

Breaking Out of the Bubble Wrap
Where We Get Stuck: Swaddled in Safety
1 Corinthians 13:11-13

Call to Worship

I invite you find yourself in a prayer written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

God, help me today
to love with gusto,
to forgive with courage,
to look for your grace,
to seek presence, not comfort,
to be grateful in all things,
to receive you in whatever form you come to me.

Help me today to be who you create me to be,
not what others desire,
to trust you in what is difficult,
to let your love flow through me
without impediment or hesitation,
to be present in this life,
not hankering after one I imagine.

I surrender myself to your love thriving in me,
love that unites me with all your Beloved,
with all Creation, with you:
I may not be fully aware,
but I am fully yours,
and I give you my thanks;
I give you my life.
Amen.

Sermon

When my daughter Stacey was born, before we brought her home from the hospital, the nurses taught us how to swaddle her. ‘Wrap her like a burrito,’ they told us. And we did: bottom of the blanket up over her feet so her legs were immobilized, sides wrapped in close beside her, pinning her arms to her sides. It sounds terrible, but I think she liked it. Most newborns do; it comforts them, to be enclosed in a tight, safe space—more like the space they occupied before they were born.

I checked to see whether parents today are still in the practice of swaddling, because it turns out that the skills of parenting aren’t timeless. Apparently, swaddling is still OK; crib bumpers—

which I always thought were *about* safety—are not. Babies have been swaddled for years...centuries...millennia, actually. Even in the Bible, in the story of Jesus' birth, we're told that his mother Mary 'wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.'

Swaddling comforts a baby. And at a stage of life when they don't know that even their own hands and fingers can connect them with something sharp, swaddling protects them from danger. But wrapping them up tightly in a blanket also keeps them from moving...which is why the swaddling phase doesn't last very long. It doesn't take long for a baby to want to wave her arms and legs around, to explore even the tiny space around her.

But for parents, our inclination is to hold our children close—protect them—for much longer than they'll let us. If we can keep them confined, we think, we can protect them from danger. And so, we move fragile objects out of reach. We swoop our children up in our arms before they get more than a few feet away from us. We scan new rooms and playgrounds for sources of risk. We breathe silent prayers for their safety. This is our job as parents. This is one of the ways we love our children.

I see that pattern even in the creation story. So I wonder if it isn't the pattern of every parent, every creator of new life. Because remember: God enclosed Adam and Eve in the safety of a garden where everything was good, where it seemed like they couldn't get hurt. They could pick the flowers, build tree-houses, make things out of mud, do whatever they wanted. They could safely eat the fruit from every plant and tree except one. Nothing in that garden was dangerous except for that one thing. And just like every child, they found and got into the one thing that was off limits...of course.

The instinct of every parent, every creator maybe, is to keep the things and people we love safe, to protect them from the risk of danger, or failure, or loss. No wonder there are helicopter parents, bulldozer parents, snowplow parents, lawnmower parents. Those are all terms that describe clearing a safe, dangerless zone around the children we love and want to protect from harm.

But it is the work of every living thing to stretch beyond the restraints that hold us in place, to outgrow the comfortable, confined space that swaddles us in safety. 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, reasoned like a child, thought like a child. Now I am an adult. I've put an end to childish things,' Paul said: including the expectation that we will be kept safe at every moment. If we are to live full, mature, flourishing lives, we have to let go of the safety that we needed when we were children.

It's not just children who prefer safety. In ancient times, maps had a name for territory that had not yet been explored, places beyond where the mapmakers knew about. They knew that everything beyond the known world had to be either land or sea, but it couldn't be charted, because they hadn't seen what was out there. What they did know was that it was dangerous, because everything we can't identify seems a little dangerous. And so many maps actually labeled the space beyond the lands and seas that had already been conquered and occupied, *Here Be Dragons*.

We're too scientifically sophisticated to write 'Here Be Dragons' on maps any more, but sometimes I think we live as though we still believe that. I grew up in a safe, suburban neighborhood in Contra Costa County. It was a little bit different for my family of immigrants, but for many of my friends, crossing through the Caldecott Tunnel into Oakland felt dangerous, risky. A social studies teacher at one of the local high schools made crossing through the tunnel an assignment. He gave credit to his students every time they went into Oakland or Berkeley—just to shop, or go to a concert, or to eat some kind of food you couldn't find in the suburbs. "Stretch marks" he called that credit.

I would imagine that teacher got a fair amount of push-back from the parents of his students. They had bought houses in that school district specifically so that their children wouldn't have to be exposed to the dangers of life on the other side of the tunnel, and here was a teacher who dared to puncture their safety.

I heard someone say once, "The only thing money can buy is bubble wrap."¹ Well, you and I both know that affluence isn't very effective bubble wrap. No amount of wealth can protect you from the vulnerability that is simply part of being human. I could tell you a hundred stories about people in this room that would demonstrate that. But money can swaddle you. It can help create the illusion that if you and the people you love stay inside the boundaries of this safe place, make wise choices, pursue smart jobs, go to selective colleges, then life will be as it should: comfortable, secure, safe.

But we were made for more than that. We were never meant to live enclosed in safety our whole lives long. The fullness of life comes only when we are freed from the blanket of security we readily wrap ourselves up in; when we stretch out and know that we are connected to the reality of a world that is much bigger—and often harsher—than life here. We can use our money to distance ourselves from the suffering and injustice that are daily parts of life for so many people. But if we do, we might miss an important truth, which is that life can flourish even when hardship and death and illness and failure and loss—all that danger, all that suffering—are right next to us.

The greatest spiritual struggle we face in our lives might be asking ourselves whether we're willing to voluntarily peel off the bubble wrap we can afford, get close enough to a world gone wrong that we can *feel* its sharp edges. The truth is, most of us have what we need—enough money, enough power, enough education—to separate ourselves from that big swath of the world that can't seem to work its way out of suffering. We can observe what's wrong and we can comment from a distance. We don't have to deal with people who can't muster up the hope or resources to help themselves, or who don't respond with gratitude and energy to offers of help. We can stay inside our own zone, where life is safe, where most of our neighbors are good people like us.

But we were made for more than that. We were created in the image of God, a God who never lets go of a creation that humans keep breaking. A God who always moves *toward* a broken world, not away from it. To insulate ourselves from a troubled world and a damaged earth is to reject our highest human calling: to live with God's face in our mirror. We will only be fully

¹ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, p. 76

alive, fully human, fully *flourishing*, when we see the world as it is and feel ourselves drawn toward it, when we love it just as it is, in all its brokenness.

In the visioning work we've been doing recently, we've imagined three practices, three ways of being, that might keep shaping us into the kind of people who are collaborators in God's dream of life that flourishes for everyone.

Connection with each another and with our neighbors, connections that we sustain and deepen over time;
Actions that keep stretching our hearts to a wider compassion;
Courage to take meaningful risks.

So this week, I want to invite you to take a small risk. Pick your own, but here are a few possibilities:

- Turn off all your electronic devices for half a day, even an hour, so that you have to look up and really look at what's around you.
- Go for a walk or a run on a day when the wind is fierce or the sun isn't shining.
- Let yourself sweat, or shiver, or sit with the feeling of hunger.
- Get yourself a 'stretch mark'—venture into some place you usually avoid.
- Do something that exposes you to a broken or unkempt part of the world. If you haven't seen the neighborhoods around us where people are living in RV's, go find one and drive through—or better yet, walk. Act like a neighbor, because you are a neighbor to those people.
- Decide that you will introduce yourself to one new person every day—just to learn their name and give them yours...with no more agenda than that.
- Have a conversation you've never dared to have before with somebody you love.

I think Jesus, who came to show us what God looks like, was all about taking risks, crossing boundaries, for the sake of love. Think about the stories you know about him, the ugliness and suffering he got right up close to:

He touched people who were so sick, that no one else wanted to get near them.

He had dinner with people who sold sex for money.

He started conversations with people who happily worked for a corrupt government.

He stayed in conversation with people who belittled and criticized him.

He leaned in toward confronting a church that had so lost its way that he barely recognized it as his own.

What about those times he sat everyone down for a meal before he had any idea where the food was going to come from?

What about the time he sent his disciples out to heal and teach and forgive, to do all the things he'd been doing; trusted them with an assignment they had not confidence they were capable of?

'Now you go be Jesus,' he said to them.

Now you go be Jesus.