

“Children of the Heavenly Father”

Matthew 3:13-17

In Christian love many of you have presented your children for baptism. When you presented your child for baptism you made the following promise to God. You would faithfully bring them to the services of God’s house, and teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. As they grow in years, you would place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the church, they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ. That is the promise each of you made as parents, sponsors, and as a congregation.

I ask you this morning, have you kept those promises? As parents, sponsors, and as a congregation, have we fulfilled our end of the baptismal covenant that we enter into every time a child is baptized into our congregation? How do we go about fulfilling these obligations? Is it enough to drop our children off at Sunday School when they get old enough and to depend on Sunday School and confirmation classes to teach our children the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments?

Pre-Sunday Schoolers are also spiritual beings. During the time from birth to age six is a profound period of growth. I cannot believe how much our grandsons have grown and matured in just 4 and 6 short years. These pre-school and kindergarten years are a sensitive time in the spiritual formation of our children. God is already present with them in a particular way during this special period of development.

When we think about the spiritual development of our children, there are very distinct differences between children from birth to six and children from six to about twelve.

I think in the pre-school years the child's spiritual life can be expressed through the symbols of our Christian faith, especially the cross. The vertical line between God and the child, the relationship between God and the child is established between birth and age six. The horizontal line is drawn during the ages of 6-12 years when relationship is between child and community.

Those of us who are parents feel a responsibility for our child's development, especially because we know how much is happening in their early years. Some parents may have a tendency to think, "I'm not capable or I just don't have the time to prepare my child for a religious life. So I'll find a good Sunday School program." That is not only a poor excuse, but it is a cop out on the promise you made with God and your child at his baptism.

What spiritual preparation do we personally provide for our children? Are we models of prayer? Do we attend church services? How do we involve God in our daily lives? Just as we are observed in every other phase of our lives, children need to see us being spiritual people.

We cannot expect the child's spiritual life to develop without any input from us, without "food for thought", without some spiritual experiences. Children must have models and experiences so they can build up their own story of relationship with God. Without our modeling, children may not be inspired to give expression to their own spiritual lives. If we can be aware of the needs of children, we can offer the support necessary for the formation of their spiritual lives.

I would like to offer you an idea that could really help you become aware of the spiritual needs of your children and a way that could help you meet those needs. Your child's spiritual life could be greatly enhanced by the preparation of a special corner of a room in your home. If there is room,

maybe a corner in your child's bedroom. This special corner could be the place where your child establishes a relationship with the mystery of God.

You could use your child's baptismal box like a small table or altar. Place things on top of the box like their baptismal candle, cloth, or shell to remind them of their baptism. Change it up by putting those symbols back in the box and put a handout or craft from Sunday School on top. A children's Bible with pictures or the Bible our second graders receive next week could be placed on top to remind you to read the stories to them. You might have concrete representations of the parables that would inspire the child's sense of wonder. The mustard seed or the precious pearl could be used to tell your child the parable. Then by leaving them on the box, the child would be continually reminded of these teaching parables of Jesus.

It is very difficult to teach young children about God by using words. Children need concrete objects they can hold and manipulate. We can make Jesus concrete for them by using concrete objects that represent Jesus, such as a Bible, candle, mustard seed, or statue of the Good Shepherd holding his children.

As a child's language begins to develop, they become hungry for words. They repeat what they hear their parents or grandparents saying. Unfortunately, that is not always good. Why not give them words of prayer such as Our Father in heaven, peace, rejoice or Amen. Maybe we should let our young children teach us older people how to pray.

As adults, we seem to focus on petitionary prayer, asking for something, because we are always so conscious of our own needs. But as we learned in Pastor Tina's workshop on prayer, true prayer begins with thanksgiving and praise. And that is what we observe in listening to the prayers of children

under six. As we listen to children pray, we hear thanks even when it is a subject that we, as adults, would turn into petition. The child sees it only one way.

For example. A child prayed at mealtime for a cousin who died at the age of 3 months: “Thank you for baby Andrew who died”. She was 3 years old when Andrew died and remembered him daily for months, always using the same words of “Thank you”. The parents then had a second child who was healthy and the child prayed: “Thank you for baby Andrew who died. Thank you for baby Andrew’s brother who lives”. We can certainly learn from those kinds of prayers from our children.

Again, in helping to fulfill the baptismal covenant as parents, grandparents, and sponsors, and not leaving it totally up to the Sunday School; I think it is crucial not only to provide a corner in your house for your child to learn about God, but it’s just as crucial to pray with your children.

Take a special time for prayer each day and pray simple prayers the child can learn and remember. It may be at meals or bedtime or it may be in the middle of the day when you receive a phone call about a friend or relative that has been hospitalized. Include your children in your daily prayer life.

The one thing I notice most is that we all lack enough time. We have no time for prayer, for silence and reflection. We cannot fit prayer into our schedules. We are always in a hurry and that’s exactly what our children observe. How will they know that prayer requires time when we provide no model for them? Should not prayer be an important part of family life?

We must learn to slow down and let our children know there is time for prayer. What is important to our spiritual life as adults? What do we do to feed ourselves, and how do we make time for prayer? Do our children know anything about our prayer life? When are they included?

For me, one of the most overwhelming things about being a papa is the sense of wonder. The sense of wonder that they have gets passed into me.

They're filled with wonder as they construct a house out of Lego's or point out details of the puzzle we just put together. Sometimes their wonder is filled with screams of joy as they stab me with a sword. Other times their wonder is silent and they seemingly sit in contemplation.

I know this. Whether it be after screams of joy or moments of silent contemplation, we need to tell our young children over and over again that they are loved. They are loved by their parents and they are loved by God. We continually tell our children that God loves them and then they will in turn fall in love with God. Maybe that is the only way we can really explain the relationship between God and the young child. I love you.

Let us not forget or break our baptismal promises as parents, sponsors, and as a congregation. Let us try to be really creative in how we fulfill our promises. Think about using that empty corner in your house or your children's bedroom as a place of worship and learning for your children or grandchildren when they come to visit. Think about including your children, godchildren, and grandchildren in your prayer life. When our grandsons come to visit, we have shelves on both sides of the closet in our entry way at their level. On one shelf is their great-grandfathers communion kit which has a miniature wooden altar with a small tray and glass. What is that for? And a story can be told.

This morning, these baptismal promises are being made once again by the Thorp family and by this parish. I hope we can just begin to understand the importance and significance of this day in Makenzie's life. It is one of the two most important and greatest days of her life if we are able to fulfill

the promises we are making on this day as the Christian community in which she will be raised and nurtured in the Christian faith.

If we fail in the coming years, then this day will lose much of its significance for Makenzie as she grows older. My expectation is that we will not fail. And even if we did, and with some children we do fail to fulfill our baptismal promises, even when we do, there is still the power of the Holy Spirit that seems to continually work beyond our highest expectations.

That Holy Spirit comes into Makenzie this morning through the speaking of God's Word along with sprinkling of the water. The spoken Word and the water along with our faith are the three necessary ingredients that make baptism a Holy Sacrament.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism along with our birthday are the two greatest days of our life. We are born and then reborn in the Spirit. That same spirit that came down on Jesus so many years ago and continues to come down on each of us everyday as we are reminded of our baptismal faith.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him. Then a voice said from heaven, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased."

The mystery of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. The mystery of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of birth and the little babies we have been blessed with. And, finally, the mystery of death and resurrection. Thank God for mysteries.

May the peace of God . . .

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