

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

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The name David Vetter may not immediately be familiar to you. It wasn't to me until I read a reference to him in a story last week. David was otherwise known as the "Bubble Boy." That reference was also previously unknown to me. David was born in 1971 with a rare immunodeficiency disorder. The only way that he could survive in the world would be to live in complete isolation from germs. Real life was literally mortally dangerous to him. And so he lived his whole life inside a plastic, sterilized container of one kind or another. At first, it was an isolation chamber. Later it was a kind of space suit with a sealed glass helmet around his head, and protective clothing all over his body. He was never able to touch, or be touched, by another human being's flesh. Eventually, they tried an organ transplant in order to save him, but it failed, and David died in Texas at the age of 12 in 1983.

It didn't take long for Hollywood to get around to making a movie about David, starring a young John Travolta. Only the Hollywood producers didn't like the real ending to David's too much, so they changed it. In the movie ending, David has fallen in love with the girl next door, and has decided that taking a risk with death is better than spending his life inside a sterile, solitary world. And so he emerges, and they ride off into the sunset on her horse. The audience is left to wonder how it all ended up for him and them.

As you might imagine, David's story raised all kinds of ethical questions about what it means to be alive and free and responsible. Who has the right to keep a person inside a bubble? Even if that person is himself? And is that really a *life* in there? How is it "living" when you can't ever touch anybody else? When does the threat of dying become so overwhelming that it keeps a person from any physical love?

We don't need to resolve those questions here and now, thankfully. But David's story—the real-life version—can be a helpful way for us to reflect upon today's Feast Day celebration in the Church, the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (what we used to call Corpus Christi). Because the gospel we just heard is really pretty graphic, if we take time to think about it: "Eat my flesh. Drink my blood. My flesh is real food and my blood real drink. And unless you feed upon it, you will die." Really? It's not for nothing that the earliest enemies of the Christian church accused them (us) of being cannibals, among other things. It's not hard to imagine why. Jesus, of course, was not teaching people to partake of his skin and plasma, but he *was* saying that this bread and wine is nothing less than my flesh and blood when you bless and share it in my name. And to receive it can be very dangerous.

Jesus, like David Vetter, had a choice to make when he came to the world: Either to exist in some sealed-off, sterile, safe, remote condition—*in* our midst but not really *among* us. Or to emerge from the bubble and take a risk, touching us, being touched, exposing himself to all that is in real life. Jesus did that—embracing, spitting, laying hands, eating and drinking. *Living* with us. He still does that today, in and through us. Yes, there's a risk in that. there's a certain danger in being too enfleshed in this world, among all these other people. There's the risk of rejection, ridicule, misunderstanding. The cross. But the alternative, for Jesus, for David Vetter, and for us, is not really to live in this world at all.

It would have been possible for God to come down in a cloud from heaven, as he once did with Moses, and to say, "Hang in there for a while until you can get out of here and come to heaven with me." That's not what God did, however, when he came to be with us in Jesus. Instead he said, "Here I am. In flesh and blood. In every Eucharistic gathering. Nothing to wait for. I'm all here for you. Eat my flesh and drink my blood. Don't put off until the next life what I'm offering you in this one." Is there a risk in choosing to live that way? Yes. As there

was for him. But true faith is not life in a bubble, as if looking out on the rest of the world from some imagined, sterilized chamber. That's not being church. That's just being a spectator. Our call is to something far more immediate and raw and, yes, risky. So the command from Jesus is not to stand at a polite distance and offer commentary. It is to eat, drink, chew, swallow, then go out and embrace the task of true discipleship. That's why this bread and wine makes any difference, why it makes *all* the difference. It is visceral, it is immediate, it is our risk, and it is our promised reward.