In 1976, when I was eight years old, I remember a made-for-TV drama called *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*. Based on true events and starring a young, pre-*Grease* John Travolta, it is the story of Tod Lubitch, a young man born with such a severe immune-deficiency disorder that he is restricted throughout his childhood to stay in his room, protected from the dangerous, outside world by tarps and other plastic barriers. As he matures and yearns to see more of life, his parents enroll him in a high school which he attends while wearing a protective, plastic, space suit. Predictably, he falls in love with a girl, but he cannot even hold her hand. He must decide whether he will live his life in lonely isolation or risk near-certain death for love. Finally, learning from his doctor that he may have developed enough immunities to be safe, he removes his plastic bubble, steps unprotected outside of his house, and gets the girl. Perhaps also predictably, they ride off into a sunrise toward their future of love on her horse. Cheesy, hokey, but popular, *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* was prophetic: from the 80s and 90s to the present day, Americans increasingly live behind plastic bubbles. In 1981, futurist and marketing consultant Faith Popcorn invented the term “cocooning,” which is what we do when we choose to stay home and avoid the chaos of the outside world. Foreseeing the rise in home theaters, food delivery services, online shopping, and telecommuting, Popcorn predicted that urbanites and suburbanites would build and hide behind cozy shells of safety. In the year 2000, political scientist Robert D. Putnam published *Bowling Alone*. In it he describes how Americans have separated from most of the kinds of social contact which used to enrich our lives. Civic and religious organizations like the Masons or the Knights of Columbus have shrunk. And while more individual Americans go bowling than ever before, bowling leagues’ participation is at an all-time low. Binge-watching Netflix, ordering UberEATS, shopping Amazon, and “bowling alone,” American has become the boy in the plastic bubble.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus meets a man who was born deaf and with a severe speech impediment; unable to hear or speak with others, he has spent his entire life locked in a plastic bubble—an isolated cocoon. A group of his townspeople bring him to Jesus. He takes him aside, puts his fingers in the man’s ears, spits on His own hand, touches the man’s tongue with that hand, sighs, and says, “Ephphatha,” which means, “be opened.” Immediately the man is opened: he can hear clearly and speak plainly. This healing is unusual; at other times, when people ask Jesus to heal them, Jesus praises them and says that their faith in Him has made them whole. In this case, the man He heals cannot speak and cannot even hear the voice of the One Who would heal him; utterly lost in himself, he must be brought to Jesus by others. Therefore, it is Jesus who takes the initiative. He is the One Who reaches out and remakes him with the Hands that shaped the first man out of the dust in Eden. He is the One, from Whom comes the Water of Life, Whose spit provides the moisture that baptizes and renews him. He is the One Who exhales an inspiring and sanctifying sigh on a man who suffocates in solitude, as He did on Easter when He breathed on the disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit. He is the One Who, by moving the tongue and praying on behalf of a man who cannot move his own tongue and therefore cannot pray, gives a lonely man a way to communicate and connect with others. Jesus does it all. Breaking through the man’s plastic cocoon, Jesus brings that man out of solitude into a new world of love.

Sometimes we are like the man whom Jesus healed. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, we find ourselves locked and trapped in any number of plastic bubbles. A counsellor I know told me that more and more of her clients are increasingly paralyzed by anxiety. I asked her why: Political friction? Racial tensions? Economic instability? She said, “They are anxious because they have no social contact with anyone.” Over 3,000 people each month move to the greater Nashville area—100 each day. We see some of that growth in Maury county. Having left their families and friends, these pilgrims have no one with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings and they have no way to hear that they are loved and that all shall be well. One of the roles of the Church—which is the Body of Christ, which is us—is to break through the solitude of strangers and to invite them a true home. For their sake, and for the sake of our Lord Who loves them as He loves us, we reach out with our hands, we breathe healing sighs of sympathy and compassion, and on their behalf we offer the prayers that they either never learned or are too lonely to remember. And if we are to be the healing, cocoon-piercing, bubble-popping Christ for them that Christ was for the man born deaf and mute, we must let Him be the same for us: grace cannot happen through us if it does not happen to us. Whether we were born and raised in Maury county or whether we are recent immigrants, we are all at least partially hampered, bound, and trapped in some kind of private, protective, painful or guilt-ridden bubble. There are so many men, women, children, and seniors who feel so friendless or afraid, exhausted or ignored, scattered or distracted that they may as well live in a cocoon so thick that they do not feel alive at all. When we feel ashamed or afraid, we try to avoid the discomfort they cause by putting up a wall around them; this wall actually shuts out others and blocks our awareness of God who can be found even our pain. This becomes our cocoon, which is actually a prison cell. That is why God the Son of God entered into His own creation in the Person of Jesus—to set us captives free and to bring us a new kind of life.

Like the man who found Jesus and healing only because he was surrounded by others, we come to church to escape our solitary confinement. Like the man born deaf but who suddenly and unexpectedly hears the voice of Christ, sometimes we suddenly hear and receive the truth of Christ’s total, complete, and inexhaustible love for us. Like the man whose mangled tongue left him unable to speak, sometimes when we receive on our tongues Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist we finally find a way to speak plainly the words of love that we have always wanted to say and that others have always needed to hear.

Today we heard about the healing of a man born in a plastic bubble; and today we hear that we, too, will be healed. That healing may not come today—but it might. And one day it will. One day God will break our plastic bubbles and free us from them; in that emergence, we will finally live the life we have always wanted but scarcely could believe could be real. One day we will see God, the One Who breaks our cocoons, Who raises us from the dead, and Who leads us to an eternity of love with Him and each other. One day, healed, inspired, oxygenated, and intoxicated by the love of God, we will hear Him say to us “Ephaphtha—be opened.”