

The Trouble with Bubbles-Luke 15: 1-10
(September 11, 2022-14th Sunday after Pentecost)

As a child growing up in the nineteen seventies, I remember that I'm captivated by the story of the boy in the bubble. Does anybody old enough remember him—Ted DeVita. It's a big story at the time. ABC Television makes a movie of the week about him. Ted DeVita is a boy with a severe case of aplastic anemia, a condition that prevents his body from producing new red blood cells and platelets making it almost impossible for his body to fight off bacteria and viruses. As a result, he lives many years of his life in a sterile plastic bubble. A single germ or unsterilized touch could be fatal. Anyone reaching to him through the hermetically sealed opening in the bubble must wear sterilized gloves, everything he touches must be decontaminated before passing through the opening. It breaks my young heart, not even his parents can press their flesh to his.¹ I used to think this was such a remote experience, did you hear echoes of life under COVID in Ted DeVita's story? I especially think of the images of people in long term care homes and their families, hands pressed up against glass windows yearning for touch yet separated by family and institutional bubbles for safety's sake.

These vignettes come to mind as I contemplate our faith story this morning, especially the relationship between Jesus and his contemporaries, the Pharisees. First, I need to make a digression to correct something in the Christian tradition. It's about how we view the Pharisees. For Christians, the term Pharisee is almost synonymous with religious hypocrisy and a strict, legalistic interpretation of religious rules to the point of absurdity. We see Jesus as standing outside the world of the Pharisees, a harsh critic who cares not for their rules and regulations. Such that over the centuries this interpretation has been used to suggest that Judaism is irrelevant, one of the many justifications for antisemitism. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, who by the way is a great follow on Twitter, says we've had it all wrong about Jesus and the Pharisees. As Ruttenberg says, a more generous view of the Pharisees is they were lay people committed to the daily living of their faith², through adherence to practices that created the space and the conditions where regular people could experience the presence of God as they went about their lives. The Pharisees were the ancestors to Rabbinic Judaism-contemporary Judaism. Ruttenberg sees Jesus as a Jew (which of course he was) arguing with his fellow Jews about the future of Judaism.³ Jesus and the Pharisees are part of the same family, it's a family squabble. The encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees are passionate because they are rooted in love and care for the Jewish family, not animosity and disdain. They are all passionate about how Judaism impacts every part of life, as Ruttenberg says "not in a harsh or limiting way. In a, things matter and have consequence sort of way. In a, here are more

¹ Ernest Kurtz, Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness*, p. 227.

² Steve Mason, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, David Noel Freedman Ed., William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2000, p. 1043.

³Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094663893765500930>

opportunities to connect with the holy, sort of way.”⁴ Jesus is reminding some of his coreligionists about this stuff not in a way that invalidates Jewish practice, but rather engages deeply on the question of how to do it.⁵ So that’s the digression.

It's not that Jesus doesn't think it's important to honour religious guidance and to be careful about with whom you associate, it's a question of how to do it so that it honours the intent of connecting with the holy through people. Here is the source of his friends' discomfort. Jesus is keeping company with “tax collectors and sinners” people avoided and despised by apparently godly people. Tax collectors were known for their unethical behaviour. The Roman authorities contracted out collection of taxes; how a tax collector got the money was up to him. fraud and excessive profits were common. Using parables Jesus defends associating with these people. Jesus asks if you had many and lost one, wouldn't you search until you found it? expecting the answer of course I would! To deepen the scandal even further Jesus associates God with a shepherd and homemaker. His friends would find God symbolized by a woman as outrageous, and first-century shepherds were considered lawless and dishonest. Yet according to Jesus God is to be found in these people.⁶ Which brings us back to bubbles.

While Ted DeVita lived in a bubble and COVID forced us into bubbles, sometimes bubbles are of our own making, the unintended consequences of what we think of as a righteous life. A life that, most times out of fear, sometimes due to ego, loses touch with both what makes us human and also brings us into the presence of God. I wonder who the people are that Jesus might associate with today that would scandalize us? Who would Jesus compare God to today that we might find off putting? If you like and you're online, I invite you to put your responses in the chat.

Jesus in our faith story this morning shows us one way to get out of our bubbles. It is to be aware of our power and how we wield it. In the case of the Pharisees, Jesus' religious siblings and leaders in the community, have power by virtue of their gender and the authority afforded them by the community to interpret religious law. Because of this power their interpretations act to separate them and their adherents from those they deem ungodly and thus reinforce their bubbles. Jesus has power by virtue of his gender as well and an informal authority granted by his community by virtue of his religious and spiritual leadership. Yet he uses that power to bring people together, to seek God in the despised and marginalized. Jesus uses his power to reach into other people's bubbles and expand his own.

The life of faith asks us to consider where we hold power in our lives and to consider the dynamics of power in any situation. The life of faith asks us to consider whether we exercise that power to isolate ourselves from others or to connect with others, whether we exercise that power to defend a fixed understanding about in whom we can seek the holy or whether we exercise that power to seek the image of God in those who

⁴ Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094596840010461187>

⁵ Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094663893765500930>

⁶ Chris Haslam <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/atksgm.shtml>

challenge us. Power is afforded to us in many ways. Sometimes it's by virtue of gender, ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Sometimes it's by virtue of age, a parent a child depending on the age and stage. Sometimes it's by virtue of position, employer, and employee. Are we using our power to connect or are we using our power to isolate and separate others. These are important questions in our increasingly polarized society

If the Netflix series, *The Queen*, can be taken at face value for it's accuracy one of the dilemmas it revealed was the way in which Queen Elizabeth II was both powerful and powerless and the ways in which she came to terms with that dilemma. She walked a fine line between her official authority as head of state for the UK and so many Commonwealth nations and her practical authority which was minimal, having been ceded to parliaments over the centuries. The Queen was said to detest South Africa's racist apartheid system, which put her at odds in the eighties and early nineties with then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who while not a supporter of apartheid took a very tepid approach to sanctions. In the series, this is a major point of contention between the two in private conversations, who knows how accurate those are though. What is accurate is the Queen did use the authority and power afforded to her to be seen hosting, greeting and forming bonds of friendship with Black African leaders who were calling for strong sanctions. Many of whom were committed socialists and anathema to Thatcher.⁷ Queen Elizabeth used her power to step out of hers and her nation's bubble, to show the world the dignity, worth and holy image in those the South African government legislated out of the white Christian bubble in that nation.

Our faith story is really about power and how faith calls us to practice power. Power is only of any value if it brings us closer to the deep truths about being human, truths that always bring us closer to God—that we're all connected, that all life is interdependent, that we're all in this together. Power is only of any value if it takes us out of our bubbles into an expansive experience of life. In case you are wondering, Ted DeVita, the boy in the bubble, died at age eighteen in 1980. With death a certainty he finally got to do what he and his family had longed for all along, which was to touch and be touched.

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⁷ Rev. Michael Coren, *Queen Elizabeth: moderation, grace*, "Toronto Star, September 9, 2022, p. A19.