

I remember going to birthday parties when I was a child. I would dress up (I had party dresses then) and I would take some present that we had worked hard to pick out. Mom and I wrapped the present just right, with ribbons and bows, and a special tag. By the time I found the birthday boy or girl, I was ready to see them open the gift right then and there in front of me, just to see their faces light up at the present I had bought for them.

Don't you just love to get presents? I like to give them almost as much as to get them, and so that makes today special for me. It's special because today we'll see a new member baptized into the family of God, and know that we have promised him the best we have to offer, the same grace and love and family that was offered to each of us in our baptisms.

Over the course of what we hope will be a long and happy life, we'll have other opportunities to spend time with L. A, and to see his little face lit up...and we hope to have plenty of chances to see his face light up with the love of Christ and sense of belonging that we promise here when we baptize someone. It's a special day, when we get a new little brother to look out for, and make promises to care for him and help him learn about God's great love for him through our own love, and our own experiences, and our own stories about knowing God as a part of our lives.

Paul and the other apostles, bishops, and missionaries of the early Church traveled the known world, bringing the gospel into the lives of people of different races, colors, and countries. As they did, they brought with them a sense that in Christ, we are reborn into a new family, the family of God, and that these new relationships were nearly as momentous as the moment of baptism itself. They were a cause to celebrate, to remember in prayer, to count on God for strength, mercy, and protection for brothers and sisters in the faith the world over in a time when things seemed sometimes dangerous and unstable. Gee, does that sound familiar!

These are still words that we need to hear today, that despite mine collapses and bridge collapses and terror threats and war and famine and all manner of violence we perpetrate on one another, despite the unkind words and short tempers and pettiness in our own lives, God is still God, and offers to us the best he has to offer. In the church, we come together to be made into something better than we are apart, into the Body of Christ, and in this body, we are called to give the best we have to offer to each other, and to those who are not yet a part of this community of faith...when we leave this place, we take the best we have to offer out into our often violent and struggling world...and we can change it.

In Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, he was writing to a church he did not start. It was not his, in any human sense. He didn't start it, he wasn't there regularly leading it, they didn't consider Paul to be their spiritual head (or at least, not the only one). But the Colossian church was Paul's, because it was one of many places where God was worshiped and Christ's words taught...and all these places were home to Paul, who spent little time in his "real" home in Tarsus. Instead he considered all the churches and Christian communities his because of the love they shared, the way their lives had been transformed by the Holy Spirit, how they all tried to live after the example of Christ.

Paul wanted to give to each of his churches the best he had to offer, and he does it here in the beginning of the letter to the Colossians. As he commends them for their faith, which he has heard of, he gives an affirmation of his faith, and of their shared faith, confirming that they are all together members of kingdom of God, sharing "the inheritance of the saints" through Christ's saving work, in the power and strength and knowledge of God.

Paul looks at faith on two levels: we receive faith through Jesus Christ, in the good news of God's love and grace in the world. Paul says the gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the world. He says, too, that he

prays for the Colossians' growth in faith, that God might fill them with knowledge and strength for the trials life inevitably brings. While Paul does not speak of an end to faith, and in the power of the resurrection in Jesus Christ, there is no end to our faith, he speaks of faith in the good news, and then faith that grows in us as a result of the good news.

Today we will reaffirm our faith as a church...the early service will do it in song and prayer and fellowship, and on behalf of us all, the 11 am service will use the historic and profoundly meaningful words of the Apostle's Creed to witness to our faith, as Ann Street Church receives L. A into membership through baptism. Baptism is itself a profoundly affirming act, reminding us that we are saved by grace through faith, of God's unending love for us, of the good news that we share as the saints in the light, the bearers and sharers of God's mercy.

Today promises will be made to a child, and a family. Promises about life, and hope, and love, and faith. As we affirm our faith in the Apostle's Creed, we make a commitment to help our new member grow in that same faith, to share our belief in God, to help him know and share his own relationship with God. What we are about is not so different from what Paul was about in the introduction to his letter to the Colossians: we are sharing together the best we have to offer. From our newest members to

the ones who have been with us the longest, we bring together all our gifts and all our shortcomings, and find that God truly makes us better together in his kingdom and family, than we ever could be apart. That's why I will always tell you that Christian faith has a hard time growing in a vacuum; it's hard to be a Christian alone.

Every time and any time we welcome someone into our fellowship of faith, here at Ann Street and as Christians and members of God's great community of faith, we are giving them the best we have to offer . It's not the best because we are perfect. We're not, and we probably don't need me pointing out examples of how not perfect we are (I promise, I would only pick on myself...there's plenty there). It's not the best because we have a beautiful sanctuary or a historic church. It's not the best because we have a great music team and choir, although we do. And it's not the best we have to offer because this is a loving, giving, sharing church...even though we are. When we welcome someone, anyone into our midst, we are giving them the best we have to offer because we are offering them Christ incarnate in his Body, the Church, here in this place. Today we're not only getting a new brother...we're showing him Christ, and how Christians live and behave, what we believe and how we love and who we

mean to be, and who we are in the love of God and presence of the Holy Spirit.

We offer to people the best of what we have when we offer them community, a group of people bound together by love, who can see one another through whatever life throws at us because we share an eternal perspective. This church has seen wars, depression, great sickness, deep sorrow and loss...and has not lost its faith. This church has seen a booming and then collapsing industry, a change from “old Beaufort” to whatever new and wonderful thing Beaufort is becoming, and it has not lost its faith. This church has weathered storm after storm, both literal and metaphorical, and yet it has not lost its faith. To the contrary, it has grown...grown in faith, in hope, in confidence that God is with us, and that whatever we go through, God is with us. Whatever darkness we, and Beaufort, have been through, this church has remained a light, a beacon, a sign of faith to our community about the goodness of God, and the best we have to offer.

And our church is not an end; it is just a beginning. The churches on the corners around us are a part of God’s kingdom and family, and that makes them ours, too...sharing all together, maybe not always as well as we’d like, in the fellowship of the faith. When Paul spoke of “the Father,

who has enabled [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light” he was speaking of the One who joins us all together, despite our different buildings, different songs, different versions of the Bible, different languages, colors, and countries. Paul literally meant that differences of nationality, color, class, and what my grandmother would call “raisin” (and not the dried grapes kind) are brought together into the beautiful picture, the kaleidoscope that is the Kingdom of God. That’s how God likes it. That’s the best we have to offer.

That’s what we’re about here. That’s the point of this sermon, and of the baptism we’re celebrating, and of the place in this house of worship for everyone who is here now, and everyone who could be: the best we have to offer is us, and God in us, and the story of how Christ came to be a part of our lives. Jesus promised that if we would gather in his name, even just a few of us, that he would be here with us. And so he is: in our love for God, and for one another, in our good works and in our shared celebrations and concerns. And that is what we have to offer, this is our best: Jesus Christ, in our presence, in our love, in our faith and our faithfulness, and even in our failings.

It would be easy to dismiss this letter to the church at Colossae. Scholars question whether Paul was the actual author, and we have to

decide how much that matters to us. I've already cast my vote for "not much." It looks like it's just sort of filling out the formula. Greeting, thanksgiving, and then the body of the letter. We might be excused for just saying that these introductory verses are just good manners, good letter writing, the equivalent of: Dear friend, how are you? I am fine.

But instead it's a testimony to the church at Colossae, and their reputation for loving Christ and one another. And it's a prayer for that church, that they may be strengthened in their faith, lead lives that are worthy of the Lord, and be strong with all the strength that comes from God. Today we pray that for L., and for all our members, and for ourselves. Today we reaffirm our faith in Christ, and in one another, and in the notion that we do have something to offer to one another, and to the world.

On birthdays and other special days, we give presents, and so today I'll leave you with one. It's not mine; a wonderful preacher and storyteller named Safiyah Fosua offers this affirmation of faith from Colossians, and I in turn offer it to you:

We are called to be the saints in the light  
Full of hope because we are in Christ,  
Assured of a place in heaven with God.  
We are the people of God  
At our best when we love God  
And when we love one another.

Ever-yearning to understand God's will

Ever-striving to let the world see that we belong to God.  
Our strength comes from God  
Who gives us power to endure all things  
With joy and thanksgiving. Amen.