
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Responsibility

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad you found Rilke, and appreciate your reading of the Abraham story. In answer to your question, yes, I think that we do have a responsibility to make things better.

It's a scriptural call.

The Bible tells us that God is transcendent, beyond nature, and that creation is ongoing, things are continuously coming into being.

The Bible also tells us that we are created in the image of God. We can imagine how things might be, and close the gap between the "is" and the "ought."

Where we can, we should, I think; privilege carries responsibility.

Take the story of Noah.

Noah is a righteous man. He does what God tells him to do. He builds an ark, loads it with the animals, and saves his family.

Noah, however, does not do what Abraham does. He does not fight for the lives of others. He does not share in their suffering, argue their cause, or protest their wrongdoing.

Noah ends up cut off and alone. He drinks too much, leaving his sons to find him naked and unconscious on the floor of his tent. They are too embarrassed to even look at him.

Jewish folklore refers to Noah as a "righteous man in a fur coat." He bought a coat to warm himself, but failed to light a fire that would have kept others warm as well.

In offering this interpretation of the story, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, "You cannot survive while the rest of the world drowns, and still survive."

I have always liked the way St. Paul talks about this call to collective responsibility in his letters to Christians in Rome and Corinth.

He uses the image of Christ's body. Church is an organic entity created by the gifts that each member has to offer. The key is to make sure that each member has the opportunity to offer her gift.

John Donne, an Anglican priest in the early 17th century, sums this all up by saying,

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume. ... No man is an island, entire of itself. ... Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.”

So, I would say, yes, we do have a responsibility to make things better. But, our responsibility goes beyond the alleviation of suffering. We are called to be responsible for the creation of community, and that requires that every member have an opportunity to offer his gift.

Creation will not be complete until all of these gifts have been offered.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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