



Rachel Barton

It has been nearly a decade since I left Oregon for Alaska. What started out as a summer job has turned into a permanent relocation. My husband, Luke, is a commercial fisherman and spends several months each year living on a boat, or in a village across the bay from where we live in Anchor Point. Together we have two kids, Fenwick (5) and Vivian (2), a dog, a cat, a frog, and a few fish.

I'm fortunate to work at a private music and dance school owned by one of my closest friends, who doesn't mind if my toddler writes on the wall sometimes. Though the strains of Beethoven and the Beatles dominate the hallways during business hours, much of our conversations in the school office are dominated by topics related to our much-varied ways of understanding and living our mutual faith in Christ. Many of these conversations color my understanding of this week's readings from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

As I think of my family, friends and colleagues, I recognize how blessed I am to find much of my faith community is with me every day of the week. Though we don't worship together every Sunday—we attend different congregations—we still find fellowship, accountability, and encouragement together. I hope we all find these things too, as we read, ponder, and pray together this week.

BIBLE READING: Colossians 2:1-7

This week we will be spending a lot of time talking about how we live together in the family of God. Much of Colossians is dedicated to this topic, and all while Paul is elucidating his long-distance relationship with this faith community.

I have some long-distance relationships; my closest friends are several thousand miles away much of the time. Even my husband, Luke, is gone working as a commercial fisherman for much of the year. My local faith community is a hodgepodge of a very small congregation and several of my coworkers at the music and dance school. I used to lament my lack of community until I learned to see how my relationships were able to span distances and depths, were I only to change my perspective on how to define a church family.

Much of today's passage speaks of a loving relationship between Paul and the church he was writing to. He's contending for them, he wants them to be united in love, he warns them not to be distracted by false teaching—all while being physically separated from this congregation.

Through social media and cell phones, we are more connected than we have ever been, yet many of us are longing for a closer-knit community. Is there anything we can learn from this ancient letter to an ancient church? Is there a new perspective to be gained on the meaning of community? Can seeing God's family in a new light make our relationships stronger?

SONG: With One Voice (Stephen Curtis Chapman and Matt Redman)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I thank you for your church. I pray that my heart and mind are opened to what you have to teach regarding it.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:11

Now that my two-year-old daughter is learning to open doors, I have to start remembering to lock the bathroom door while showering. It's not that I object to a fully dressed toddler joining me while I wash my hair, it's that she brings the dog, too. And the dog hogs the hot water.

The truth is, I'm all about togetherness and inclusion until I have to share my space with a wet dog. She doesn't need to lay down *right there* while I'm trying to rinse the shampoo out of my eyes. Showers are for people! Paul writes about the social labels that separate the believers at Colossae: gender, race, language, culture, and legal status. There's nothing in Colossians about spaniels however, and she's blissfully unaware of any distinction between herself and my (other) kids.

When we label ourselves and others, we set up barriers against the work of the Spirit. I struggle with believing that I have to look or act a certain way to be truly effective as a member of my faith community. If we are truly to believe that Christ has made us one in him, can we believe in his ability to use us all, regardless of gender, social position, legal status, or culture? What are some labels we use that separate us from each other today? Marital status? Education level? Political persuasion? Smoker, vegan, health-nut, or couch potato?

SONG: Down to the River to Pray (Alison Krause)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I ask you to help me live beyond the labels I place on myself and others. Help me to break down barriers between you and your church—not build them.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:12-13

Recently, Luke and I got a chance to practice our apologizing skills. It was a couple of days after he had cut our daughter's hair without discussing it with me first, and I had bluntly told him my opinion on his skills as a barber. No matter how petty the episode was, we had hurt each other. We needed to forgive and be forgiven.

We talk a lot, in platitudes, about forgiveness being necessary for the forgiver, emphasizing the importance of letting go of our grievances. My recent experience with Luke tells me it's more than an individual exercise, however. When we forgive, we do release a burden, but forgiveness is also necessary to the restoration of a relationship. And that surely matters to the forgiven as well as the forgiver.

The more intimate we are with our family, friends, and faith community, the more opportunities we have to do the work of restoring and renewing our relationships. And if we are to forgive as Christ forgave, perhaps we should remember that his forgiveness entailed generations of preparation, years of ministry and, ultimately, agonizing sacrifice. He *worked* to forgive and restore. It wasn't instantaneous.

When we say that the burden of unforgiveness is borne by the unforgiver, we ignore the real consequences to living relationships. Where there are relationships that can or should be restored—in our homes, workplaces and churches—can we work to forgive and be forgiven? Can we take the focus off our hurts and envision a healed relationship instead?

SONG: Forgiven (Sanctus Real)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Redeemer, thank you for restoring my relationship with you. I am grateful for your forgiveness. I pray that you will help me to learn the work of forgiveness.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:14-15

Conversations at the music school, if not directly related to music, have a tendency to be peppered with musical metaphors. During a slow afternoon at the office, the drum instructor and I were sharing our experiences of Christian community and somehow ended up comparing how our respective communities handle divergences in congregational opinion. Disagreements seemed too strong a phrase; somehow dissonance in the faith fit so much better.

One of the lovely aspects of dissonance that my musical coworkers are sure to point out is that in Western music, dissonance, simplistically the opposite of consonance or harmony, can also be considered transitional. Dissonance, that instability to the ear that begs for the coming resolving chord, is a necessary tool for any composer.

When we disagree as believers, it can be noisy, unpleasant, and sometimes painful. Finding harmony in the midst of all this takes an ear more finely tuned than mine.

The NRSV of today's passage has the verse "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect *harmony*" (v. 14, emphasis mine). Without the presence of God's holy love when we talk about these dissonances in our beliefs, how impossible it becomes to find harmony as Christ's body.

Can we trust in God's love to bind us as a body of believers, even as we disagree? Can we seek to hear the dissonance amongst all believers—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox—not as unpleasant noise to fear but as hope for a complex and harmonious resolution to come?

SONG: Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord of love, help me to hear your perfect harmony in the voices of your people today.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:16-17

Luke has a technique for handling our children's misdemeanors, particularly when they throw tantrums, that is surprisingly effective. He sings his disciplinary statements. Usually to the tune of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," always loudly and off-key. It never occurred to me that the kids would take more kindly to my requests that they desist their unruly behavior if I did my best (or worst) Bing Crosby impression. I'll have to try it sometime.

It got me thinking, however, about how we teach our kids. Why do they respond to silly songs so much better than time-outs and stern commands? Perhaps it's because we're reminding them of what they already know: that they are part of a family and that we as a family choose to live joyfully. It's not about making sure they do the right thing, but about bringing them back into connection with the rest of the family.

In the NIV translation of today's verse, it sounds like the readers are meant to admonish each other with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. I think of Luke's admonishments to the kids, naturally. When you read other translations, this imagery doesn't seem to apply, but teaching and worship are still coupled together as linked ideas.

Sometimes I miss out on the teaching aspect of worship. I look for my community in intellectual discussion with friends, informed teaching in sermons and Bible studies, correction through my closer relationships. What can I learn by singing to God with my community? Maybe a lot of things I already know: that I am part of a family of God, that our purpose is to worship and glorify him.

SONG: Brethren, We Have Met to Worship

PRAYER SUGGESTION: I pray your wisdom would be present in me as I worship you today.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:18-24

An instructor at the school was talking about playing guitar at the Christmas Eve service at his church. “I probably played 124 chords that night, but you know how it is, you get done and all you can remember is that one you got wrong.” Yes, I know exactly how it is.

Remembering our mistakes above our successes seems to be a universal human characteristic. At the end of the day, I remember all the ways I could have been a better spouse, parent, employee, or all-around human being. I need to remember what I said to my coworker that day: your audience wasn’t listening for mistakes. They were enjoying the good parts and they won’t remember the lapses.

When I hear the admonition to husbands and wives regarding love and submission, I remember the many arguments for what it means in our personal relationships. I also hear the “Twilight Zone” theme and Rod Serling’s voice saying “submitted for your approval,” because *submission* to English speakers doesn’t always mean subjection of will. It also connotes an offering, a suggestion, or a presentation.

As a community of faith, we submit in this way all the time. We submit our prayer requests, our ponderings on the Scriptures, our guitar-playing skills for the Christmas Eve service. Are we holding back from sharing for fear of a critical audience? Are we an appreciative audience for our fellows? Submission is difficult when we fear that our offerings will be received without love.

SONG: For All That You Have Done (Rend Collective)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I ask that you bless this community, that we submit to each other and receive each other with love.

—Rachel Barton

BIBLE READING: Colossians 4:5-6

A well-known landmark in Homer, Alaska, is a lighthouse-style building that houses the Salty Dawg Saloon. Being so close to the harbor, it is frequented by tourists in the summertime and by fishermen year-round. The bar lives up to its name: there are old sea dogs there every day, and their language is, well, salty.

When Paul suggests the believers at Colossae “season [their] language with salt,” I doubt he had in mind the sort of conversation shared by fishermen in a port bar. This metaphor of seasoned language had different connotations for the Colossians than it does for a twenty-first century reader in a fishing village. At the time, salt was a valuable commodity and a necessary food preservative. We still use salt this way, but with refrigeration and the prevalence of fresh food at the supermarket, I tend to forget how crucial salt has been to protecting the human race from either food poisoning or starvation.

These characteristics of seasoned speech—that it flavors, prevents decay, and has value—can be hard to live up to. What comes to my mind is how I speak about my brothers and sisters in Christ. When I talk to outsiders, am I gracious about others in my faith community? Is my language of value when the conversation turns to believers outside that community? I hope that I contribute more to the unity of the church body as a whole than to its decay.

SONG: Lord, Speak to Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord I pray that the way I speak will have value in your kingdom and that through me your preserving and gracious nature will be made visible.

—Rachel Barton