

Message for Opening Worship, The Connectional Table, May 12, 2009

Mary Brooke Casad

I want to thank Bishop Hopkins for giving me this opportunity to bring the message for our opening worship. And I want to thank our youth and young adult members, Bethany Amey, Benjamin Boruff and Stefanie Schultz and our CT office manager, Stefany Simmons, for their work and creativity in planning our worship time together.

Their selection of our meeting theme "Entrusted with a gift: Called to serve" has indeed been a timely one for me as I have pondered my journey over the last 1 ½ years, for my time as Executive Secretary of the CT has also been marked by the deaths of three family members: my father, Bishop Ben Oliphint, my youngest brother, Kelley Oliphint, and my mother, Nancy Oliphint.

As I have reflected on the theme "Entrusted with a gift: Called to serve," three things have emerged for me that have, I believe, both corporate meaning for us all, as well as being personally meaningful to me: identity, inheritance and service.

We have indeed been entrusted with the gift of our identity, called by name at our baptism and initiated into the family of God. What a gift it is for, as scripture informs us, "once we were no people, but now we are God's people."

The gift of our identity brings with it an appreciation of who we are and whose we are, of an understanding that we are beloved children of God, each made in God's image. Our identity is affirmed as we gather together as the Body of Christ, those who are called by His name. Our identity as United Methodists brings a unique gift to our place in this body, one that sets us apart with a distinct DNA and heritage. But with the gift of our identity comes great expectations. As Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required."

Now my mother had a unique way of reminding her children of their identity. My husband Vic experienced this on our very first date. As we left the house,

he noted that my mother bid us goodbye and said, "Remember the Alamo!" From another room in the house he heard my grandmother call, "Remember the Alamo!" Little brother Kelley ran to the door and called "Remember the Alamo!" By the time we got in the car Vic was pretty curious.

"I don't understand what's going on," he said. "Didn't you grow up in Louisiana? So what's with the Texas history?"

Now the Alamo, located in San Antonio, Texas, was an old mission that was the site of a famous battle in 1836 when Texas was fighting for its independence from Mexico. History records that all 179 defenders of the Alamo perished in the battle with Santa Anna's troops, which numbered over five thousand. The cry "Remember the Alamo!" became the cry of the Texans in subsequent battles, as they paid homage to the fallen heroes and encouraged each other on to victory, which eventually came.

My grandmother never told me why she selected that phrase; after all, she did grow up in Marshall, Texas, before marrying and living the rest of her life in Louisiana. I was only told that when my mother was young and leaving the house, my grandmother would remind her to "Remember the Alamo!" My mother continued the tradition with her children, as I did with mine.

So, on that first date with my future husband, I explained that the phrase "Remember the Alamo!" was a code. And the code meant: "Remember who you are. Remember that you are a part of this family, and you are loved. Remember that to be a part of the family means that you have been given a great gift of identity, and with it comes great expectations of how you honor and use that gift."

We've been entrusted with the gift of identity as God's children; how will we respond?

What about the gift of inheritance? I've come to see this gift in a multi-faceted way. Some might look at the worldly inheritance my parents left my two brothers and me and say "Too bad. You've inherited stocks at a time when the stock market plummeted. You've inherited a house at a time when real estate values have greatly decreased. Not much of an inheritance."

Likewise, some might look at our United Methodist Church, and say to us "Too bad. You've inherited a church with declining membership and attendance in some locations. You've inherited a church with dwindling resources. Not much of an inheritance."

On one level, this might be an accurate description. But I'm reminded of the passage in Romans 8 that proclaims, "that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." Don't we have an inheritance, as our communion liturgy instructs us that "is imperishable and undefiled, and unfading"?

My brothers and I agree that our true inheritance cannot be measured in worldly terms; for they don't make certificates and deeds for what we have truly inherited. So it is with the Body of Christ.

My father's greatest inheritance to me was his love of and service to the Church, which I watched over the years and learned so much from. He chaired the Board of Directors for the United Methodist Reporter newspaper, and 15 years later I found myself in that same chair. I'll never forget the day I called him to tell him that the board had decided we needed to sell the building that housed the Reporter offices and production center. This was the building he had labored hard to raise money for, several hundreds of thousands of dollars, and had personally given to. With fear and trepidation I delivered the news of the impending sale.

His response was: "Go ahead and sell it. You always do what's best for the mission and ministry. Buildings and structures are simply tools that serve a purpose for a time. Be thankful you have it as an asset, and sell it, so that you can advance the ministry."

As we have been led to focus in four particular ministry areas of creating new places for new people, developing principled Christian leaders, improving health globally and eliminating poverty, perhaps we need to assess our resources in a different light...the light of Christ Jesus. Perhaps we need to study and pray about how God is calling us to be the best stewards of our inheritance, and how it can best serve God in the future. Perhaps we have been called to a time of receiving the tradition and risking

it for something new, so that we may not be, as John Wesley feared, "a dead sect, having the form of religion, but not the power."

Yes, the greatest gift we've been given is faith in Christ Jesus. My dad often quoted British historian, Sir Herbert Butterfield: "Hold fast to Christ, and let everything else go." We've been entrusted with the gift of an inheritance; how will we respond?

As our theme suggests, God has entrusted us with gifts so that we may be in service with and for others. My brother Kelley was only 34 years old when he became the chief executive officer of the Fayette County hospital in LaGrange, Texas. Prior to that, he had been a vice-president at Methodist Hospital, Houston, where a quote from the Nobel Prize winning Indian poet Tagore graces the main entrance:

I slept and dreamt that life was all joy,

I awoke and saw that life was but service.

I served and understood that service was joy!

Kelley's ministry in health care was shaped by this poem, and the staff and medical personnel of his hospital soon came to know Kelley's motto: "Service is joy!" He led the efforts to create a new hospital with a new name: St. Mark's Medical Center, because, as Kelley said, St. Mark was a man of the people.

Kelley's vision for the hospital was that the entire facility would be wrapped around a chapel and healing garden, symbolizing the centrality of spiritual healing. In a few weeks, our family will attend a dedication ceremony for this garden, which will be named for Kelley. It's an appropriate memorial for him as we remember his own journey through illness, and the comfort and reassurance he found in his faith.

For me, this hospital facility has become a tangible symbol of our Wesleyan heritage, for it is from our center where we draw strength from our relationship with God that enables us to reach out in service to the world. Out of personal piety, comes social holiness.....a transformed heart, a transformed world.

We've been entrusted with many gifts and are called to serve....for such a time as this. But it is a different time than we have ever known before; and we may be frightened and uncertain as we mourn what has been and is no more.

At the conclusion of each of the memorial services for my three family members, all held in St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, a lone bagpiper processed down the aisle playing "The Lord's My Shepherd." When he reached the front pew where our family was seated, he turned and led us out to the tune written by our ancestor, Scottish poet Carolina Oliphant, Lady Nairne: "Will Ye No Come Back Again?"

But my mother's service was held on Mardi Gras, "Fat Tuesday," the day before Ash Wednesday. So to pay tribute to her Louisiana heritage, we decided we needed "the second line." The tradition of "the second line" comes from New Orleans, dating back to the early 1800's, when slaves and free people of color created the Jazz Funeral. The "first line" was the family, walking slow and mournfully to the cemetery. But when the burial was over "the second line," composed of a jazz band and friends, began a joyful dance, parading through the streets, celebrating the life of the deceased and helping release his or her soul.

So at my mother's service, when the family had been led out by the bagpiper and reached the fellowship hall, a jazz band in the back of the sanctuary began to play "When the Saints Go Marching In," and the South Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops and spouses led the congregation into the fellowship hall as "the second line." And our mourning was turned to dancing!

Could it be that The Connectional Table is being called on to be "the second line" for our United Methodist Church, as our church mourns what has been and faces a time of uncertainty?

Are you ready to lead our church in "the second line?" Are you ready to proclaim that as Easter People, we have been entrusted with the gifts of identity and inheritance, and we are called to serve? Don't you want to get up and dance and shout and proclaim the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ, and invite all to join us in a joyful parade? God's identified us as God's children and joint heirs with Christ---can there be any greater gift? It's now our privilege and honor to serve God, by serving others. We are called to trust God and walk in newness of life, so I ask you:

Will you join me in "the second line?"            Amen.