.

I learned all I ever needed to know about these little beauties at the age of sixteen when I took my first job in the jewelry business. Informally I learned all I needed to know in buying this ring from two gemologists – Enrico Addressi and Bill Everhart. I learned about cut diamonds derive their value from the various combinations of cut, color, clarity and carat weight. Bigger is not always better with diamonds. If they are chiseled and polished to ideal proportions in all their 58 facets, if they have the right color, if they are free from flaws that weaken the stone or damage its look, they can produce a fire that is absolutely breathtaking to the eye. These round, loose diamond beauties can then be set in gold or platinum in four- or six-pronged settings. The gold or platinum must be alloyed with other harder metals so that the prongs can protect the stone from damage. For just the right stone, six prongs are better for it protects the stone from

falling out and being lost. The finished product is a beautiful reminder that this pure carbon beauty is the hardest thing on earth. It is so hard that it can drill through the hardest rock known to man, all the ways to the depths from which it emerged.

You know if we squeezed all the water out of our bodies (oxygen and hydrogen) what you'd be left with is almost pure carbon – dust if you want to be less romantic. And linked together as one body of all of us – the Body of Christ if you like – we form a beautiful chain of carbon, blessed by water and the Word. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome and to you and I to reveal some of the great truths of God's ultimate reality. First, we have been “made right” by God. What does this mean? It's like gravity. There is a relationship between a large object (the earth or God) and smaller objects like you and me. We are always attracted back to the larger object. No you can jump up and down to try to escape. But you always come back down. You just have to remember that you are a smaller object. Now this gravity is not a new thing. It was here before the formation of the world. So God did this before you got here. That's just like what God did in Jesus Christ for you and me. It's done. Our job is to accept that we are smaller objects. That's faith...that's trust. But the verses from our passage that I want to focus on this morning comes in verse three after the phrase, “but not only that.” Even though we have gravity, even though we have the assurance that we have “peace with God,” there is still the little matter of daily living. So Paul describes this strange little phrase that we can rejoice in affliction! Say what? He says this because of this little relationship that goes like this: affliction produces perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope. And our hope is sustained by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

William Barclay points out some interesting points about the Greek words that Paul uses for “affliction” and “character.” The word for affliction is really a geological term for intense pressure and stress – like thousands of pounds per square inch applied to the human condition. What does that remind you of? Uncut, raw diamonds? Pure carbon after the water is squeezed out? The word for “character” that Paul uses is the noun for what is left in a precious metal after all the impurities are burned away. The image is that of the silversmith working to produce the refined, pure silver. But wait. Remember that the perfect diamond ring I described is set in a gold setting that is alloyed with other base metals so that it can protect the diamond from the snags and tugs of the world! You never put a diamond in a setting of pure gold, much less pure silver, which is much too soft to hold this stone. But ah, character is always housed in a soft, vulnerable heart, is it not? Just like love, this diamond that we house is most valuable when we run the risk of losing it. So let me put together this image that Paul and I are working on. This huge, uncut diamond in the rough, which has persevered invisibly for millions of years under intense pressure now rests on this soft, pure silver setting of human character. How strangely beautiful... yet I don't recommend it for an engagement ring!

Close your eyes and visualize that image for a moment. As you open your eyes I want to suggest that this is the image for the 2007 Texas Annual Conference from which we have just returned. Its theme was entitled “Encounters with the Holy.” This is a perfect theme for Trinity Sunday as well. I want to share just a few of those encounters with the Holy and a few afflictions that we encountered as well for our week in the Woodlands. These afflictions were really pressures, flaws, and other somewhat painful moments. Let me start with me. As many of you know I ran as a candidate for the

Conference delegation to 2008 General Conference. As I went off to the Woodlands I would describe my chances as somewhere between slim and none. But I had not prepared myself for this drama revealed in *Powerpoint* before 2000 in the Woodlands Sanctuary. For each of the sixteen ballots the results of the election were displayed from the elected all the way to those receiving just one vote. As the tally would approach zero, I would say a little prayer, “please Lord, let there be a least vote for me this time!” There were also the afflictions of the real and imagined tactics of the political forces at Conference. There was even a rumor of the Confessing Movement transmitting the approved voting list via text message to the cell phones of all of its party members from a laptop in the balcony. I am not sure we have that technology yet, but maybe it did happen. I also witnessed the personal anguish of one brother from north of Houston who had been openly confronted by a political opponent for my friend’s reconciling views. We prayed together that God would take away the anger and sadness that we felt at that moment.

But we did have Holy moments including the outstanding preaching of Conference preacher Will Willomon, the awesome witness of Dawson Taylor at our “Breaking the Silence” luncheon in front of almost 300 guests, with about 100 first-time guests to this event. We laid hands on our brothers and sisters in ministry as they accepted new appointments. And we saw a spontaneous outpouring of support for a new program to save the children of Africa from the epidemic of malaria through the “nothing but nets” program in which over 20,000 lives will be saved by the generosity of conference churches pooling their resources over just one day. That was a holy moment.

But the holy moment I want to focus on for just a moment came in the speech captured on this DVD by Rev. Dawson Taylor of the Cathedral of Hope. I hope you will get a copy of this DVD that we will make available. I don't want to steal the thunder of you watching that speech for yourself but I do want to retell one of Dawson's stories. Dawson was trying to encourage GLBT people and advocates to keep the faith for the work that lies ahead in the United Methodist to ensure full inclusion of all people in the full life of the church. He recalled the story of the great Michelangelo sculpted his masterpiece "David." He was asked how he was able to have the vision for David and to persevere through the many months of carving that brilliant statue in marble. The artist replied, "I saw the angel in that rough stone. And each time I chiseled away I knew that I was approaching the realization of freeing him from that stone." He then went on to list the acts of mercy, justice and grace that each of us can accomplish as we unleash in freedom the angelic vision of full inclusion. In the same way I see not the figure of David but a beautiful, full-cut diamond. Already I have seen God beginning to chisel away at this raw diamond in beautiful facets from that luncheon. The new Administrative Board Chair from a prominent, tall steeple church in Houston told me she is attending the RMN Convocation in Nashville and her Lay Leader who attended the luncheon may attend as well. One of my most respected, conservative colleagues, fresh from her doctoral program has been appointed in our neighborhood to Shepherd Drive UMC, a changing faith community, and I will have lunch with her soon to introduce her to the Montrose community. And I will be joining soon the Pastoral Accountability Group led by one of our more conservative voices, all in the name of better dialog to bring us to one beloved community.

What I see, sisters and brothers, is a fully formed diamond that is God striving to free from the bondages of this earth. Just like a diamond it has emerged from the afflictions and heat of the earth to reveal God's ultimate glory. And think about the ultimate fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Romans. Think for a moment what is the most famous diamond on earth. It is of course the *Hope diamond*. This is our diamond as well – the gift of hope. May it never die but be renewed in all of us. Remember also that this diamond took millions of years to form. Let us pray that reconciliation will not take nearly as long.

So what is our strength and hope? We have been made right by the Lord. We can jump up and come down – not by any action or power of our own, but only by the power of a holy God. We have the Holy Spirit poured out on this beautiful community all around us. Carbon plus water plus spirit makes all of us perfect in God's sight. But most of all we can still claim hope to see and experience holy encounters with a living God in which new facets of this diamond that we call the body of Christ are yet to emerge.