

I'm not very athletic. This may not come as a surprise to you. It certainly isn't a surprise to me. I have never felt that I had any ability at all at playing sports. My brother was a good athlete. He played hockey and baseball at Governor Dummer and he loves both sports, though he doesn't play them any more.

I suppose he fulfilled whatever family necessity there was for athleticism. Our Dad was an athlete too, until he broke his leg playing football for Northeastern, and it didn't mend well, so that he had a pronounced limp ever after. But Mom wasn't into sports either, so she cooked and I practiced the piano, especially when it was time to do the dishes.

Anyway, though I had no gift for it, I always wished that I could have been reasonably good at one sport at least. This is why I remember so vividly one afternoon in my high school career, an afternoon on the basketball court. I was on the least of the junior varsity teams but nevertheless on the team, and on this one day things went really well.

We rotated positions at that time and I was a forward that day. For some reason everything fell into place. Several good clean passes were made to me and one by one my jump shots went 'swish'. Instead of blowing my chances to score, as was so often the case, a remarkable number of my shots went in and my little team won the game.

It's the comments after the game that I remember best. "Great job! Way to go! Yay!" And from our coach, a tight-lipped woman I was sure didn't even know me, came, "Nice shot, Susan." Wow! Nice shot, Susan. I was walking on air. That was so long ago yet I remember it so clearly.

What is it, I wonder, about affirmation, about a simple supportive comment, that is so important, that means so much to us? Just a little of it, applied at the right time and in the right way, can be so encouraging that the memory can stay with us for 40 odd years. The glow of praise from a contemporary, and perhaps especially from an authority figure like that coach about whom I remember nothing else, can last and give pleasure for a very long time.

What we witness today in the gospel story of Jesus' baptism, is a wonderful affirmation descending on Jesus, loving words from God the Father, supporting Jesus as the Beloved Son.

This is more than just support, of course, it's a statement of Jesus' identity, his oneness with the Father, the revelation of the relationship between Father and Son. But isn't our identity shaped, too, by the affirmation we receive? Don't we grow in courage and confidence and trust when we know that we are beloved?

We are beloved. And all of that affirmation that descends "in bodily form," as the gospel says, "like a dove," all of that affirmation is for us as well as for Jesus.

We receive it in our own baptism, and again and again as we come together in worship and take the sacrament of Holy Communion each week. Communion is the weekly reminder of the grace of baptism.

Just as God said it to Jesus as he stepped out of the Jordan River, so God says to us, “You are my son, you are my daughter, the Beloved.” What great strength and confidence and joy that declaration holds for us.

We would probably not know all this, though, if Jesus had not stepped into that river with all the others John was baptizing that day. By going in, Jesus underlines the fact that he came to be one of us. Though we know he is without sin, being One with God, and doesn’t need cleansing from sin, though we struggle to understand that he is fully human and fully divine, the fully human side of him submits to baptism by John and takes his place in the river with the rest of us.

He is baptized into forgiveness from sin and rises up out of the water to new life, he who is himself new life. In doing this, Jesus opens the way for us, who are decidedly fully human, to be forgiven and to enter into covenant with God.

A covenant, as you know, is a two-way promise. Both parties to a covenant promise something to each other. In baptism we promise to belong to God as God’s children and to follow Jesus, our brother. God’s part of the covenant is affirmation, love, and support for us, that never ends.

Never ends. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing but ourselves, but that is another sermon.

What God wants from us, though, as children of God and followers of Jesus, is to treat each other with love and forgiveness. We are to seek Christ in each other, and finding him there, to serve Christ in each other as well. We are to respect the dignity of every human being and love our neighbors as ourselves. Shortly, as we renew our baptismal vows following the custom of the Church on this day, we’ll repeat these promises that we make to God as our part of the covenant.

We’ll say in response to the questions, “I will, with God’s help,” because these promises are not easy for mortals to keep. We need God’s grace, God’s help, to grow into being the forgiving, grateful children God desires us to be.

I want to mention here the Vestry’s work since our last Vestry meeting, and continuing tomorrow at our monthly meeting, on a Relational Covenant for St. Andrew’s. In this we hope to spell out the ways we intend to behave toward one another as we follow Christ together in this community. We’re articulating basic things about how we relate to each other, how we work out differences, how to deal with conflicts when they occur.

The goal is that everyone should feel safe and valued in this community and this document, this covenant, will become a part of a broader Safe Church Policy here at St. Andrew’s.

It may seem a shame to have to spell out what has been obvious before, but there is nothing wrong with a good reminder, in print, of what “loving our neighbors as ourselves” means to us. It’s instructive to work it out and to put it in print and to read it regularly.

We have made a covenant with God in baptism. We will renew our promises to God today and receive God’s promise to us – the wonderful, life-giving, confidence-building affirmation, “You are my daughter, you are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. Nice shot! Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria