

## How We Understand and Practice the Sacrament of Holy Baptism

In the liturgy of baptism in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, we find the following charge to parents and sponsors.

As you bring your child to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities:

*to live with them among God's faithful people,  
bring them to the word of God and the holy supper,  
teach them the Lord's prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,  
place in their hands the holy scriptures,  
and nurture them in faith and prayer,  
so that your children may learn to trust God,  
proclaim Christ through word and deed,  
care for others and the world God made,  
and work for justice and peace.*

*Do you promise to help your child grow in the Christian faith and life?* (ELW, p. 228)

As a congregation, we have chosen to take great care in the preparation of parents as they anticipate the baptism of their child. This is true of parents who are new to faith and parents who are new to our congregation. Those seeking to have a child baptized who do not yet have a relationship with our congregation are invited to participate in a season of their own faith formation first as an initial step in being immersed into the community *themselves* and availing *themselves* to the gifts of worship, prayer, formation, and companionship among those to whom their child will belong. This time of formation as Christian parents is an important first step. The truth is, baptism is not a single one-day event. It is a life-long commitment on the part of everyone involved, and taking some time to understand and prepare for it is both necessary and prudent.

Baptism is God's gift to parents who, left on their own, could do nothing but struggle in the sacred responsibilities that Christian parenthood demands. The baptism of anyone -- child or adult - places that person into the life of a caring community in which the overwhelming tasks of forming a child in faith are shared. Baptism not only makes one a child of God, it makes one a child of the community. *Together* we share in the shaping of that one to live the rest of his or her eternal life in the presence of the almighty, powerful, and loving God and among brothers and sisters in Christ.

With the best that is in us spiritually, theologically, and biblically, we believe that this time of preparation is what strengthens our congregation. It forms both parents and children into people who are sturdy enough to withstand the tide of a tempting, secular world. More, a time of preparation for baptism solidifies a parent's relationship to others in the congregation. From these companions in Christ, the parents will turn again and again for advice, for partnership, for prayer, for encouragement in all that lies ahead as a child makes his or her way from the font to their own affirmation as young adults. It is clear to see that much support is gained from parents in our congregation as they are continuously reassured by the presence of others that they are not in this alone.

At the baptismal liturgy, when we “read” from the bulletin: *We welcome you into the Lord's family, we receive you as a member of the body of Christ...* we are saying much, much more than, “isn't he a cute baby?” Or, “Doesn't she seem like a nice little girl?” We are saying that from your experience looking into the future of that child toward the terrible twos or life with a thirteen year old, “this is going to take more than just the parents to accomplish.” We are in essence committing *ourselves* to the care of this beloved child of God.

Congregations grounded in a rich understanding of what baptism means, how it connects us to one another, and its importance as an act involving all of us, are strong congregations. The strength of the body of Christ is what it takes to bring young Christians, as we say in the liturgy, *to the water of life and to the bread and cup of blessing.*

This is why we both offer and insist on careful, thoughtful, prayerful planning as a baptism approaches. The depth and seriousness of the promises parents, sponsors, and the congregation make demand such loving thought and care. We are wise and compassionate as a congregation to provide a time for making connections. Together, we walk side by side as partners, charged with the care of a new member of God's family. God asks a lot from us. But then, God also provides the grace by which we can respond and grow into the responsibilities that lie before us.