

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

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Pentecost IV, Matthew 10:40-42

*Come Holy Spirit and kindle in our hearts the fire of your love. Amen.*

As I've mentioned before, I am a big public radio fan. All my radios are permanently tuned to our member station KUT 90.5 FM. In addition to the news programming, I love the in-depth interest exploratory programs like RadioLab, Fresh Air, This American Life, and the TED Radio Hour. Just recently, I discovered a social science podcast called *Invisibilia* which explores the invisible forces that control human behavior – ideas, beliefs, assumptions and emotions.

When I was younger, I was interested in psychology and the inner forces and motivations that drive individual behavior. But as I've gotten older, my interest has turned more to the study of social science as I've begun to recognize the even stronger influence of our social constructs to shape and define our lives – even to the point of determining much of our individual behavior. It seems that our culture and social mores provide the framework within which our peculiar psychological selves are active.

Last month, I listened to a podcast on *Invisibilia* about the power of our reality bubbles. In this piece, they explored the way we look at reality and questioned whether we can ever really see it. They noted that we often have very different views of the same reality, which naturally brings us to “reality bubbles” and they described these bubbles as *prisons built by our preferences*. They talked about our contemporary culture's relentless drive toward customization by preference, reinforced by the consumer culture and fueled by social media, and how these preferences shape (perhaps even determine) our view of reality.

Recently, much has been made of the current “echo chambers” created by personal preference of media (mass, news, and social media), in which all we hear and see seem to merely reinforce already held viewpoints. In this podcast, they've expanded this notion of echo chambers even further to expose how where we live and work, and with whom we socialize greatly constrain us, creating and sustaining a limited bubble of reality – one that, while not untrue, is most certainly not the entire picture.

The interviewer spoke with a young man named Max Hawkins, who is a techie living in San Francisco. For a long time, Max loved his reality bubble because nearly everything in it conformed to his notion of ideal. Max worked at Google and every day he would wake to artisanal coffee and bike to the Embarcadero in order to ride the Google shuttle to the office. Throughout the day, Max would work on a variety of creative and fulfilling projects and eat healthy and locally-sourced meals at the Google café. He would then return in the evening to the Mission district and meet up with friends to talk ideas. As bubbles go, not bad at all. Life was good for Max.

Then one day, Max was lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling. Describing the scene, he said, “I just started thinking about these loops that we get into, about how the structure of your life completely determines what happens in it.”... Let's hear that again, “...about *how the structure of your life completely determines what happens in it.*” Max continued, “You work at Company X, which is Y miles from your home. You must commute from where you live to where you work, which puts you on a path that limits your exposure to people outside that path.”

And over time, as the interviewer commented, “The people inside the bubble get closer to you, and the people outside further away.”

In realizing this, Max started to feel trapped within this reality bubble of his very own making, so he decided to do something about it. In Facebook, there is a feature called “Graph Search.” With this feature, Facebook scours the public events within your bubble’s parameter of friends, places, and interests, and presents a list of these events. These are just the normal, everyday events that people post because they want their community of friends to know about them. Max decided he wanted to burst out of his bubble and so he built himself an app that would identify all the public Facebook events anywhere in the San Francisco area and then randomly chose one for him to attend.

So, Max started to go to events all over the city; to areas of the city he had never been and to cultural enclaves he never knew existed. One time his app sent him to a huge apartment building in the Marina area of the city. He showed up and rang the building buzzer. The guys let him in because they misheard his name, thinking it was a friend of theirs. When he arrived up at the apartment door, there was great confusion. Max explained to this group of seven Russian young professionals that his hacked Facebook feature had randomly selected their event to attend. They thought it was so funny that they invited him in and poured him a White Russian, which led to several more as the night went on. He stayed with them for several hours.

Over the year, he “bubble-hopped,” attending a community center pancake breakfast, an open house, salsa dancing events, and acroyoga. In doing so, it became clear to him just how much of modern American life is organized around preference which, in turn, determines our lives and narrows our paths. Max entered not only other reality bubbles but also people’s homes and lives. He was surprised at how often he was warmly welcomed and invited into their midst in intimate ways. This offer of welcome was also reciprocal, for he had to approach them with open welcome as well. Through this mutual welcome, I suspect that both he, as the stranger, and the others in the social group benefitted greatly, as viewpoints of reality were shared.

Max even attended a small dinner party on Christmas in Fresno. He knew very little about the event, other than only about 10 people would be there. Max went to the front door to ring the bell and he was totally freaked out, thinking that this time he had gone too far; had pushed the welcome beyond acceptability. It was Christmas day, after all. Then a woman answered the door and said, “Hello, welcome. Who do you know?” He ended up staying for five or six hours with her and her friends, dining, laughing, and singing Christmas carols together.

Can you imagine? I know that is not the way I answer the door to a stranger: “Hello, welcome.” That is true hospitality. That is generous welcome. I think that is love.

This reminded me of a hymn called “Love is the welcome.” The lyrics are written by Kathy Galloway and it is published in a small hymnal used for worship at the Iona Abby, on the Isle of Iona. We sing this hymn here at Communion Café. In fact, we will sing it at the end of our service today. The first verse of this hymn is this:

Love is the welcome that comes from the heart  
And opens its doors to a stranger  
Which makes of its house a resting place for all  
For the sake of the babe in the manger

If love is, indeed, the welcome that comes from the heart and opens its doors to a stranger, then it was love that opened the door on Christmas day to welcome the stranger named Max.

In our gospel lesson today from Matthew, Jesus speaks of this welcome. This short lesson (merely two verses today) are at the conclusion of a much longer passage in which Jesus gathers his disciples and sends them out to preach and heal in his name. Despite the risks and dangers that may await, Jesus instructs that they will do so unguardedly. They are sent with no purse, no provisions, and no real protection – as sheep among the wolves. In doing so, they are aligned with the “little ones” of the world – as strangers, vulnerable and in need of compassionate welcome.

Jesus then promises that when they, as strangers and the little ones, are welcomed, God will be welcomed as well. This vulnerability is not only lived by the stranger who comes to the door but also by the one who opens the door. This risk is shared by all but when doors are opened with welcoming love, space is made for God’s felt and active presence. “Love is the welcome that comes from the heart, and opens its doors to a stranger.”

This call to holy welcome is harder than it seems at first... this welcome of strangers... because often the one we must welcome is a prophet, and we know how dangerous they may be. Prophets present us with a view of the world that reveals the reality beyond our ‘bubbles.’ Prophets call us out of ourselves by bringing their lived truth, as well as their message of divine revelation, and invite us to experience reality beyond our own constructs which inevitably opens our eyes to God’s truth. To invite the stranger fully into our midst it to welcome God’s transformative love to take root in our hearts. Love is the welcome – and it is God’s love that is the holy welcome between strangers and, with its blessings, our eyes, ears, and hearts are further opened to the bigger and fuller reality that exists beyond our limited and enclosed bubbles determined by preference.

Jesus’ message of welcome – of welcome of the stranger, no matter which side of the door one is on – calls for a hospitality that is greater than merely being pleasant and nice. Indeed, as Liddy Barlow writes, “This kind of hospitality is a hard and holy challenge.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus calls us to welcome the other into our homes and into our very lives, and to allow ourselves to be changed by the encounter. And in this mutual and reciprocal welcome, Jesus assures us, God will be fully present and alive.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barlow, Liddy; “A Deeper Welcome” (June 30, 2017); The Christian Century