
Baptism and the Dignity of Responsibility

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The First Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A**

I was going to make all my own baby food. And I would do such a good job that my children would have no interest in candy or junk food when they got older. We would engage in such wholesome activities, too, that they'd have no interest in TV, either, or video games or toy guns. My children would be well-behaved in public. They wouldn't cry on airplanes; and they would grow up going to church, and loving it. If they acted up, I would just count, 1, 2, 3, like the book said. And *magic!* Perfect mother with perfect children!

Then the kids came along, and before I knew it, my cabinets were filled with jars of store-bought baby food, and I was *begging* my toddler to watch the Wiggles on TV, so I could tend to his baby sister, who was stranded on a mat with the dog licking her face. Before I knew it, when my son threw a tantrum, I counted to three and then threw one myself. And church? Well, let me just say that getting my family there was not the pleasant experience I'd planned.

And that was just in the first few years! That was before they went off to school all day. That was before they started driving, and dating, and playing sports where they could—and did—get hurt. That was before they failed tests, didn't make teams or get into schools, had their hearts broken, lost beloved pets, lost classmates, lost so much in a pandemic. That was before they started stumping me with hard questions about God, and the Bible, and life and death and tragedy—and forming their own opinions about the faith that was so important to me to pass on to them.

Nothing has humbled me more than trying to raise children in this faith, in this world. Except, perhaps, for trying to do it with another person, whom I love, and *occasionally* disagree with. It is humbling, and scary, to love someone so much, and to be so responsible for them, and to have so little control at the same time.

And still. Still, in a few minutes, we're going to ask the parents and godparents of these candidates for baptism, "Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?" Will you be *responsible*?

How can anyone say yes, given what we know and have experienced? How can anyone say, "Yes, I'll be responsible!"—for these children, or for anyone or anything, for that matter—, when so many of us are feeling so helpless at the same time? So powerless to protect the people we love from pain? So insignificant in the face of the great suffering, violence, injustice, divisions of our time?

Well, we can't, if we think that responsibility means control. Controlling another person. Controlling a relationship or situation. Taking all matters into your own hands, rather than trusting others.

But that is not responsibility. Responsibility is the ability to respond. It is not unilateral action or communication. It is relational, dynamic, mutual. Responsive and open, not only to acting, but also to being acted upon, affected, changed, by another.

Responsibility is not a burden, either. It is a gift, a freedom, a dignity, bestowed upon us by God, who loves us and trusts us. I mean, God *really* trusts us! Before these children have done anything to prove themselves, God believes in them, and gives them the Holy Spirit and marks them as Christ's own *forever*. Before we have proven ourselves trustworthy, and even after we've messed up, God believes in us and chooses to partner with us. To entrust to us the divine mission of healing and reconciliation and liberation. To bind God's very self to us in a covenant of mutual responsibility.

We see this throughout the Bible: God dignifying humanity, again and again, with responsibility. Indeed, the whole Hebrew Bible, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, shows “a movement from divine initiative to human endeavor, from the supernatural to the natural, from a controlling to an empowering presence of God.”^[1]

In this way, God takes a risk with us like that that parents take with their children, in being responsible for them, while also entrusting them with responsibility, and honoring their freedom to become the people God created them to be. God models for us the vulnerability that follows whenever we love an other, or care about something, enough to accept responsibility without control.

So it takes a lot of courage, and love, and faith—in God, in others, in yourself—to say, “Yes, I will be responsible.” Which is perhaps why the baptism liturgy follows that first question with another: “Will you by your prayers and witness help this child grow into the full stature of Christ?” In other words, will you be responsible for what is in your power? Will you be responsible for your faith, your spiritual life, and spiritual maturity, and lifelong growth? No, you can’t control this other human being or their faith. No, you can’t ensure their smooth sailing through life. No you can’t change your partner, either. But you can do you. You can pray. You can stay grounded in God, yourself. You can keep growing in faith, yourself. And that may be the best gift and testament you can give those around you.

That doesn’t mean it’s all up to you, of course. We really are in this together. So we, this whole community of faith, will promise to be responsible to you and to the newest Christians among us. We will promise to “do all in our power to support you in your life in Christ.” All in our power. We have limits, *and* we have power. We each have the power to respond—in our own unique way—to you, to others, to circumstances beyond our control, to the needs and hopes of the world. To the Gospel. And to God.

Together, in a few minutes, we will respond to what God has done in Christ, to what God is doing here today, by renewing our baptismal covenant. Renewing our commitment, our responsibility, to do what *is* in our power: to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship. To persevere in resisting evil. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and respect the dignity of every human being. With God’s help.

Because that’s where it all starts: with God. With God’s help and guidance and power and trust in us. So we pray, and listen, and respond. With our lives.

If you want to support these children in their life in Christ, if you want to spread the good news of Christ and build up the church, respond to God with your life. Live the good news. Do your faith. Do the good that is in your power to do, right here, right now. With God’s help.

[1] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken Books, 2005), 149.