

Reimagining Relationship: What Autism Reveals About What it Means to Relate to God

By

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Date: April 26, 2021

Approved:



Warren Kinghorn, Supervisor



Sarah Barton, 2nd Reader



Will Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Popular expressions of contemporary Christianity emphasize a version of the faith is not a religion, but a relationship. What would such a statement mean for people on the autism spectrum whose diagnosis in *DSM-5* describes their kind of relating with words like disability, deficiency, and disorder? Are they to be considered disabled in their ability to relate to God? The answer is no. By first identifying the way that projection is at play in our phenomenology of relationships, this project takes the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder found in *DSM-5* and locates examples where the Bible witnesses to God behaving in a similar manner. This overlap of neurodiverse relational patterns and divine conduct does two things: First, it provides opportunity for people on the spectrum to find their kind of relating in the God of the Bible. Second, it expands the palette of language and metaphor the church can draw upon to describe how people relate to God and how God relates to people. The final chapter includes captured learnings and examples for how a work like this can be implemented in parish ministry. In all this, autism reveals both where our relational theology is insufficient, as well as where new avenues of Christian faithfulness lie.

Dedication

To Kristin, Aidan, and Quinn. Your support, wisdom, and encouragement have been vital. I love you all.

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1. Introduction

Autism is on the rise worldwide. A 2014 study from the US Centers for Disease Control found that one out of every fifty-nine children under the age eight was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that year.¹ That diagnostic rate is up 15%, from one in eighty-eight, just four years earlier.² Autism is present children and adults of every ethnicity and socioeconomic background and its presence transcends both class and geography.³ The growing prevalence of diagnoses has had many positive outcomes like an increasing awareness of autism as well as a decrease of stigmatization.⁴ Yet, the real needs of people on the spectrum have created new challenges for public health and services institutions.⁵ Autism is also shaping the life of the church.

Churches of all traditions, sizes, and styles have members who are on the spectrum. As with ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds, ASD also transcends

¹ Baio J, Wiggins L, Christensen DL, et al. “Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2014.” Center for Disease Control. [http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6706a1external icon](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6706a1external%20icon) (accessed July 31, 2019)

² Baio, Jon. “Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders—Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, eleven sites, United States, 2010.” Center for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6302a1.htm> (accessed July 31, 2019)

³ Matthew J Maenner et al., “Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years - Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2016,” Morbidity and mortality weekly report. Surveillance summaries (Washington, D.C. : 2002) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 27, 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7119644/>.

⁴ Some of thi increase in awareness and decrese of stgnatizartion is directed by people on the spectrum themselves. See, Autism Society, “Media Urged to Recognize Shift from ‘Autism Awareness Month’ to ‘Autism Acceptance Month’ This April,” Autism Society, March 4, 2021, <https://www.autism-society.org/releases/media-urged-to-recognize-shift-from-autism-awareness-month-to-autism-acceptance-month-this-april/>.

⁵ The ADDM (Early Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring) reports that children of color are less likely to be diagnosed with ASD than white children. This leads to disparities in services and interventions across affected populations . For more see: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/addm-community-report/documents/differences-in-children-addm-community-report-2018-h.pdf>

denominational distinctions. Furthermore, because the surge of diagnoses has happened over the last decade, much of autism's impact has been felt in ministries related to youth and children. Church leaders have had to find new ways to reach out and connect with families who feel either anxiety or exclusion because of their child's behavior.⁶ But this is not to say that autism is primarily a problem for the church. In fact, it provides new opportunities for spiritual and theological imagination. This includes what this project will focus on, what it means to be in relationship with God.

Autism as Apocalypse

Like many writing about disability, I came to this topic through someone I love. At age three, my son Aidan was diagnosed with autism and, for me, it was an apocalyptic event. Biblically speaking, an apocalypse is an unveiling of divine truth where that which could not be perceived before is revealed and things are seen as they actually are from God's perspective. In so many ways Aidan's diagnosis did this to me. It unveiled my prejudices and fears. It laid bare my entitlements and secret meritocracies. It revealed unknown expectations within my heart. However, it also opened me up to love in a more unconditional ways than I thought I was capable of. It freed me from shackling and sinful definitions of what I thought made a life full and joyful. In this way, autism was for me as Brian Brock says, a vector for both God's judgement and mercy.⁷

⁶ Whitehead, A. L. (2018), Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57: 377-395. doi:[10.1111/jssr.12521](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12521)

⁷ In *Wondrously Wounded* Brian Brock describes the way that our personal and communal interactions with disability in general and autism in particular reveal hidden truths about our hearts and common life.

As an Episcopal priest, church has always been an important part of my family's life. It became clear, however, that raising Aidan in the Body of Christ would not follow the same path as my peers or overlap with the experiences they were having. Aidan's need for movement-based stimulation meant there would never be a time where sat still on a carpet square, angelically contemplating a Godly Play bible story. His sensory processing differences would forever rule out the noise and chaos of a Vacation Bible School. It was clear that if church was going to work for Aidan, it would need to meet him on his terms.

Complicating my negotiation of these factors was the fact that Aidan's diagnosis came while I lived in Nashville, Tennessee. This put my experience as a Christian parent and Aidan's experience with the church in vigorous dialogue with the values and assumptions of evangelicalism. Even though our family worshipped in the Episcopal Church, the spiritual hegemony of Nashville's broader religious culture was decidedly evangelical. Colloquial definitions of words like "salvation", "gospel", "heaven", and "Christian" were all influenced by the conservative and reformed expressions of Christianity that dominated the city's ecclesiastical and commercial life.

For this reason, when it came to raising Aidan in the faith, I had to engage with one of evangelicalism's defining orthodoxies, the "personal relationship with Jesus." This theological construct chafed against my experience of Aidan's faith because I knew that,

Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 246.

even though he had been diagnosed with what *DSM-5* clinically defined as a relational disability, he was in no way disabled in his ability to relate to God.⁸ Never the less, the metaphors, assumptions, and theologies I encountered in Nashville's theological ether kept saying otherwise. My frustration and conviction about this dissonance is part of what drove this project.

However, this is not a primarily deconstructive monograph. It is an apocalyptic one. Autism revealed things in my heart that needed to change and grow. In the same way autism reveals limitations and assumptions about how the church conceives of relating to God. Furthermore, I will argue that autism also expands our concepts of what it can mean to be in relationship with God and have God relate to us. As such, it does indeed serve as a vector of divine judgement and mercy for the church because, through the lens of the spectrum we will see that being in a relationship with God it is more complex and beautiful than we may have ever imagined before.

A Note on Language

How autism should be addressed, especially by someone who is not on the spectrum, is a complex and dynamic conversation. There is always the real risk that the way I write about autism in a project like this can further marginalize the very people I want to center in the life of the church. Therefore, let me briefly share a note about my language.

⁸ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed)* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Currently there are two primary approaches for to how to speak about autism. One is called person-first language, where someone like Aidan would not be called an “autistic person”, but rather “a person with autism”. Person-first language is viewed as empowering people on the spectrum because it names their humanity first, not their disability. It is the current academic and journalistic standard, yet it is also considered limited by autism advocates because it assumes that autism is both a disability and something separate from a person’s fundamental humanity.⁹ For this reason, there has been a move within the autism community itself to challenge the person-first approach and reclaim identifiers like “autistic”. This approach is called identity-first language.¹⁰ Here someone like Aidan would refer to himself as “an autistic person” instead of “a person with autism” with the argument being that identity-first language empowers people on the spectrum by centering their voice and not describing autism as something subordinate to their humanity. In Aidan’s case then, autism would not be seen as a label given to by him by a clinician or by me, his father, but instead, as an identifier of his choosing and therefore part his own self-identity.¹¹ There is a current and ongoing debate

⁹ “National Center on Disability and Journalism,” NCDJ (Arizona State University), accessed April 9, 2021, <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>.

¹⁰ Madeleine Ryan, “I Don't Have Autism. I'm Autistic.,” Lenny Letter (Lenny Letter, June 7, 2018), https://www.lennyletter.com/story/i-dont-have-autism-im-autistic?mbid=lenny-newsletter_061218_&bxid=5a57b1413f92a4054ae9992e&utm_term=Lenny_Letter_Active&utm_source=Social&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Lenny_Letter_061218&utm_content=Final.

¹¹ Grant Macaskill speaks to the way that baptism into the Body of Christ interrogates, transcends, and in some ways, even challenges this kind postmodern identity construction for autistic Christians. See, Grant Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, no. 1 (November 2017): pp. 15-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2017.1373613>, 24-25.

about which approach is most appropriate and, at the time of my writing, it has not been settled.¹²

Therefore, for this project I will move between the two approaches. I will use person-first language because this is an academic thesis and person-first language remains the best practice in the academy. However, I will also use identity-first language when speaking about autism as someone's lived experience or as an alternative, but not aberrant way of being in the world. Included in this approach will be the terms "neurodiverse" and, "neurotypical". "Neurodiversity" is a way of talking about the socialization, communication, and thinking patterns of people on the spectrum as something that is different but not abnormal. It is not a clinical term, but is gaining traction as a familiar way to talk about autism as something which both conveys unique gifts and strengths and enriches the whole human family.¹³ I will use it similarly. Conversely, "neurotypical" is the word used by autism advocates to describe conventional and cultural familiar ways patterns of socialization, thinking, and communicating.¹⁴ I will use it in this way as well.

Finally, when writing about medical dimensions of autism I will need to use the diagnostic language of impairment, disorder, and disability. This is necessary because part of my argument involves dialoging with the criteria for autism in *DSM-5*. I realize

¹² Meg Evans, "Identity-First Language," Autistic Self Advocacy Network, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>.

¹³ For more on neurodiversity see Armstrong, Thomas. *The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain*. Cambridge, MA, 2011.

¹⁴ The fascinating and sarcastic etymology of both "neurodiverse" and "neurotypical" is chronicled by Steve Silberman in *Neurotribes*. Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: the Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (New York, NY: Avery, 2016), 450-454.

that this is problematic for anyone whose conviction is that autism should not be labeled a disorder. However, part of why I want to utilize the DSM's language, in part, to make that very point.

The DSM is a norming document. It defines autism's baseline criteria and remains the dominant way that autism is identified and understood. This can be a good thing because it provides standards for things like billing insurance companies for occupational therapy that someone on the spectrum might need. However, it also has limits. One of the chief limits is that it intrinsically categorizes autism as a disorder, leaving no room for the aforementioned appreciative and more empowering perspectives. The latter of these two reasons is why I am intentionally engaging *DSM-5* and its language of disability or disorder. How far can these categories be pushed? When directed toward the Bible's witness of divine conduct, do they still apply? If they can be true of God, then in what sense is autism a disorder? Instead of rejecting the DSM, I want to reveal its limitations by playfully putting it in dialogue with the biblical witness and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What I believe we will find is that, as Paul says sometimes, "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Cor 3:19).¹⁵

It is important to note that throughout this process I have been in dialogue with my son—not just to secure his permission to tell some of the stories I include in the last chapter, but also to gain his perspective as someone on the spectrum. His insights and feedback have been invaluable and I include some of them in the final chapter.

¹⁵ Biblical references are from the NRSV.

Relational Theology and Its Contemporary Limitations

To see how autism brings judgement and mercy to contemporary relationship with God language, we need to first explore where this language comes from in the first place. In his book *Reinventing American Protestantism*, Donald E. Miller tells a story about attending a service in a California church where the song leader proclaimed, “We’re not singing about religion tonight; we’re talking about a relationship with Jesus.”¹⁶ Stephen Prothero observes similar messaging in his book *American Jesus* where a pastor on stage proclaimed that “The answer is not religion. It is a relationship with Jesus.”¹⁷ Both of these stories are emblematic of a larger theological trend in American Christianity: marking the essential nature of Christian faith as having a relationship with God.

This “relational theology” is not only to be found in evangelicalism but also has an expression in traditional denominations as well. Groundbreaking work like Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* contributed to a merging of theological and psychological categories in the 20th century that shaped the theological imagination of Catholic and Protestant theologians alike. What it meant to be a person made in the image of God was increasingly grounded in a person's capacity for relationship.¹⁸ Yet even as the categories

¹⁶ Donald Earl Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1997), 29-30.

¹⁷ Stephen R. Prothero, *American Jesus How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 150.

¹⁸ Buber’s *I and Thou* is arguably the most influential text of the 20th century with regard to synthesizing psychology and theology. In it, Buber makes the philosophical case for an inexorable link between ontology and relationship. To participate in mutual, self-giving, reciprocal relationship for Buber, is the nature of what it means to be human. This theological trend cannot to be ascribed to *I and Thou* alone, but

and assumptions of ‘relational theology’ continue to hold authority in many expressions of American Christianity, they meet a profound theological challenge in the lived experience of people on the autism spectrum.¹⁹

Clinically speaking, an autism spectrum diagnosis requires the overlapping of three interconnected deficiencies: socio-emotional reciprocity, non-verbal communications, and the development, maintenance and understanding of social bonds. What this means is that an ASD diagnosis manifests primarily as an impairment in the capacity for relationship. At a clinical level then, to be on the autism spectrum is, by definition, to have a relational disability.

Such a definition raises difficult theological questions for the modern church. If one's capacity for relationship is central to what it means to be human and Christian faith is an expression of a relational reciprocity with God, then what of people with autism? Are we then suggesting that people on the spectrum are disabled in their ability to relate to God? The obvious and intuitive answer is "no," but why? By interrogating neurotypical assumptions about what it means to relate to God, this project will

Buber's influence is undeniable. Martin Buber, *I And Thou: a New Translation with a Prologue "I and You" and Notes by Walter Kaufmann* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).

¹⁹ In *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, Molly Haslam interrogates the way our culture overvalues particular kinds of “symbolic responsiveness” when it comes to why human life has value. When examined through the lens of people with intellectual disabilities, she establishes that Martin Buber's categories of will, grace and mutuality make possible a full and robust kind of relational responsiveness that is not tied to the assumptions of contemporary society. As such, Haslam demonstrates that “relating,” as I will also argue, has many expressions not tied to conventional norms and expectations. See, Molly Claire Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012), 67-91.

demonstrate the way that autism expands and magnifies categories for divine/human relationships, particularly when “relationship” is viewed through a neurodiverse lens.

I will begin with a survey of ASD. Where did this diagnosis come from? Has it always been this common? What are the particular diagnostic criteria for someone with ASD, and why is the condition considered a spectrum-diagnosis? This foundation will be crucial for my argument, because the specifics of the diagnostic criteria will be used to frame the bulk of the project: locating examples of a neurodiverse relationality in the Bible’s witness to divine conduct and behavior.²⁰

To get there, we will need to first examine the role that projection plays in our phenomenology of relationships. A concept called Theory of Mind (TOM) posits that relationships between people involve a particular dynamic of reciprocal projection. It theorizes that one knows the intent and motives of other people by projecting their own motives and intentions onto that person’s behavior. Then, when that person reflects back the behavior the projector is looking for, it reinforces that their assumption has been

²⁰ The biblical authors do not, of course, say anything directly about autism or “neurodiversity”. It is a modern concept, unknown in the ancient world. What the biblical authors do witness to, however, is divine conduct that subverts modern, Western, social expectations regarding politeness and propriety. When this witness is overlaid with contemporary diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis like ASD, it surfaces new questions about what it means for people to relate to God and for God to relate to people. Furthermore, from the earliest days of Christianity, the church has seen its role as being the pastoral and physical caretaker for those who were socially marginalized. This would include people with conditions that might today be described with the language of autism and “disability”. This inclusive posture toward the marginalized marked a different view of human anthropology than the Greco-Roman culture at-large held. Conventional wisdom was that human life derived its value based on an individual’s ability to contribute to society. The earliest Christians, instead, located the value of human life in the fact that all humans are created in the image of God. Their response to the needs of the marginalized was not to speculate on causes, but instead service and incorporation in the church. This project attempts to stand in that same tradition. For more see Almut Caspary, “The Patristic Era: Early Christian Attitudes Toward the Disfigured Outcast,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012), pp. 24-64.

correct.²¹ TOM has been a dominant force in autism research for much of the last decade, and is not without its limitations.²² However, for our purposes it serves to introduce the critical observation that human relationships involve projection.

From here, I will consider what happens when this same projection dynamic is applied to relationships with God. In her article “Perichoresis, and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,”²³ Karen Kilby explains that projection is at play in the way theologians apply social doctrines of the Trinity. Kilby highlights this dynamic in order to critique it, but not because the projection is inappropriate. In fact, she argues it is unavoidable. Her concern is that it is happening uncritically. For Kilby, it is not wrong, therefore, to see reflected in the Godhead all the kinds and of types of healthy human relationships. However, one must never do as she argues the social theorists do - move those projections to the center of our theology. They must remain descriptive, not prescriptive.

Even though Kilby writes “Perichoresis and Projection” as a cautionary tale, her work will provide a constructive avenue/method for naming the friction between

²¹ Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

²² One such example of this is McGuire and Michalko’s reframing to Baron-Cohen’s conclusions, regarding ToM and autism. For McGuire and Michalko the rules of engagement required by ToM create unhelpful binaries than turn autism into a problem to be solved rather than another way of being-in-the-world. They reframe the relationship as one that, instead, uniquely witnesses to the reality of mystery and risk present in all human relationships. As such, autism is not seen as a puzzle to be deciphered but a teacher that draws all humanity deeper into the complexities of the human experience. See, Anne E. McGuire and Rod Michalko, “Minds Between Us: Autism, Mindblindness and the Uncertainty of Communication,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 2 (2011): pp. 162-177, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2009.00537.x>.

²³ Kilby, Karen. “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity.” *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 432-445.

contemporary relational Christianity and autism. Furthermore, her conclusion invites a new avenue of exploration: if social doctrines of the Trinity utilize projection when they find their kinds of relationships reflected in the Godhead, then, as long they are not totalizing, can people on the spectrum do the same? Can a neurodiverse relationality be found in the divine conduct and behavior witnessed to by the Old and New Testaments? To put it another way, is God capacious enough such that someone with autism can find their kind of relationality in God too? The answer to that question, I will show, is yes.

Neurodiverse Relationality and the Bible

The Bible is full of examples where the text witnesses to God speaking, acting, and behaving in ways that someone on the spectrum would relate to and recognize. By returning to criteria for ASD found in *DSM-5*, I will first engage three examples from the Old Testament—Psalm 22, the Levitical feasts (Lev. 23), and the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 4-11)—to demonstrate where the diagnostic criteria for ASD overlaps with those texts’ rendering of divine conduct. Following that, I will turn to the New Testament and identify three examples from the life and ministry of Jesus—the encounter with the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28), the call of Levi (Mk 2:13-17), and the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Lk. 18:1-8)—where Jesus’ attitudes and behavior do not conform to neurotypical assumptions and patterns either. Each of these examples will offer an expanded, neurodiverse view for how we can conceive of relating to God and of God’s relating to us.

In the final chapter, “Toward a Neurodiverse Hermeneutic”, I share some of my learnings but also provide an example for how a project like this can benefit the life of

the church: two sermons. These sermons demonstrate the way some of the aforementioned exegesis can be applied directly in the preaching act and the power of centering neurodiversity in the parish.

Before I go further, it is important to acknowledge that autism exists as a spectrum. Because of this, an ASD diagnosis can include a myriad of behaviors and conditions some of which are more challenging, painful, and even dangerous than others²⁴. For the most part, the examples I will offer from the Bible where God's behavior reflects neurodiversity, will be representative of a less severe expression of the spectrum. Furthermore, when I suggest that someone with autism might be able to locate themselves, or recognize their behavior in said divine conduct, I am assuming a level of verbal acuity and social engagement that may not necessarily true of every person on the spectrum.

It is for this reason, I want to underscore that this monograph is primary a work of theology. It is meant to be about God first. This may seem obvious to state, but the way autism is expressed in any one person on the spectrum is as unique as every individual on that spectrum. Therefore, it would be impossible and even inappropriate to try and locate examples of divine behavior that would be satisfactorily comprehensive. For this reason, I will keep the focus on the Bible's witness to God and make theological observations that demand the church reconsider what it means for us to relate to God and have God relate to us. And even though my examples cannot and will not representative of every

²⁴ This is detailed more in the next chapter.

expression of autism my hope is that more work along these lines will follow. There is more to discover.

In all this, I desire to bring hope. The apocalypse autism supplies is, indeed, a vehicle for divine judgement as incomplete, unknown, and even sinful dynamics and convictions are exposed and uncovered.²⁵ But it is simultaneously a vehicle for divine mercy as sin is repented of and new insights spring forth. This project is about lifting up the new, dynamic ways neurodiversity helps us expand our understand for relating to God. This expansion is propelled our brothers and sisters on the spectrum whose ways of relating provides a new theological imagination for how everyone can be in a relationship with the divine. So now, let us begin with a survey of what autism is, where it came from, and how it is diagnosed.

²⁵ Miguel Romero critiques Brock's use of apocalypse in reference to disability and autism. Their exchange can be found on the Syndicate Network, Brian Brock et al., "Wondrously Wounded," Syndicate, October 21, 2020, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/wondrously-wounded/>.

2. Autism: History, Contours, and the Context of a Diagnosis

For a condition as prevalent as autism is, there are more novels, blogs, and guidebooks for parents than there are comprehensive histories of the diagnosis. That being said, however, American child psychiatrist Leo Kanner is most often credited with naming autism as a distinct condition and codifying its initial contours. For this reason, I will begin autism's story with him.

Kanner and Asperger

Leo Kanner was already a respected child psychiatrist before he published his ground-breaking 1943 study, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact".²⁶ This study that would popularize the word "autism" and become Kanner's legacy. Born in Austria and educated in Berlin, Leo Kanner immigrated to the United States in 1924 and joined the faculty of Johns Hopkins six years later. His early career at Johns Hopkins was fruitful. He founded the first child psychiatry clinic in the country and wrote the defining textbook in the field. Kanner, however, always remained a clinician and in 1943 began a new study with 11 children, all of whom all had a particular set of traits in common.

All 11 of the children demonstrated an observable difficulty with social interactions, trouble with adapting to changes in routine and showed strong inclinations toward being alone. They also manifested a condition called echolalia which is the practice of repeating a speaker's words back to them over and over. Of these 11, Kanner's first and most thoroughly examined subject was a boy named Donald T.

²⁶ Leo Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): pp. 217-250.

According to the 33-page letter written to Kanner by Donald's father, Donald was a boy who was always "happiest when he was alone...drawing into the shell of himself...oblivious to everything around him."²⁷ Kanner found this to be in true in his own observations of Donald as well, noting that

(Donald) did not seem to notice when someone entered or left the room he was in, and he was indifferent to visiting relatives, potential playmates, and he even failed to pay the slightest attention to Santa Claus in his full costume. When petted he showed no apparent affection and he gave the impression of being self-sufficient. At the age of two he developed an obsession for spinning blocks and pans and virtually all-round objects that could be spun. A spinning pan for instance, could keep him fascinated for hours and, when interfered with, he had destructive temper tantrums. The majority of his actions were endless repetitions performed in exactly the same way as they had been carried out originally. Furthermore, he never spontaneously spoke just to chat or to share his thoughts. When he spoke, he seemed either to ejaculate irrelevant utterances randomly, such as 'chrysanthemum' or to parrot what he had heard said to him at some other time.²⁸

Kanner's observations of these 11 children formed the basis of a new psychiatric diagnosis that he came to call "infantile autism" with Donald T. being the first recipient of the new diagnosis. However the word at the root of the term "autistic" was not new at all. Kanner borrowed it from Eugen Bleuler.

Eugen Bleuler was a Swiss psychiatrist who in 1910-1933, years before Kanner's tenure at Johns Hopkins, was doing pioneering work around a disorder he called schizophrenia.²⁹ In his work, Bleuler noticed the tendency of some of his schizophrenic patients to pull away and turn in toward themselves socially. This inward turn involved, "a telltale social withdrawal, evidenced by a flattening of personality, a cutoff of

²⁷ "Leo Kanner's 1943 Paper on Autism." *Spectrum*, April 2, 2019.

<https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/leo-kanners-1943-paper-on-autism/>.

²⁸ Berend Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux: a History of the Concept from Leo Kanner to DSM-5," *History of Psychiatry* 24, no. 4 (2013): pp. 442-458, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154x13500584>, 447.

²⁹ A term Bleuler coined in April of 1908 during a lecture in Berlin.

communication, and a preference for isolation.”³⁰ Bleuler called this tendency “autism” from the Greek word “autos”, meaning self.

Autism remained a nuance of the schizophrenia diagnosis until Kanner appropriated the term 33 years later and applied it to what he was seeing in Donald T. and those 10 other subjects. Even though he did not invent the term, Kanner is credited as distinguishing of “infantile autism” as its own distinct diagnosis and as the mapper of its initial contours. However, Kanner was not the only person in his field to notice autism in the early 1940s. Across the Atlantic, a doctor named Hans Asperger was using the same word to describe some of the same symptoms.

Hans Asperger was an Austrian pediatrician and professor who practiced at the Children’s Hospital in Vienna. In 1944 Asperger identified four boys who all demonstrated characteristics strikingly similar to Kanner’s group back in the United States. These four children all struggled with social intuition, something Asperger called “lack of empathy”, found comfort in ritual and routine, paid intense attention to preferred topics of interest, and tended to withdraw socially. Asperger’s paper about these four boys was called, “Die "Autistischen Psychopathen" im Kindesalter” (Autistic psychopaths in childhood) and was published in 1944, one year after Kanner’s *Autistic Disturbances*.

However, as similar as both sets of patients were it just as important to note the ways that they were different. Kanner’s subjects manifested echolalia while Asperger’s did not. Instead of repeating a speaker’s words, Asperger’s subjects talked to themselves

³⁰ John Donovan and Caren Zucker, *In a Different Key: the Story of Autism* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 319.

in one-sided conversations. Also, while Kanner's subjects had diminished professional prospects due to a lack of speech and cognitive impairments, many of Asperger's demonstrated strong communication skills and even went onto a great professional accomplishment in the arts and sciences³¹. As detailed further below, these seemingly minor differences would contribute to autism's eventual recognition as a "spectrum" diagnosis once Asperger's work was finally re-introduced to American and British scientists in the 1980s.

Because of his patient's pronounced tendency toward social withdrawal, Asperger also used Bleuler's term "autism" to describe the condition he was observing. Like Kanner had the year before, Asperger distinguished autism as its own unique diagnosis, separate from schizophrenia.

The proximity in time of these two studies and the coincidence of both scientists using the word "autism" has engendered rightful suspicion over the years. Did Kanner plagiarize Asperger's work or vice-versa? How could two scientists working in the same field, independent of each other come to using the same word to describe the same phenomenon inside of a year of one another? Recent scholarship has offered a compelling hypothesis.

In a 2017 paper, scholar John Robison proposed that the link between Kanner and Asperger was not academic theft, but instead a man they both worked with: Jewish

³¹ Part of this distinction could be due, in part, to the Third Reich's practice of eugenics. Whereas Kanner had a broad spectrum of subjects, working in Austria in 1944, grimly, Asperger would have only had subjects deemed beneficial to the Reich. Hence their superior prospects.

scientist George Frankel.³² Frankel had been Asperger's chief diagnostician in Austria, but the rise of the Third Reich and growing anti-Semitism in Europe compelled Frankel to leave Vienna.³³ He immigrated to the United States and, thanks to his expertise in the field of psychiatry, was hired to work at John's Hopkins by Leo Kanner in 1936.

According to Robison, this makes Frankel a "middle-man" between the two scientists and might help explain the connection and timing of Kanner and Asperger's work.

This remains only a well-researched theory, however, it is without dispute that Asperger and Kanner both lifted Bleuler's word "autism" out of the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia and applied to a new condition they were discovering in the mid-20th Century. Both men remain seminal for the development of ASD as a diagnosed condition, yet it was "Kanner who first named the two defining traits that would become common to all autism diagnosis going forward: the extreme preference for aloneness and the acute need for sameness."³⁴ Following World War II, geopolitics dictated that most autism research would follow Kanner's work and autism became a recognizable condition all over the world. This increased prevalence led to questions, not only about autism's cause but also the possibility of its cure.

The Mid 20th Century: Refrigerator Mothers

Today, we know that autism has no distinct cause as well as no cure. Current thinking on the former suggests a combination of environmental and genetic factors, the

³² John E Robison, "Kanner, Asperger, and Frankl: A Third Man at the Genesis of the Autism Diagnosis", *Autism* 21, no. 7 (2017): pp. 862-871)

³³ Because of the rise of Antisemitism, but also to follow the woman he loved. *Ibid.*, 863.

³⁴ Donovan and Zucker, *Different Key*, 40.

interplay of which is still being studied.³⁵ Research has also trended away from finding a “cure” for autism and toward effective therapies, interventions and treatments to help people with ASD live in the world.³⁶ However, in the mid-twentieth century the causes of autism were of much greater concern, due in large part to the misinformation of American psychologist Bruno Bettelheim.

Bettelheim is a controversial figure in autism’s story because much of his academic work was discredited after his death on grounds that he falsified his credentials, plagiarized his work, and mistreated his patients. Yet, in his day he was a towering public intellectual whose wrong ideas about autism tragically shaped the opinions of the public and the academy regarding the causes and treatments of the condition. Bettelheim was deeply influenced by Freudian psychology and was convinced that autism was a psychogenic disorder brought about by past mental stressors and trauma. According to Bettelheim, the source of that distress for all autistic children was a mother who was unloving or emotionally distant. This thesis gained traction in the culture and quickly became a kind of conventional wisdom. Mothers of children on the spectrum were called “refrigerator mothers”, a term that suggests they were cold and emotionally unavailable. Bettelheim’s influence was so great in shaping public opinion that the April 26, 1948 cover of Time Magazine, ran with the headline “Medicine: Frosted Children”. This was the magazine’s earliest reported story on the topic of autism and the central point of the

³⁵ “Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorders,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 27, 2019), <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>

³⁶ Shreeya Gyawali and Bichitra Nanda Patra, “Autism Spectrum Disorder: Trends in Research Exploring Etiopathogenesis,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, May 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pcn.12860>.

article was “to introduce *Time*’s readers to the existence of these rare “diaper-aged schizoids” who were “happiest when left alone.”³⁷ All this reinforced the false assumption that these children would not be so afflicted if they had been loved better by their mothers.

It is hard to overstate how much Bettelheim’s misinformation influenced research on autism and its therapies but, fortunately, it did not go unchallenged. Pushing back against the “refrigerator mother” hypothesis was American research psychologist Bernard Rimland. Rimland’s own son was diagnosed with autism at age 2, yet his wife’s relationship with their son was anything but cold and distant. As such, Rimland started to look for alternative explanations for the condition and in 1964 wrote the landmark book, *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior*. In it, Rimland argued that autism was not a psychogenic disorder but instead was the result of a complicated combination of genetic and environmental factors. *Infantile Autism* marked a sea-change in public opinion regarding autism and shaped the way the condition would be researched i for decades to come. It also laid the groundwork for Lorna Wing to take autism research through its next major evolution.

Enter “The Spectrum”

Lorna Wing was a British medical doctor specializing in psychiatry, but her focus shifted to child development when, like Bernard Rimland, her daughter Susie was diagnosed with autism. When Susie was diagnosed in 1959, “(it) came at a time when severe autism led to two clear prescriptions: early institutionalization for the child and

³⁷ Donovan and Zucker, *Different Key*, 74.

psychoanalysis for the mother.”³⁸ None of this was good enough for Wing and her daughter, so Wing shifted her academic focus to research in child development as it related to autism.³⁹

In the 1980s Wing’s work led to two major breakthroughs in the field of autism research. The first was the recognition that an autism diagnosis required something she called a “triad of impairments”. In 1981 one of the first epidemiological studies was conducted on autism. This study explored how prevalent social, language and cognitive impairment were in children with intellectual disabilities. What the study found was that these three impairments always seemed to occur together.⁴⁰ This finding had a seismic impact of on autism research seismic because, according to Wing, it allowed for “the examination not only of “pure” syndromes but also of borderline and partial forms, within the context of a larger, geographically defined population.”⁴¹

Wing would go on to call this discovery a “triad of impairments that included communication; social skills; and a restricted and repetitive way of being-in-the-world.”⁴² What this did diagnostically was to move the tendency toward isolation out of the center of the diagnosis, and place social impairments there instead. Before, autism had been more about “aleness”, but according to Wing, that desire to be alone was actually

³⁸ Donovan and Zucker, *Different Key*, 308.

³⁹ Giulia Rhodes, “Autism: a Mother’s Labour of Love,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 24, 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/may/24/autistic-spectrum-disorder-lorna-wing>

⁴⁰ Lorna Wing, “Language, Social, and Cognitive Impairments in Autism and Severe Mental Retardation,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 11, no. 1 (1981): pp. 31-44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01531339>

⁴¹ Wing, “Language, Social, and Cognitive Impairments”, 32.

⁴² Andrew Cashin, Dip App Sci, and Philip Barker, “The Triad of Impairment in Autism Revisited,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 22, no. 4 (2009): pp. 189-193, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2009.00198.x>, 189.

reflective of a relational deficit linked to the misreading of social cues and symbols. This distinction helped to further distinguish autism from other diagnosable impairments like mental retardation (now referred to as intellectual disability)⁴³ and laid the groundwork for what would happen next.

If Wing's "triad of impairments" was the 1980's first significant event for autism research then the second was the translation of Hans Asperger's research into English. Asperger had long maintained that his subjects in Vienna represented a distinct and different kind of autistic syndrome than Kanner was observing in Baltimore. He accounted for the difference by pointing to the difference in cognitive and verbal ability among his patients and Kanner's. Asperger's patients were highly intelligent and verbal. Kanner's were not. However, when Asperger's research became available in English his thesis was tested against the contemporary research and categories. Not everyone was convinced.

Among them was, again, Dr. Lorna Wing. Wing had no doubt that the distinction Asperger noted between his patients and Kanner's was legitimate. However, she was not convinced this difference pointed to two distinct disorders. From her perspective, both sets of subjects demonstrated the same, underlying two-way social impairments. Both groups had disorders that,

(arise) from a lack of ability to understand and use the rules governing social behavior. These rules are unwritten and unstated, complex, constantly changing, and affect speech, gesture, posture, movement, eye contact, choice of clothing, proximity to others, and many other aspects of behaviour.⁴⁴

⁴³ Audrey Thurm et al., "State of the Field: Differentiating Intellectual Disability From Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00526>.

⁴⁴ Wing, "Language, Social, and Cognitive Impairments", 116.

From her perspective, Kanner's and Asperger's patients did not represent two diagnoses but instead, they all had the same underlying condition, only with different severities. By drawing together Kanner's and Asperger's studies Wing made space for the emergence of a revolutionary new concept: the autism spectrum.⁴⁵ Autism was no longer a rigid collection of symptoms where any deviation represented a separate condition. Instead, it had a range with a continuum of severity. The same underlying impairments still made up an autism diagnosis, but they could vary in intensity and impact on each individual.

As the concept of the spectrum evolved it radically shaped the way autism was studied, understood and diagnosed. If even this brief history shows us anything, however, it is that the autism diagnosis is an ongoing, dynamic conversation within the academy. As more and more research is brought to bear on our contemporary assumptions, it should be expected that the contours of the diagnosis will shift again during this author's lifetime. That being said, however, let us now turn to the most contemporary diagnostic standard: *DSM-5*.

DSM-5: Autism's Contemporary Contours

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM as it is commonly called, is the academic and medical community's standard for classifying and diagnosing mental disorders. The first DSM came together in 1952, just after World War II, and subsequent editions have all included changes and updates based on the new knowledge and research that has become available. As such, each iteration of the DSM

⁴⁵ Lorna Wing, *Asperger Syndrome: a Clinical Account* (London: National Autistic Society (NAS), 1981)

provides a time capsule-like snapshot of the psychiatric and psychological community's assumptions and understanding about a diagnosis. Nowhere has this been truer than with the diagnosis of autism.

The most current edition of the DSM is *DSM-5* and was first published in 2013. *DSM-5* made significant changes to the autism diagnosis. Because of the social and political nature of the DSM, these changes have not gone uncriticized.⁴⁶ Never the less, the diagnostic contours of *DSM-5* set the standard for what is recognized in our culture as the "autism spectrum," and therefore what is commonly understood as "autistic relationality." Because I will put these criteria in dialogue with the scriptures to highlight areas where autistic relationality can be found in the Bible, it is necessary to clarify the most current measures.

Criteria and Commentary

DSM-5 presents five criteria, A through E, that make up an ASD diagnosis. Criterion "A" addresses deficits in social communication and interaction, with Wing's triad of impairments prominently on display:

- A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

⁴⁶ For more on the social and political dimensions of the DSM see Warren A Kinghorn, "The Political Science of Psychiatric Diagnosis: A Moral Defense of the DSM. ," in *Philosophy and Psychiatry: Problems, Intersections, and New Perspectives*, ed. D D Moseley and G Gala (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 60-79. Kinghorn argues that DSM is not simply a book of objective scientific discovery, each volume of which moves human knowledge ever closer to a pure and unvarnished diagnostic description of mental illness. Instead, he contends that it is a political and social document that not only delineates what psychiatrists and other clinicians treat, but also serves as an artifact that chronicles contemporary understandings of certain mental illnesses. These contextual realities are not a weakness for Kinghorn however, but may serve as part of the DSM's strengths.

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.⁴⁷

Criterion A is about the way someone on the spectrum is challenged to read social cues and symbols. These challenges may manifest in either the misreading of social situations or a lack of interest in reciprocating relationships or both. To contribute to an ASD diagnosis these challenges must be present across a person's whole life and be observable in different contexts. This means that the social challenges denoting autism must be intrinsic to a person and have negatively affected every part of that person's life.

Adding further clarity are three subheadings that give simple, but not exhaustive examples of how these social communications and interaction deficits might be manifest. First, there are challenges with "social-emotional reciprocity". This would include examples like not being able to or interested in sharing and maintaining a conversation, especially around a non-preferred topic. It also includes Kanner's and Asperger's "inward turn" where social interactions are not only uncultivated but may also be unwanted. Second, is a noted lack of non-verbal social reciprocity. This includes everything from

⁴⁷ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed)* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, (2013))

limited eye contact, a flattened affect, to body positions like turning your back on the person speaking, that do not telegraph a subject is interested in relating to someone else. Third and finally, diagnostically a person with autism demonstrates a deficiency and lack of interest in building, deepening, and maintaining relationships with peers and others. Any of these examples, manifest across a subject life, can be a contributor to an ASD diagnosis.

The next criteria, “B”, deals with the behavior manifested in those “endless repetitions” Kanner observed in Donald T. fifty years earlier:

- B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):
1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
 2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
 3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
 4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).⁴⁸

Here is the familiar ASD trait of rigid and fixed insistence on pattern, routine, and ritual with four potential manifestations. The first is “stereotyped or repetitive motor movements”, like lining up blocks, repeatedly rolling a toy car back and forth along the same trajectory, or even repeating certain words or sounds (Kanner’s echolalia shows up

⁴⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (5th)*.

here). The second is a rigid “adherence to a routine” that can include both ritualized behavior as well as speech. It is not enough, however, simply to manifest ritualized behavior. An autism diagnosis requires that there also be great difficulty in changing it. The third manifestation is a narrow and intense focus on a particular topic of interest. Here a subject must demonstrate obsessive concentration where the intensity or even the subject matter itself is atypical or even socially transgressive.⁴⁹ The fourth and final manifestation is an intensified and/or diminished experience of certain sensory input and stimuli. Here a subject experiences sensory input like sound, touch, or taste with either unusually heightened or unusually diminished sensitivity. *DSM-5* requires a subject to show at least two out of four manifestations to qualify for an ASD diagnosis.

Because many of the symptoms above can present in other diagnoses as well, *DSM-5*'s last three criteria and coding notes provide qualifications to ensure that ASD is the best diagnosis and not another condition:

- C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).
- D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.
- E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified

⁴⁹ “Home : News : Parents and Friends,” Autism and the laundromat birthday | Autism Support Network, accessed February 2, 2020, <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/autism-and-laundromat-birthday-3589035>)

should be given the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder.

Specify if:

With or without accompanying intellectual impairment

With or without accompanying language impairment

Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor

(Coding note: Use additional code to identify the associated medical or genetic condition.)

Associated with another neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder

(Coding note: Use additional code[s] to identify the associated neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder[s].

With catatonia (refer to the criteria for catatonia associated with another mental disorder)

(Coding note: Use additional code 293.89 catatonia associated with autism spectrum disorder to indicate the presence of the comorbid catatonia.)⁵⁰

The above criteria clarify three things for an ASD diagnosis. First, the observed symptoms must have been present before their current manifestation. For example, ASD sometimes does not present in children until the social demands put on a child start to exceed their capacity to manage them. It is important, therefore, to make sure that any symptoms that appear autistic are not actually the result of another diagnosis or phase of life. Second, the symptoms must actually impair an individual's functioning. What makes autism a disability medically speaking, is the way it denotes persistent relational behaviors that dis-able a person from functioning in routine social arrangements. Therefore, while neurotypical individuals may recognize aspects of an ASD diagnosis in themselves, if the symptoms are not impeding their function, then it is not ASD. Third, the symptoms are not better defined by another disability or condition. This is important because, in the same way, Bleuler initially thought autism was part of schizophrenia,

⁵⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (5th)*.

autism shares traits with many other conditions and pathologies. If autism is not the best diagnosis, it should not be applied. The final section of coding notes reinforces how important discernment is when applying an autism diagnosis. It should not be done lightly.

Lastly, as mentioned above *DSM-5*'s changes to the ASD diagnosis have not been without criticism. One of the most controversial was *DSM-5*'s elimination of Asperger's Syndrome as a diagnosis separate from autism itself.⁵¹ The committee chose to collapse Asperger's Syndrome and other autism-adjacent diagnoses like autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) into one comprehensive diagnosis simply called "Autism Spectrum Disorder". The reasoning is understandable; as the criteria for autism evolved these separate diagnoses became more and more difficult to distinguish from one another phenomenologically. However, for a generation of people who came to see some of these categories not simply as diagnostic criteria but instead, an identity, the change has been uniquely difficult.⁵²

Complicating matters further is the fact that, even though the committee for *DSM-5* sought to streamline the diagnosis by folding ASD and older autism-adjacent diagnoses together, they also created a new one: Social Communication Disorder (SCD). SCD has drawn much criticism for the way it looks a great deal like the very type of autism-

⁵¹ "Analysis of New Diagnostic Criteria for Autism Sparks Debate: Spectrum: Autism Research News," Spectrum, April 2, 2012, <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/analysis-of-new-diagnostic-criteria-for-autism-sparks-debate/>

⁵² Claudia Wallis, "A Powerful Identity, a Vanishing Diagnosis," The New York Times (The New York Times, November 2, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/03/health/03asperger.html>

adjacent diagnosis the committee was trying to simplify with the current edition. Furthermore, it has been noted that the introduction of SCD resembles the way Asperger's Syndrome was presented in *DSM-III*, raising concerns that the committee is making history repeat itself instead of actually clarifying the diagnosis.⁵³

Other criticisms of *DSM-5* have come from, none other than Dr. Lorna Wing. Writing with Judith Gould and Christopher Gillberg, Wing is concerned not by what has been added, but by what has been left out. She writes, "...the DSM committee has overlooked a number of important issues (in the autism diagnostic criteria), including social imagination, diagnosis in infancy and adulthood, and the possibility that girls and women with autism may continue to go unrecognized or misdiagnosed under the new manual."⁵⁴

Wing's final contention involving girls and women is important and currently developing a new dimension of ASD. There is mounting evidence that suggests autism manifests itself differently in girls than it does in boys.⁵⁵ This is true, specifically, with regard to the way girls and boys process and analyze social information. In short, the brains of girls with autism, while still developmentally behind the curve of their own gender, actually track closely with the brain development of neurotypical boys the same age. This, when coupled with the fact that the diagnostic criteria for autism were developed around male subjects and that other diagnoses, like obsessive-compulsive

⁵³ Verhoeff, *Autism in Flux*, 454.

⁵⁴ Lorna Wing, Judith Gould, and Christopher Gillberg, "Autism Spectrum Disorders in the DSM-5: Better or Worse than the DSM-IV?," *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 32, no. 2 (2011): pp. 768-773, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2010.11.003>

⁵⁵ Maia Szalavitz, "Autism-It's Different in Girls," *Scientific American* (Scientific American, March 1, 2016), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/autism-it-s-different-in-girls/>

disorder and anorexia, can overlap or mask autism, make it possible that many girls might be going undiagnosed. This is a relevant concern that requires more research.

The last three versions of the DSM, published in 1980, 1994, and 2013, have contained many changes with regard to what autism is and how it is diagnosed.⁵⁶ As demonstrated by the history above, this is because our understanding of autism continues to evolve as do the culture circumstances that influence the diagnosis. We should expect more changes in future versions of the DSM. However, it is not only just our scientific knowledge about autism that is changing. Our cultural perceptions of the disorder are changing too.

Autism in Context: Acceptance, Pride and Challenges

Because the first decade of the new millennium saw a dramatic rise in the number of ASD diagnoses something else unexpected happened as well: there was a change in the cultural awareness and acceptance of the diagnosis. The more people were being diagnosed with ASD, the more opportunity neurotypical people had to know someone on the spectrum. As a result, autism has made its way into both our cultural narratives and common vocabulary.

In 2007 the CBS network premiered a sitcom called *The Big Bang Theory*. One of the main characters on the show is a genius, child prodigy named Sheldon Cooper who, in addition, is earning his Ph.D. at age sixteen, is intentionally written to resemble someone with ASD. Played by actor Jim Parsons, Sheldon became the show's breakout star and as the series' popularity grew, so did Sheldon's cultural footprint. Show creator

⁵⁶ A revised edition of *DSM III* called *DSM-III-R*, was published in 1987.

Bill Brady and actor Jim Parsons agreed that while Sheldon does not formally have Asperger's Syndrome because it would create too much of a burden to get the details right, the character is written and performed purposefully to exhibit traits of the diagnosis.⁵⁷ *The Big Bang Theory* became a Top 10 rated show in its third season and has remained so throughout its current, twelfth season.⁵⁸ Sheldon Cooper proved to be such a popular character that the network created a spin-off series about him as a child called *Young Sheldon*. But Sheldon was not the only character of the early 2000s to reflect the contours of the spectrum.

In the wake of *The Big Bang Theory's* success, two other popular television series on NBC, *Community* and *Parenthood*, both included characters with autism. Unlike, the *Big Bang Theory*, the characters on these two programs were written by creators who were personally familiar with the disorder. *Community's* Abed Nadir, played by Dani Pudi, begins the series without a formal diagnosis, but instead is heavily coded as autistic. That being said, however, showrunner, Dan Harmon later revealed that he had been diagnosed with autism as an adult and that writing Abed was part of how he came to recognize his own diagnosis.⁵⁹ On *Parenthood*, writer Jason Katamis drew on his own experience as the father with a son on the autism spectrum to write the storyline of the

⁵⁷ Alan Sepinwall/The Star-Ledger, "Reader Mail: Does Sheldon from 'Big Bang Theory' Have Asperger's?," nj, August 13, 2009, https://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/2009/08/reader_mail_does_sheldon_from.html)

⁵⁸ Nellie Andreeva, "Full Series Rankings For The 2009-10 Broadcast Season," Deadline, May 28, 2010, <https://deadline.com/2010/05/full-series-rankings-for-the-2009-10-broadcast-season-44277/>)

⁵⁹ Frazer, "Community's Dan Harmon Discovered He Had Asperger's While Writing Abed's Character," Vulture, September 23, 2011, <https://www.vulture.com/2011/09/community-dan-harmon-wired-aspergers-abed.html>)

Braverman family⁶⁰. On the show, the Bravermans' son Max is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and the challenges it creates for the family made up one of the main storylines of the show. Following the success of *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, and *Parenthood* other television programs and movies began incorporating characters with autism into their narratives, however, the phenomenon is not limited to adult programming. On April 10, 2015, *Sesame Street* debuted a new character, Julia. Julia is a four-year-old girl, yellow Muppet with a red-bob haircut who also has autism. Her debut coincided with Autism Awareness Month and included resources on the *Sesame Street* website for parents and families subtitled "See Amazing in All Children."⁶¹

These television programs are a few of the many examples that illustrate the shift in the perception of autism that has followed Lorna Wing's challenge of the "refrigerator mother" stereotype. Characters like Julia and Abed provide a cultural touchstone for the diagnosis. You may not know someone with autism personally, but you love *Parenthood* and find Sheldon hilarious. This kind of representation⁶², while not perfect, has provided positive categories and models for the acceptance and understanding of autism and has aided in demystifying the diagnosis.⁶³ No longer is a person on the spectrum necessarily

⁶⁰ "'Parenthood' Writer-Producer Jason Katmis Aims to Keep It Real," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, March 14, 2014), <https://www.latimes.com/health/la-xpm-2014-mar-14-la-he-five-questions-katims-20140315-story.html>)

⁶¹ "Resources for Parents," Sesame Street and Autism, accessed February 8, 2020, <https://autism.sesamestreet.org/>)

⁶² There is current debate around non-disabled actors playing characters with disabilities. See, Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopic, "THE RUDERMAN WHITE PAPER ON EMPLOYMENT OF ACTORS WITH DISABILITIES IN TELEVISION," The Ruderman Family Foundation, July 2016, https://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_7-1-003.pdf.

⁶³ Matthew Rozsa, "Autism in Pop Culture Has Come a Long Way - but There's Still Room to Grow," Salon (Salon.com, April 2, 2019), <https://www.salon.com/2019/04/02/autism-in-pop-culture-has-come-a-long-way-but-theres-still-room-to-grow/>)

an outlier who requires institutionalization. Instead, they could be someone you found in your study group or could see as a roommate. They are the friend in your neighborhood who you may have once seen as “weird”, but in whom you could now find amazingness.

New awareness and acceptance regarding autism are not just happening in media, but within the autism community as well.⁶⁴ Back before it was incorporated into the ASD diagnosis by *DSM-5*, the term “Asperger’s” was making its way into the lexicon as a self-referential description of awkward behavior and social faux-pas. Phrases like “I’m being totally Asperger’s right now,” or just the descriptor “aspie” were being reclaimed by people on the spectrum as both a badge of identity and a tool for seeking empathy.⁶⁵ For the first time in its short lifespan, autism is becoming something about which one can be proud.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in spite of this wave of cultural understanding and acceptance, raising a child on the spectrum remains a significant challenge. The National Autism Association notes that the mortality rate of people with autism is twice as high as the general population with the most common cause of death being drowning. Almost half of all people with autism are in danger of wandering or bolting from safety, a threat that is

⁶⁴ Sarah Kurchak, “I Have Autism. Watching Television Helped Me More than Therapy.”, Vox (Vox, April 10, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/10/15223982/autism-julia-sesame-street-muppet>)

⁶⁵ Admin, “Top 10 Signs You Have Aspergers,” The Art of Autism, August 14, 2019, <https://the-art-of-autism.com/top-10-signs-you-have-aspergers/>)

⁶⁶ “Health | ‘Why My Autism Is a Gift’,” BBC News (BBC, July 29, 2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3106599.stm>) and Chanel Vargas, “Pixar’s Beautiful New Short Film Loop Features a Nonverbal Teenage Girl With Autism,” POPSUGAR Family, February 8, 2020, <https://www.popsugar.com/family/pixar-loop-short-film-details-47156866>).

See also the Autistic Self Advocacy Network “Autistic Self Advocacy Network,” Autistic Self Advocacy Network, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>.

compounded for the third of people on the spectrum who cannot communicate their name, address, or phone number. Bullying remains a problem for all children, however, children on the spectrum remain particularly vulnerable with nearly two-thirds reporting they have been bullied because of their autism.⁶⁷ With autism, however, the threat does not always come from someone else. Children on the spectrum can also exhibit self-injurious behavior like biting, scratching, and headbanging.

There are also financial challenges. The costs of special therapies and lost wages can also make raising a child on the spectrum expensive. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy can cost up to \$60,000 per year yet, because they tend to serve as caseworkers for their children, parents of children with autism are 50% less likely to work outside the home than parents with neurotypical kids.⁶⁸ Compounding these challenges is the fact that many of the school-based autism services do not have an adult version. That means that once a child diagnosed with ASD exits their public school, they may not have any access to any therapies and services. This is part of why more than half of adults with autism remain unemployed and have not enrolled in higher education, and that nearly half of 25-year-old adults with ASD have never held a job.

Social and institutional challenges for people on the spectrum also exist in the church as well. A 2018 study from the National Survey of Children's Health found that children on the spectrum were almost twice as likely to not be involved in a religious

⁶⁷ "Autism & Safety Facts," National Autism Association, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts/>.

⁶⁸ "Autism's Cost," Beacon Health Options, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.beaconhealthoptions.com/autisms-cost/>.

service or community as their typically developing peers.⁶⁹ This outpaces the estrangement of families who have children with other intellectual behavior and health challenges. Addressing the challenges that autism presents to the church is where this project will turn next. If representation can matter in television, is there also space for those on the spectrum to find themselves represented in the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ? And if there were, what kind of difference might it make for the spiritual lives of the countless people impacted by ASD? To answer these questions, we must next interrogate a defining feature of contemporary Christianity: being in a relationship with God.

⁶⁹ David Briggs, “Study: US Churches Exclude Children with Autism, ADD/ADHD,” ChristianityToday.com (Christianity Today, May 3, 2019), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/study-us-churches-exclude-children-with-autism-addadhd.html> For more on this and the perspective of autistic Christians on their faith and the church see, Eleanor X. Liu et al., “In Their Own Words: The Place of Faith in the Lives of Young People With Autism and Intellectual Disability,” *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 52, no. 5 (January 2014): pp. 388-404, <https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-52.5.388>.

3. Mindblindness, Projection, and the Problems of Relating with God

Relational speech about God is as old as the Bible itself. Janet Soskice notes that of all the metaphors Scripture uses to describe the divine, one of the primary baskets is familial.⁷⁰ Metaphors like Father, Son, and Brother are not simply images, nor are they literal. They are, she argues, “kinship” titles that point to the incarnational claim of the scriptures that God is our kin.⁷¹ This is significant because, as Soskice explains,

Kinship titles are mutually implying—if I am your kin, then you are mine. Once one has a brother or a sister, one is a brother or a sister. This is not merely a matter of emotional and domestic ties. A shepherd who ceases to look after sheep is no longer a shepherd. He might become a farmer or, as in David's case, a king. Kinship terms are not similarly disposable. To claim that God is our Father, or Christ, our brother, is thus to make a strong claim not only about God but about us.⁷²

Here, relational speech about God names both something about the character of the divine and the ontological reality between Creator and creation. As kin, God and the human beings made in God's image are each bound together in relationship.

Another metaphor from scripture that points the same direction is the biblical title “friend of God.” Abraham (Jas 2:23) and Moses (Ex. 33:11) are both described and “friends of God,” and Jesus takes up this same imagery when he tells his disciples, “I have no longer called you servants, but friends.”⁷³ However, as Lauren Winner notes, the metaphor of “friendship” is not confined to the Bible alone, “Theologians through the ages—Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas—have spoken of all of us, not just

⁷⁰ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷¹ Soskice use of the word “kin” is the Old English rendering of being “like” someone.

⁷² Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 38-41 (Kindle Location).

⁷³ John 15:15

biblical heroes, as friends of God. Theodoret of Cyrus, a fifth-century bishop, said that friendship with God is the entire goal of the Christian life."⁷⁴

Such relational metaphors about God, therefore, are helpful as a "heuristic instrument that structures the unknown so as to make it accessible, even if it cannot aim at full adequacy."⁷⁵ Yet, as Janet Plaskow notes, we must be aware that the characteristics we ascribe to the divine in our metaphors can sometimes be mere reflections what our culture values most.⁷⁶ For this reason, she warns us to be careful that particular symbols for God do not "become so deeply established and familiar [that] they lose their transparency as symbols and come to be seen as descriptions of God that provide unique access to the nature of divine reality."⁷⁷

This is an interesting observation as it is applied to the religion/relationship binary observed in the first chapter. Are their unique cultural forces, particularly in the United States, that have reinforced this dichotomy? Is there something in our history that makes our contemporary speech about God hyperbolically relational?

In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero observes that the development of "relationship with Jesus" piety as something over and against rule-based "religion" comes

⁷⁴ Friendship is a prominent metaphor in Christian theological accounts of disability. See, Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

See also, Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche: a Spirituality for Every Day* (London: SPCK, 2013). And, John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

⁷⁵ For a deeper treatment of metaphorical language in Theology and Pastoral Care see, Daniel J. Louw, "'God as Friend': Metaphoric Theology in Pastoral Care," *Pastoral Psychology* 46, no. 4 (1998): pp. 233-242, 238.

⁷⁶ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 121–28.

⁷⁷ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 127.

out of evangelicalism's challenge to Puritan theological dominance of the late 18th and early 19th century.⁷⁸ As the United States developed a religious culture that was distinct from Europe, the dogma and doctrine piety that characterized the great Reformation traditions could not hold sway against the denominational melting pot emerging in the new American context. Evangelical theology gained more and more footing among American Christians, and so too, then, did its piety of engaging Jesus personally.

As evangelicals placed more of their faith in him, Jesus became more human and less divine. Rather than cowering before Jesus as the King of Kings, evangelicals increasingly approached him as a person who could, in the words of St. Bonaventure, "be known and loved and imitated." No longer a signpost in a vast theological system, Jesus emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a living, breathing human being.⁷⁹

As this perspective of Jesus developed through the 20th century and liberal, mainline Protestant denominations lost their cultural power in the 1920's, Prothero observes that evangelicals, "recalling their roots in the sentimental piety of early Victorianism, centered their lives on a personal relationship with Jesus."⁸⁰ Prothero tracks the influence of this particular relational speech about God through the Jesus Movement of the 1970s, the seeker-sensitive church movement of the 1980s, and into the praise and worship mega-churches of today. In the American Christian context, "relating to God" and a "personal relationship with Jesus" became one and the same, taking a pride of place as the norming norm of popular piety.

Yet, this perspective on relating to God meets a profound challenge when interrogated by the experience of people on the autism spectrum. If what it means to be

⁷⁸ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 43-158.

⁷⁹ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 55-56.

⁸⁰ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 156.

Christian is to "relate" to God, is there space for those in the faith for whom relating is uninteresting or even undesirable? If the existential framework for the divine and the human is relational encounter, then what of those who do not "relate" easily or who do not prefer relationships? Are they compromised in their ability to relate to God?

Christine Guth asks this very question in her article, "Horses Live to Run. What about People?" Guth is a Mennonite theologian whose husband was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. In grappling with the connection between relationship and faith, she writes,

I once had my own easy answer to this question... The capacity for relationship was, I thought, the most valuable aspect of human experience, and how we reflect the image of God. My Asperger family led me to throw out all such assumptions and start over. First, both our children were diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (a condition on the autism spectrum: a disorder affecting a person's ability to socialize and communicate with others). Then my husband Bob also claimed the diagnosis. Surrounded by people on the autism spectrum, I began to wonder how God's good creation could include people with brain differences that limit ability to form relationships. What could it mean to be human when some folks cannot relate in ways that meet our expectations? I concluded in frustration that the people I love with all my heart are a completely different kind of human being, incomprehensibly "other."⁸¹

Here Guth names the friction that relational speech about God presents when it is confronted with the autism spectrum: when it comes to relationships, not all people seem to be created equal. Scottish theologian John Swinton puts it this way, "If we are to make the statement that human beings are made for relationships, do we not need to add the proviso that while all people need relationships, not all people live to relate?"⁸²

⁸¹ Christine Guth, "Horses Live to Run. What about People?," *Australian Journal of Pastoral Care and Health* 5, no. 1 (2011), 26-27.

⁸² John Swinton, "Reflections on Autistic Love," *Practical Theology* 5, no. 3 (2012): pp. 259-278, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v5i3.259>, 267.

As a Christian with autism, Christopher Barber reflects his frustration with the way relational "connectedness" is placed at the center of Christian language about faith and practice. In an article entitled "On Connectedness," Barber writes,

People with autism make connection with God. We do it in ways that may seem to be different and even odd to those observing us from outside the autism spectrum. Because we have particular challenges connecting with people and our environment, it thus readily assumed that we cannot experience or express a sense of the spiritual. Does this mean those with an ASC do not relate to others and that, therefore, they are seen as not being fully present or even, as an extreme, that they do not exist?⁸³

Barber's point is well taken. The more faith and piety are framed as "connecting" and "relating" to God and neighbor, the less Barber and others on the spectrum may recognize their ability to be a part of it.

What can be done with this problem? I will argue that the solution here is not to reset the theological starting point for the faith or abandon relational speech about God to be more inclusive. As we have seen, relational metaphors are deeply biblical and of great value. Instead, the path forward lies in expanding the concept of relationship itself. Is what Barber and others are experiencing the very dynamic Janet Plaskow warned about? Has this particular metaphor about God ceased to function symbolically and instead been pressed into a narrow and neurotypical paradigm about how God relates? I believe so. Yet, to undo this we need an expanded definition of how God relates, which means we first need to explore our phenomenology of relationships and the Theory of Mind.

⁸³ Christopher Barber, "On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum," *Practical Theology* 4, no. 2 (June 2011): pp. 201-211, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v4i2.201>, 209.

The Theory of Mind and Projection in Relationships

The Theory of Mind (TOM) is a complex social theory where an individual "imputes mental states to himself and others (either to conspecifics or to other species as well). A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first, because such states are not directly observable, and second because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms."⁸⁴ In essence, TOM posits that human beings can know others have a mind by observing their behavior and inferring, based on what is observed, that the other person has a mind too. TOM is identified as a "theory" because another person's mind is not directly observable and because, like any hypothesis, the inferences are used as a method to test and predict outcomes.

The central dynamic of TOM is projection: specifically, the role it plays between observer and the observed. TOM posits that people understand each other's behaviors and intentions by projecting into another's conduct their own motives and assumptions. For example: Imagine a person is walking on the street and encounters another person on the sidewalk. How does the first person determine if the second person is a threat? TOM asserts that through a multilayered process of observation, inference, and assumptions, the first person watches the behavior and attitudes of the second person and draws conclusions about their risk based on how *they* imagine *they* would act if they wanted to be perceived as non-threatening. If the person approaching demonstrates those similar non-threatening behaviors and attitudes, the conclusion is drawn that they are safe. TOM

⁸⁴ David Premack and Guy Woodruff, "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1, no. 4 (1978): pp. 515-526, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x00076512>, 515.

functions under the assumption that by knowing one's own mind, one can know the mind of another.

Autism researchers utilize TOM as a way to account for the relational differences of people on the spectrum . Because the neurodiverse have difficulty reading social cues and "stepping into someone else's shoes," then it is posited that they do not have a "theory of mind." This inability to "read" someone else's mind is called "mindblindness,"⁸⁵ and it is offered as a possible explanation for the challenges people on the spectrum experience when relating to others.

However, when it comes to the overlay of the Theory of Mind and autism specifically, John Swinton offers not a critique so much as a caution. Because TOM is based on "reading" someone else's mind, Swinton notes an inherent assumption at work within the theory: it only functions if other people's minds are more or less like your own. Swinton lifts up this inconsistency to say not, "...that we should discard TOM. There may well be much to be learned from utilizing its insights. My point is that it is overly powerful, and it requires careful critique."⁸⁶

Swinton's concern lies in a potential neurotypical hegemony at work behind the scenes in TOM. While people on the spectrum may demonstrate mindblindness, that could only be because their minds do not function like neurotypical minds function. Yes, a person with autism may have trouble reading the neurotypical mind but is not the opposite also true? The neurotypical mind also struggles to comprehend the neurodiverse

⁸⁵ A. Senju et al., "Mindblind Eyes: An Absence of Spontaneous Theory of Mind in Asperger Syndrome," *Science* 325, no. 5942 (2009): pp. 883-885, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1176170>.

⁸⁶ Swinton, "Autistic Love," 265.

mind's patterns, assumptions, and values. It is just as inscrutable to someone who is not on the spectrum as an autistic mind may be to someone who is neurotypical. Therefore, he presses, the mindblindness goes both ways.

Swinton's larger concern is about whose mind we assume is "normal". For most of its application to the autism spectrum, TOM has served to reinforce conventional wisdom about who is "abled" and who is "disabled." Swinton's challenge is to remember that this may have more to do with sample size than anything empirical. Numbers should not equal "normal."

This caution is something I will return to at the end of the chapter, however for our purposes now, I want to underscore the way Theory of Mind links relationship and projection. According to TOM, the way we relate to others has much to do with how we project our assumptions and experiences onto them and then look to see if those same assumptions and experiences are affirmed in how they get reflected back to us. This phenomenon is happening in all our relationships in countless, unconscious ways over and over again. According to TOM then, relationships involve a constant reciprocity of projection.

All of which begs the question, "What about God?" If one of the operational dynamics in how we relate to other people is by projecting ourselves onto their behavior and attitudes, essentially "reading their minds," can we do the same thing with the divine? And if we can, should we? If the "other" in projection is not another person but instead the triune God, does this kind of projection present an opportunity or a risk?

The Problems with Projection

Karen Kilby addresses the problems that can arise when a projection dynamic is applied to God in "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity."⁸⁷ Though she does not invoke Theory of Mind, Kilby sees projection happening in the way social doctrines of the Trinity are constructed and then applied in contemporary theology.

She begins by acknowledging that the history of the social approach to the Trinity is noble. Its function was to revivify a doctrine that fell out of favor for some because of the way it could be used to oppress and marginalize. These problems of oppression, the social doctrine solved, when framing the Trinity through the eastern lens of *perichoresis*, or the divine dance between the members of the Godhead. Through this "social lens",

the claim that God though three is yet one becomes a source of metaphysical insight and a resource for combating individualism, patriarchy and oppressive forms of political and ecclesiastical organization....the very thing which in the past has been viewed as the embarrassment has become the chief point upon which to commend the Christian doctrine of God: not an intellectual difficulty but a source of insight, not a philosophical stumbling block but something with which to transform the world.⁸⁸

In the hands of social theorists, the doctrine that once oppressed now liberates. The Trinity is the stone that the builders rejected, that has now become the head of the corner.

How could such a successful theological endeavor be possible? According to Kilby, only through the heavy use of projection. Just like in the TOM, where a subject's assumptions are projected onto another and then interpreted based on that person's own

⁸⁷ Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (2000): pp. 432-445, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb06456.x>.

⁸⁸ Kilby, "Perichoresis," 438.

inner logic, the social theorists, Kilby claims do the same with the Trinity. She explains that it happens as a sort of three-stage process:

First, a concept, Perichoresis, is used to name what is not understood, to name whatever it is that makes the three Persons one. Secondly, the concept is filled out rather suggestively with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness. And then, finally, it is presented as an exciting resource Christian theology has to offer the wider world in its reflections upon relationships and relatedness.⁸⁹

The precise dynamic here is essential to apprehend. Kilby argues that social theorists are finding new life in the doctrine of the Trinity by using the concept of *perichoresis* as a container into which they can project their experiences and circumstances. She critiques the way that this projection is then lifted up as an ethical prescription for how people and communities ought to relate to each other. What has been imported into the doctrine to solve a difficulty it proposed is now heralded as one of its critical features. It is a type of "reverse projection," as Kilby calls it or theology-by-feedback-loop, and it is deeply problematic when left unacknowledged.

Yet, as John Swinton offered with his caution of TOM, Kilby's solution is not to abandon social doctrines of the Trinity altogether. She instead suggests that we adjust our expectations for what such a doctrine is meant to accomplish. Why does the doctrine of the Trinity need to be relevant, she asks? Why cannot it just be doctrine? In posing these questions, she concludes that the best way forward is not necessarily to make our doctrines descriptive of the way God objectively is, but that they should instead,

⁸⁹ Kilby, "Perichoresis," 442.

be taken as grammatical, as a second-order proposition, a rule, or perhaps a set of rules, for how to read the Biblical stories, how to speak about some of the characters we come across in these stories, how to think and talk about the experience of prayer, how to deploy the "vocabulary" of Christianity in an appropriate way. The doctrine on this account can still be seen as vitally important, but important as a kind of structuring principle of Christianity rather than as its central focus: if the doctrine is fundamental to Christianity, this is not because it gives a picture of what God is like *in se* from which all else emanates, but rather because it specifies how various aspects of the Christian faith hang together.⁹⁰

Kilby's conclusion is crucial for our path forward because it parses two things out.

First, the problem with projection is not in the act of projecting itself. As she notes,

Theologians are, of course, free to speculate about social or any other kind of analogies to the Trinity. But they should not, on the view I am proposing, claim for their speculations the authority that the doctrine carries within the Christian tradition, nor should they use the doctrine as a pretext for claiming such an insight into the inner nature of God that they can use it to promote social, political or ecclesiastical regimes.⁹¹

The problem is with the totalizing move the social theorists make with what they have projected, not the projection itself.

Second, she concludes that doctrines should operate as a grammar for the faith, not its foundation. Because projection is unavoidable, Kilby suggests that we move the place they work in our theology from first order to second order. Then, doctrines like the Trinity can function as they should, as a web that holds everything together, not the starting point from which our theology emanates.

Autistic Relationality in Divine Conduct: The Problem, the Categories, and the Solution

⁹⁰ Kilby, "Perichoresis," 443-444.

⁹¹ Kilby, "Perichoresis," 444.

Here now, it all comes together. Kilby's critique of projection, the distinction between first-order and second-order relations in Christian theology, and TOM taken together help us do three things. First, name an essential part of the problem "relationship with God" piety is presenting to people on the spectrum. Second, identify the proper categories needed to address the problem. Third, show us a path forward. Let us start with the problem.

The Problem

Why is contemporary "relational" Christianity so problematized by the way people on the spectrum relate? The answer, I am arguing, is to be found in Kilby's description of "reverse projection." When she demonstrates how social theorists take the doctrine of the Trinity, fill it out "suggestively from within their own context...with notions borrowed from (their) own experience of relationships and relatedness"⁹² and then lift up those same projected notions as what the doctrine has to teach us about God and ourselves, is she not also showing us precisely what is happening in the present day "personal relationship with Jesus" theology.

The process goes as follows: The Bible uses familial (Father, Son, Brother) and relational (friend) metaphors to describe God. Then, a theologian's own values, assumptions, and experiences of human relationships are projected onto those metaphors. The projected metaphor is lifted up to define what "relating to God," and "God's relating to us," looks like. Lastly, the projection is given authority because it is regarded as

⁹² Kilby, "Perichoresis," 442.

“biblical.” This theology by feed-back-loop is the rub authors like Christopher Barber and Christine Guth experience when they bring their faith and autism together. The categories do not work because they uncritically frame relationship to God using neurotypical references and contours.⁹³

Relationships as Grammar

Because our problem is being created by the same kind of reverse projection that Karen Kilby critiques in “Perichoresis and Projection,” her solution is also ours. Kilby argues that we relocate our doctrines so they function as a grammar for the faith. I am arguing this same kind of relocation should occur regarding the place "relationship" has in our contemporary Christian piety. Instead of being held up reductively as the essence of the faith (Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship), "relationship" should, instead, also function as a grammar. Because "relating to God" represents a recognizable pattern in the scriptures for how God is redeeming the world in Christ, it should shape how the Church interprets and enacts the hope of the Holy Scriptures. Yet, while there may be ample evidence of Biblical metaphors that look familiar to the neurotypical mind, that evidence must never move to the center and become totalizing. Instead, it needs to retain its proper place as an identifiable and faithful example of *one* way to relate to God and *one* way of imaging how God relates to us.

A Solution

⁹³ In *Vulnerable Communion* Thomas Reynolds calls this the “cult of normalcy” while arguing that, theologically, disability is actually the norm not the exception. Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: a Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 18.

This then, finally, points us toward the work for the remainder of this project: if neurotypical relationship patterns can be found in the Bible and represent one faithful way of relating to God, are there others as well? Can we find patterns and examples that reflect an autistic relationality in the Bible's witness to divine conduct?

John Swinton's caution about the TOM and "mindblindness" opens a tantalizing possibility that there are. Swinton reminds us that just because a neurotypical person cannot "read the mind" of someone on the spectrum, it doesn't mean that the person on the spectrum is the one who is different. It just means the patterns of their mind are unrecognizable to the neurotypical person and vice-versa. It is a "mindblindness" that goes both ways. Therefore, just because people on the autism spectrum do not recognize their kind of relating in contemporary "relationship with God" theology and piety, it does not mean it is not there. It may instead be that we have not spent enough time looking for it. Our theologies have remained "mindblind" to autistic relationality. They do not, however, have to stay that way.

Over the next two chapters, I will highlight examples from the Old and New Testaments, where neurodiverse relationality can be recognized in the text's witness to the divine conduct. As we have established, "relationship" involves multiple levels of projection⁹⁴. So, in the same way, the neurotypical mind can find evidence of their kind

⁹⁴ Molly Haslam's work is relevant again here. Her challenge to the overvaluing of what she dubs "symbolic responsiveness" is naming is the precise dynamic of projection that ToM illustrates. If you believe that human life has value because of an individual's capacity for meaningful interaction then you will look for your definition of "meaningful response" to be present the other. If it is not found, then one creates value judgements. These judgements can be hurtful and dehumanizing when applied to the intellectually disabled, but also, in the case of the terminally ill or comatose, deadly. See Molly Claire Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012). Similarly, Hans Reinders explores the way the intellectually disabled challenge cultural assumptions around human life deriving its value through a person's ability to

of relationality in the Bible's witness of God, so too can the neurodiverse. Let us begin, then, with the Old Testament.

produce and accomplish. See, Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

4. Autistic Relationality and Divine Conduct in the Old Testament

According to the Theory of Mind, projection is an essential and unavoidable dynamic in the phenomenology of relating. But projection can create problems, especially when it comes to relating to God. As Karen Kilby reminds us in “Perichoresis and Projection,” projection we must remain vigilant in acknowledging our projections and keep them in their proper place. The insights and grace they provide with regard to God are welcome, but should never be moved to the center of our theologies. For her example, Kilby uses the social doctrine of the Trinity while, in the last chapter, I applied this matrix to contemporary “relationship with God” theology.

If projection is an unavoidable dynamic in how we relate to one another and to God, though, what about people on the autism spectrum? Are there places in the Bible where someone with ASD might recognize *their* experiences of relating in the text’s witness to God? The answer is yes.

Before going further, it will be useful here to highlight the work of Grant Macaskill. His book, *Autism and the Church* provides a theological framework for faithful engagement with autism, the Bible, and the Body of Christ.⁹⁵ Because autism was not a known or recognized condition during biblical times, addressing it in scripture requires proper boundaries. Macaskill highlights three frameworks for addressing autism in the Bible that he considers fundamentally flawed. Two of them are not a risk for this

⁹⁵ Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021).

project: viewing autism through the Bible's accounts of demonic possession⁹⁶ and regarding autism as a condition to be healed.⁹⁷ His third flawed framework, however, requires more careful attention because it involves diagnosing biblical characters with autism. Pointing to where this has been done in the past, Macaskill warns that the criteria and methods required for an actual diagnosis are not adequately provided by any biblical narrative. He explains that a clinical diagnosis

involves lengthy interviews, both with the person (if they are able to communicate) and with family members. A detailed picture of their background and development is constructed, shaped (as far as possible) by the person's own testimony concerning their sensory and social experiences. The process may take more than one day of interviews, and is regulated by very detailed, carefully developed questions of agreed diagnostic value. It is simply impossible to replicate this by relying on the limited third-person narrative detail of a biblical story⁹⁸

Macaskill's point here is important for the integrity of this project. The exegesis that follows in the next two chapters is not an attempt in to proclaim that God is autistic.⁹⁹ Similarly, my usage of the diagnostic criteria in *DSM-5* is not in any way to be construed as an attempt to diagnose God with autism. If my argument goes there, it fails. Instead, I am taking the diagnostic criteria for ASD found in *DSM-5*, and highlighting specific

⁹⁶ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 45.

⁹⁷ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 47.

⁹⁸ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 44.

⁹⁹ One author to whom I owe a great deal is Nancy Eiesland. Eiesland's connection between the wounds of the crucifixion on Jesus' resurrected body and disability in the eschaton in *The Disabled God* deeply influenced my imagination for this project. The way she theologically describes how people who live with disabilities can recognize themselves in the God who knows and loves them is a goal this project shares. However, one of Eiesland's rhetorical moves, saying that God "is disabled" is something I will steer way from regarding autism. Even though neurodiverse patterns can be observed in the biblical witness to God's speech and conduct, I want to be careful not to use them to make claims about God's essential being. If God is not "abled" then God is also not "disabled". Likewise, if God is not "neurotypical" then God is also not "autistic". See Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

areas in the Bible where God is described as behaving in a similar manner. By doing this, I am providing examples where a someone on the spectrum could project their experiences of relating onto the divine. God's way of relating to us and our way of relating to God, it turns out, does not always conform to neurotypical patterns.

First, I will look at *DSM-5*'s criteria A.1 through A.2, persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and apply its criteria to the experience of divine conduct found in the Psalms. Next, I will lift up section B.1 and B.2, the insistence on sameness and repetition, and reflect on its connection to the book of Leviticus. Finally, I will explore the overlap of B.3, highly restricted and fixated interests, and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus.

Again, these examples are not being used to suggest that God "is autistic." That would be both the kind of centralizing projection Kilby warns against and the kind of exegesis Macaskill rebukes. Instead, these examples will demonstrate that there are places in the Bible where divine conduct not only might be recognizable to someone with autism but they could conceivably project their kind of relationality onto how the text describes God's behavior. Therefore, with these boundaries firmly in place and in mind, let us turn to the location of our first diagnostic criteria: deficits in social communication and its relationship to the Psalms.

The Silence and Absence of God in the Psalms

One of the core criteria that *DSM-5* requires for an ASD diagnosis is a “persistent deficit in social communication and interaction”.¹⁰⁰ These deficits require a manifestation along three distinct areas. The first of these is section A.1, a deficit “in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.” By mentioning “normal back and forth conversation” the DSM committee recognizes a common dynamic when communicating with someone on the spectrum is that, when spoken to, a person on the spectrum might respond unexpectedly or they may not respond at all.

Next, if criterion A.1 includes deficits in the verbal part of communication, then the second area, A.2, is about the insufficiencies that manifest in nonverbal communication. Criterion A.2 reads as follows, “Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.” This is referring to the way a person on the spectrum may not reciprocate communication with expected or appropriate non-verbal cues. This may include non-typical body language and lack of eye contact, but it could also include physical positioning, posture, or even leaving the space while in being addressed. A neurotypical social contract for conversation includes the expectation that both parties remain present until the conversation is over. This may not be the case for someone on

¹⁰⁰ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed)* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

the spectrum. Taken together then, A.1 and A.2 makes plain the possibility that when a person on the spectrum is engaged in conversation, it might not be uncommon for that person to respond in either silence or absence.

The Hebrew scriptures are full of examples where God is experienced as being either silent or absent. This is not always a negative experience. For example, when Elijah meets God on Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19:11-18, it is in the “sound of sheer silence,” that God’s presence dramatically meets the prophet. More often, however, the silence of God is cause for distress. The prophets bear witness to this when they lament divine silence in the face of injustice and wickedness. Habakkuk cries out,

Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And You cannot look on wickedness with favor.
Why do You look with favor
On those who deal treacherously?
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up
Those more righteous than they? (Hab1:13)

Similarly, Isaiah demands of the Lord, “Will You restrain Yourself at these things, O Lord? Will You keep silent and afflict us beyond measure?” (Is 64:12) In one oracle it is even God’s own voice admitting to recalcitrance, “I have kept silent for a long time, I have kept still and restrained Myself” (Is 42:14a).

In all of these cases, however, God’s speaking is synonymous with God’s action. This connection has deep roots in the Hebrew scriptures, going back to the creation poems of Genesis.¹⁰¹ For this reason, an appeal for God to speak is often connected with

¹⁰¹ Genesis 1-2. Creation flows from God’s speaking. Captured poetically in the maxim “words create worlds”.

an appeal for God to act. This is particularly true with regard to justice and is where the anxiety of the prophets is frequently located. If God is silent injustice might prevail.

The Psalms retain this connection between God's voice and God's action, but frequently sharpen its focus toward the personal. Where the prophets regularly ask God to act for the sake of the nation, the psalmist often demands that God act for the sake of their life.¹⁰² Couched in the psalmist's demands is a particular anxiety: If God is silent, could it mean that God is not actually there?

Psalm 35:17-21 provides a good example of this kind of personal and theological crisis. The psalmist has enemies that are plotting and scheming against them for no known reason. The psalmist has done nothing to earn their contempt, yet these enemies will not relent.

How long, O Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my life from the lions!
Then I will thank you in the great congregation;
in the mighty throng I will praise you.
Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me,
or those who hate me without cause wink the eye.
For they do not speak peace,
but they conceive deceitful words
against those who are quiet in the land.
They open wide their mouths against me;
they say, "Aha, Aha,
our eyes have seen it. (35:17-21)

The personal appeal rescue continues with verses 22-24. Here, divine silence and divine presence are directly linked.

You have seen, O Lord; do not be silent!

¹⁰² There are oracles where the prophet also begs for divine intervention behalf of their personal life and safety. One thinks of Jeremiah here (Jer 17:14). The appeal for personal divine rescue is present in both the Psalms and the prophets.

O Lord, do not be far from me!
Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defense,
for my cause, my God and my Lord!
Vindicate me, O Lord, my God,
according to your righteousness,
and do not let them rejoice over me. (35:22-24)

If God is silent the Psalmist fears that God is also absent. Psalm 88 echoes similar angst, “But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me” (v.13-14)? This theme of human stress around the silence and absence of God has one of its most prominent examples in Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 is a lament psalm and is often most recognizable to Christians because Jesus quotes it on the cross in Matthew’s (27:46) and Mark’s (15:34) gospel. It has 32 verses which are divided into two parts. The first half, verses 1-21a, is a complaint from the speaker, while verses 21b-32 turn to praise because divine rescue has come.

The complaint section of the psalm opens with famous words that ring of abandonment, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This complaint implies that there is a past relationship between the psalmist and the divine that the former party feels has been transgressed. Jonathan Parker names this feeling as a betrayal. He says there is “a sense of divine betrayal that stands at the centre of the psalm’s focus. Perhaps no human would care much if God were distant, unless some promises—some acts of drawing near to order, guide, and protect—had not been enacted by the Divine towards (the) people first.”¹⁰³ Apparently the psalmist had once known divine faithfulness and

¹⁰³ Jonathan D. Parker, “‘My Mother, My God,’ ‘Why Have You Forsaken Me?’: An Exegetical Note on Psalm 22 as Christian Scripture,” *The Expository Times* 131, no. 5 (2019): pp. 199-204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524619883200>, 201.

knows the stories of God's acts of deliverance in their nation's past (22:4-5), so, where is God now?

As the psalm continues, the complaint becomes more acute. Not only is there no conversation, there is also no communion,

Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest. (2:1b-2)

For the psalmist, their experience of God here includes both divine silence and divine absence. When the psalmist cries out for conversation, there no response in return, because for the psalmist, God is not there. This experience of God's absence is, for the psalmist at least, real and not imagined. As Walter Brueggemann points out in his commentary,

Is Israel free and unrestrained in its capacity to voice its conviction of divine abandonment? This psalm, among others, makes clear that Israel uses no-holds-barred rhetoric to attest its conviction about YHWH. Israel is thereby free to attest to its experience of divine abandonment and to take it at face value as a theological point. Conventional theology is wont to say that God "seems" to abandon, but Israel will not allow YHWH that luxury, knowing that such a "seems" immediately introduces the pretend theology of Docetism. Israel trusts its experience, from which grows its theological attestation; Israel will not curb that attestation to its own experience of abandonment, even in defense of YHWH.¹⁰⁴

Brueggemann's distinction is important. The absence of God that the psalm witnesses to is genuine for the speaker. What generates the experience of God's silence is the lack of response to a direct petition. This lack of response leads the psalmist to

¹⁰⁴ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 145.

wonder, “why are you so far from helping me” (22:1b). In Psalm 22 then, when spoken to, God does not respond and does not show up.

Theologically, Psalm 22 remains one of the great lament psalms. It is larger than the experience of any one particular Israelite as it gives language to anyone who has known the desperation and fear that comes from the experience of God’s distance in a time of crisis. Yet, as a phenomenology, Psalm 22 also showcases a pattern of relationship between the psalmist and the divine that could be very familiar to someone on the spectrum.

The criteria in *DSM-5* for an ASD diagnosis we looked at above includes specific language that, when laid next to Psalm 22, looks remarkably similar. Section A.1 notes that an ASD diagnosis requires deficits in social-emotional reciprocity (that) include failure of “normal back-and-forth conversation” as well as the failure to “initiate or respond to social interactions.” Psalm 22 has several petitions that reflect these very same patterns in the relationship between the psalmist and God. Verse 22:1 states, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” Here, can it be said that God is engaging in either social or emotional reciprocity? The Psalmist is seeking empathy and assistance, but the divine is not meeting that expectation.

This lack of expected response, as noted earlier, is experienced by the psalmist as a betrayal. Verse 2 continues with the same pattern, “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer.” However, the divine continues to fail in what A.1 calls a “normal back and forth conversation.” This conversation is a monologue, not a dialogue, and the psalmist is

the only one trying to keep the conversation going. God is not responding: the divine is silent.

The similarities continue when we consider the psalm's depiction of God's absence. Here the context is important: The psalms are prayers and songs composed to be spoken or sung out loud. Part of the expectation of audibly spoken prayer was that the God to whom you offered it was close enough to hear your petition. This may seem odd to modern ears whose metaphors of prayer are conditioned by technologies like the telephone, internet, and email. However, it remains an important reminder that in the ancient world, you could not speak to someone with whom you were not in proximity. Petitions toward the divine were directed at one who was close enough to hear.

For this reason, when the psalmist laments God's absence in response to their cries, is it not a direct example of an *abnormal* non-verbal communication? Verse 11 implores God, "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help" and verse 13 demands, "But you, O Lord, do not be far away!". Subsection A.2 lists "deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction," which include "abnormalities in eye contact, body language and nonverbal communication" as diagnostic criteria for autism. Can these criteria not be clearly be applied to the divine conduct in Psalm 22? A neurotypical response to someone speaking would include anything from eye contact, active listening, turning toward the speaker, and not walking away. Yet, in Psalm 22, when addressed directly, the divine's verbal response is silence and God's nonverbal response is not to be present at all. This leaves psalmist wondering

why God, “is so far away” and is precisely the kind of “abnormality” in non-verbal, communicative behavior that *DSM-5* recommends for an autism diagnosis.

Again, to be clear, I am not arguing that God is autistic or that divine non-responsiveness and absence is the whole story of God’s care for and action toward humanity . I am instead following Brueggemann’s caveat that the because the psalmist experiences these characteristics in the divine, they remain theologically relevant. More so, however, they are potentially identifiable to someone with ASD and make for a pattern of relationality in which a person with autism can locate their own experience of themselves and of others.

The Levitical Feasts and Repetitive Behavior

Another example of neurodiverse relationality in the Old Testament comes from the book of Leviticus. While deficits in social communication and interaction (A.1. through A.3.) mentioned above provide the foundational criteria for the diagnosis, *DSM-5* also requires a subject to demonstrate two out of four different subtypes of “restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior” (B.1 through B.4). The first of these four types (B.1) involves repetitive motor movements, use of objects, and repetitive speech. The second (B.2) consists of an insistence on sameness with “inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior”. The third (B.3) is an abnormally intense fixation or focus on a restricted and fixated topic of interest while the fourth (B.4) is listed as “Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment.” Of these four, the criteria of B.1 and B.2 bear a striking resemblance to the liturgies and festivals codified in the book of Leviticus.

The book of Leviticus contains divine instruction on a wide range of topics intended to govern Israel's social and religious life. Included in these instructions are directions for a sacred calendar meant give shape to the community's annual rhythm. This calendar consists of seven appointed festivals, and a summary of them all is found in Leviticus chapter 23.¹⁰⁵

The chapter begins with the Lord telling Moses to instruct the people that, "These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals." (23:1-2) The word "appointed" used here is the Hebrew word *mo'ed* which the JPS Torah Commentary translates as "fixed."¹⁰⁶ These festivals then do not ebb and flow. They are static and are expected by God to remain the same year after year. They must not change.

Chapter 23 continues with a reminder to honor the Sabbath (23:3) and then moves immediately to the first festival of the sacred calendar, the spring feast of Passover. While there are other, more specific details about how to observe Passover in both Exodus 12:1-2 and Deuteronomy 16:2-6, Leviticus 23 only includes when the feast is to begin: the fourteenth day of their first month (23:5).

¹⁰⁵ Joel White argues that the feasts of Leviticus 23 should be counted as six instead of seven. This is because the feasts are narrated through a series of five "divine speeches" one of which contains both the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Weeks. White argues that most modern translators arrange Leviticus 23 to reflect the way the Jewish community came to celebrate the feasts, not the way they are actually grouped together in the text. This, "engenders an artificial separation of the so-called 'Feast of Firstfruits' (Lev. 23:9-14) from the 'Feast of Weeks' (Lev. 23:15-22)." For more on this see John Granger Cook, "Raised on the Third Day According to the Scriptures: Hosea 6:2 in Jewish Tradition," *Paul and Scripture*, 2019, pp. 188-211, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004391512_011.

¹⁰⁶ Chaim Potok et al., *The JPS Torah Commentary: the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*(Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 154.

Next comes direction for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (23:6-8). This festival is to be seven days long, includes two sabbath observances, and kept by only eating bread that is unleavened or flat. Lastly, for this feast all “offerings to the Lord” (23:8) are to be explicitly made by fire.

Next come the instructions for the Feast of First Fruits (23:9-14) which are more detailed than then previous directions. During First Fruits faithful observance requires bringing the “sheaf of first fruits of the harvest” (23:10) to the priest, who is given the specific directive to offer the sheaf to the Lord by “raising it up” (23:11). The text continues with more particular directions including specific units of measure, the ingredients, and recipe for the grain and drink offerings as well as distinct dietary requirements for the worshipper (23:12-15).

The spring feasts are concluded with the Feast of Weeks. This feast marks the conclusion of the harvest season and is supposed to begin seven sabbaths, or fifty days, from when the priest raised up the sheaf during First Fruits (23:16). The text continues with more detailed instruction reading the multiple food, drink, and animal offerings God requires for faithful observance (23:17-21). The instructions conclude with an admonition to leave the gleanings of their fields for the poor - a directive underscored by the refrain “I AM the Lord.” (23:22)

Taken together, what is undeniable about these directions is how strict and particular they are. There is a clear expectation on the part of the divine about when, who, and how the people will participate. Furthermore, these feasts are all *mo'ed* which means they will be kept in the same way year after year. They do not change.

The same pattern is also discernable in the final three feasts that make up the remainder of the chapter. The Festival of Trumpets has the same, minimalist instruction as First Fruits: observe it as a sabbath on the first day of the seventh month and present all offerings by fire (23:24-25). However, this feast is announced not by the conclusion of Passover, but instead by a trumpet blast that signals it is time to prepare for repentance (25:24).

This repentance is expressed at the next feast which comes on the tenth day of the same month (23:27), the Day of Atonement. Complete instructions for the Day of Atonement are presented earlier in the Leviticus (16:1-34), but the one thing chapter 23 includes that is unique is a warning. While instructions for the Day of Atonement incorporate familiar criteria of sabbath and fasting, verse 29 and 30 uniquely note that a failure to comply with these ordinances will come with severe consequence, “For anyone who does not practice self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people. And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people.” (23:29-30) God’s requirement for rest and self-denial is rigid, immovable, and will merit steep consequences for anyone who does not comply.

The final feast of Leviticus 23 is the Feast of Booths. Taking place on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (five days after the Day of Atonement), this festival expects the people to make temporary dwellings, cover them with branches, and live in them for seven days.¹⁰⁷ Booths, like Passover, has its anchor in the Exodus narrative, “You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in

¹⁰⁷ The Hebrew word for booth is *sukkot*, which also means branches. This is why, like *pesach* and Passover, this feast is sometimes called by the single name of its defining symbol, Sukkot.

booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (23:42-43) and it is to be kept as “a statute forever throughout your generations.” (23:41)

It is important, here, to highlight a crucial point. All the directives surrounding the feasts provide a way for the community’s inner life to take on a concrete, external manifestation. There are myriad examples in Leviticus that would make this point, but the summary of the feasts in Leviticus 23 uniquely compiles and showcases this truth. Ritual, liturgy, and sacrifice were how God asked the people to give expression to their gratitude, regret, trust, hope, and joy. Ellen Frankel observes that “the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *koran*, from the root ‘to draw near.’ In contrast, the English word for sacrifice comes from the Latin root meaning “to make sacred.” At the heart of these different interpretations lie two fundamentally different interpretations of what it means to offer something to God.”¹⁰⁸ The offerings outlined in the festivals of chapter 23 are not disconnected, cold regulations. Instead, they are the way one “draws near” to God. Communion with the divine in this instance is about repetitive action, not shared feelings. In the feasts, relationship with YHWH takes expression in routine.

In all this, we once again find a mode of relating that is both definitive of and familiar to autism. The “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” from Criterion B easily map onto the patterns of forms of Leviticus 23, especially B.1 and B.2.

¹⁰⁸ Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: a Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1996), 152.

First, B.1 lists “stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech.” Do not all the festivals described in Leviticus 23 include prescribed use of objects and speech? Passover and Unleavened Bread both require bread without yeast. First Fruits and Weeks involves a grain offering that is lifted up and moved in a very specific manner, while the Feast of Booths expects worshippers to build a shelter in which to live annually. It is not difficult to identify these observances as being examples of a “repetitive use of objects and motor movements.” Repetitive motor movements and use of objects that are, in and of themselves, a direct expression of relationship with the divine.

Second, Criterion B.2 identifies that the “restricted and repetitive behavior” of ASD sometimes takes shape as an “insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior.” Is this not something that overlaps directly with the “fixed” nature of the feasts in Leviticus 23? Each of them is *mo’ed* and “a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements” (Lev 23:14). They each contains instructions from YHWH that include rigid dates, times, and durations. This certainly reflects a kind of “insistence on sameness and inflexible adherence to routines” that reflects *DSM-5*’s criteria.

Similarly, B.2’s “insistence on sameness” also includes, “extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, (and the) need to take the same route or eat the same food every day.” These examples each parallel divine requirements in the feast calendar. The “extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, (and) rigid thinking patterns” look much like YHWH’s

continued insistence that these statutes being kept “forever” and “for all generations” (23:14, 21, 31). Similarly, the examples of “rituals” and “taking the same route” find an easy overlay in the liturgies of all of the feasts in general, and the pilgrimage requirements that emerged for Passover, Weeks, and Booths specifically. Also, Unleavened Bread’s condition that the community eat a specific kind of food (bread without yeast) for multiple days is certainly not unfamiliar to B.2’s example of eating “the same food every day.” Lastly, the Day of Atonement’s consequence of “destruction” for anyone who does not fast and keep sabbath (23:29-20) may to the modern mind, seem like an extreme overreaction an angry God. However, is it not also possible for someone on the spectrum to recognize such a reaction as B.2’s “extreme distress at small changes.” YHWH’s warnings flow from YHWH’s disturbance that these particular instructions are not being obeyed. Such stress, followed by a strong reaction, could be something very familiar to the experience of a person on the spectrum.

Here again, I am not arguing that following the Jewish sacred calendar of Leviticus 23 makes the worshipper or God autistic. I am, however, lifting up that God’s expectation of relationship that comes through routine and repetitive action could indeed be very familiar but perhaps even comforting to someone on the spectrum. Christine Guth makes this point when describing the way she and her husband, who is neurodiverse, express their love to each other.

Bob's version of love is marked by dogged commitment, persistence through agonising struggles, willingness to give and take, enjoyment of companionship, and other treasured aspects of shared living. Folks with Asperger's thrive on predictability, so their love may shine in predictable routines. Bob's commitment to spending the last half hour of every evening with me, reviewing the day's ups and downs, has, in its very reliability, breathed new life into our marriage.

Likewise, I have learned that Bob values when I express my love for him predictably. When I make sure the refrigerator always holds the items he invariably carries in his lunch, he feels my care. Who says you need roses for romance?¹⁰⁹

Speaking of dogged determination, let us now turn to our final example where autistic relationality is mirrored in divine conduct, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus.

YHWH's Fixated Interest: Freedom

The story of Pharaoh's hardening heart does not begin Egypt, but in the wilderness and the beats may be familiar from the book of Exodus. Moses is on the run when God speaks to him from a bush and instructs him to go to Pharaoh (3:1-22) and demand release for Israel. Moses' first response is excuse, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (5:11). YHWH reassures Moses with the promise of divine presence, yet Moses continues to resist. He explains that he does not know the divine name (5:13), he worries the Israelites will not believe that YHWH has actually sent him (4:1), he claims that he is not an eloquent enough speaker (4:10), then finally, Moses directly asks God to send someone else instead of him (4:13). At this, YHWH gets angry (4:14) because Moses' resistance to the divine call for Israel's freedom will not persuade YHWH to let it go. The divine is going to have this conversation with Pharaoh about Israel's freedom.

Because of divine insistence, Moses relents, but when he ultimately stands before Pharaoh and proclaims, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that

¹⁰⁹ Christine Guth, "Horses Live to Run. What about People?," *Australian Journal of Pastoral Care and Health* 5, no. 1 (2011), 27.

they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” (5:1b) Pharaoh’s response is not resistance, but dismissal followed by heightened oppression, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go,”(5:2) “Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words”(5:9).

YHWH, however, remains resolute and, in the face of Pharaoh’s defiance, begins the series of plagues. This part of the narrative is known as the sign cycle and introduces a new dynamic to the events of the story: the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Though YHWH already told Moses that this would be part of the divine agenda for Israel’s freedom (4:21), it creates theological complications for the reader. Things are made more problematic because, even though the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is sometimes ascribed to Pharaoh himself (8:15, 8:32, 9:34), sometimes it is ascribed directly to YHWH (7:3; 9:7,12; 10:1, 20, 27;11:10).¹¹⁰ This raises understandable questions about why God would create a condition in the heart of Pharaoh, only to then punish him for it as the sign cycle escalates?

There have been many approaches to sorting out this theological conundrum. In her historical survey of both Christian and Jewish responses to the “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart”, Christine McGinnis observes that exegetes tend to follow one of two

¹¹⁰ There is a third formulation of the “hardening” where the question of agency is left open. Exodus 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35 do not ascribe the hardening of the heart to either Pharaoh or YHWH directly. This is where historical-critical scholars focus their attention, noting that different sources may account for the different in formulations. However, because findings do not address or resolve the theological issues the text presents I am not including them in my survey here.

broad paths. The first is what she calls “mercy and hardening as a single operation,” and the second she calls, “just retribution.”¹¹¹

The first of these, “mercy and hardening as a single operation,” McGinnis says it is best exemplified by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. According to this perspective, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened because God, in God’s merciful honoring of human free-will, allows Pharaoh’s natural inclination toward sin (manifest as pride, stubbornness, and refusal to learn) to grow and flourish. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, then, is actually a result of divine mercy. She explains,

If God’s patience with sinners allows their wickedness to abound, then one can rightly say that in this way, he hardened their heart. And because Pharaoh is not convinced by the signs and wonders wrought in his midst but is thereby proved to be even harder and more unbelieving, then, does it not look as though the hardness and unbelief had arisen from the marvelous miracles?¹¹²

The “single operation” of this perspective is the mercy of God. Divine patience and love offered freely to all, yet in the hearts of those who do not receive it, this same grace can indirectly permit wickedness to grow.

The second response to the problem of God’s “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart” is what McGinnis calls “just retribution.” In this view, God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is “just retribution for Pharaoh’s own actions.”¹¹³ However, this view of the retribution requires nuance. In rabbinic literature, for example, McGinnis explains that the retribution is still benevolent, but also punitive. Here the “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart” is a necessary thing so that divine punishment could be fully meted out upon the

¹¹¹ Claire Matthews McGinnis, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012): pp. 43-64.

¹¹² McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 45.

¹¹³ McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 52.

Egyptians for their oppression and enslavement of the Israelites. Joseph Telluskin explains that God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that the divine would have "an excuse to continue punishing him and the Egyptians"¹¹⁴ for their cruel slavery. Had God not hardened his heart, explains Telluskin, Pharaoh would have been denied his free will and therefore denied the opportunity to "acknowledge the evil he had done and freeing the Israelites – not out of terror-but out of recognition of the sin that he and his people had committed against them."¹¹⁵

Harkening back to historic Christian sources on the matter, McGinnis points first to Augustine. Augustine she notes, also holds a "just retribution" perspective on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but with a slight variation:

Augustine views the hardening as a passive, rather than an active, work of God, in which God allows the consequences of human disobedience to take their natural course. In essence, the plight of Pharaoh is that deserved by all of humanity because of sin. None are *worthy* of God's mercy, in Augustine's view. Left to our own devices, we would all be hard-hearted like Pharaoh. But, through no merit of our own, God bestows grace, and when mercy is imparted, the human heart is transformed.¹¹⁶

For Augustine, God shows mercy to all, yet for those who choose not to receive it, the consequences are still just. So, while not as punitive a perspective as the rabbinic example, for Augustine the "hardening" is still viewed as retributive.

The final perspective on "just retribution" McGinnis exemplifies through the work of Martin Luther. If Augustine's view on "just retribution" has a passive view of the work of God, then for Luther it is the opposite. According to Luther, Pharaoh's heart is

¹¹⁴ Joseph Telushkin, *Biblical Literacy: the Most Important People, Events, and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible* (New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2010), 417.

¹¹⁵ Telushkin, *Biblical Literacy*, 417.

¹¹⁶ McGinnis, "Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," 54.

hardened precisely *because* God will not relent in demanding freedom for Israel. As

McGinnis explains,

Hardening, suggests Luther, results from the rage aroused in one who, intent on pursuing his or her own desires and the things of this world, is confronted with explicit resistance to that pursuit... God does not create evil in us “from scratch” like one who “blends poison into an innocent vessel,” argues Luther. God does not reach in, as it were, and turn Pharaoh’s heart from one direction to another, transforming a “fleshy” heart to stone by some divine alchemy. Pharaoh’s hardening is the inevitable result of the conditions indicated above: his inability to will other than his own desires, his inevitable resistance therefore to the demands of God and Moses, and the general motion and action of God’s omnipotence, which moves Pharaoh “according to his own bent.” When God announces with “utmost certainty” that he will harden Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus, argues Luther, God does so “because he was quite certain that Pharaoh’s will could neither resist the motion of his omnipotence nor lay aside its own badness nor welcome the introduction of its adversary, Moses.”¹¹⁷

It is Luther’s perspective above that is most helpful for this exploration of autistic relationality in the Bible. His rendering of the “just retribution” perspective, takes the Biblical text literally: God really did “harden Pharaoh’s heart.” But it is only because YHWH would not relent in demanding Israel’s freedom from Pharaoh.¹¹⁸ The more pressure God put upon Pharaoh, the more stubborn Pharaoh’s sinful heart became: God, therefore, hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

This divine’s fixation with the topic of Israel’s freedom continues even after the events of the Exodus. It is codified in the law at Sinai, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”¹¹⁹ It is referenced when the people are instructed to have honest weights

¹¹⁷ McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 57-58.

¹¹⁸ Desiderius Erasmus et al., *Luther and Erasmus, Free Will and Salvation: Erasmus, De Libero Arbitrio* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969), 28-29.

¹¹⁹ Exodus 20:2-3.

and measures (Leviticus 19:36), told what constitutes acceptable offerings (22:32-33), required not to charge interest or make a profit on food, instructed to forgive all debts during the Year of Jubilee (25:38, 55), told that God would tabernacle among them (26:13), commanded to wear fringe on the edges of their garments (Number 16:41), warned not to forget about God when they come into their new land and find prosperity (Deuteronomy 6:12, 8:14), warned not to listen to false prophets (13:5), instructed to stone those same false prophets (13:10), told not to fear opposing armies that they will face in battle (20:1), and finally when they are warned not to worship the gods of the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:36). Over and over again we in God an interest in Israel's freedom that is fixed, stubborn, and unyielding.

This is also where we begin to get a picture of divine conduct that strongly resembles the criteria for ASD in *DSM-5*. Section B names "restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior," with "highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests)" as contributing criteria for ASD. Such "perseverative interests" are intense, sometimes narrow in focus, and may be accompanied by an obstinate, unwavering resolve. Is this not the same kind of resoluteness God displays with Pharaoh? Can YHWH's insistence on Israel's release be seen as anything other than something that is highly restricted, fixated and abnormal in intensity? Especially when its intensity could harden the heart of the Pharaoh?

Additionally, God is rigid. So rigid in fact that the divine is unwilling to negotiate with either Moses or Pharaoh. Every excuse and evasion Moses surfaces are met with

either provision or frustration - never compromise. Likewise, when Pharaoh offers to release only the men after the 5th plague, YHWH does not agree. For the divine, there is only one acceptable outcome and it is unbending in focus: total freedom for Israel. Would such rigid thinking and narrow fixation not look very familiar to someone on the spectrum? It certainly fits the diagnostic criteria of B.3 as YHWH's restricted and fixated topic of interest is Israel's freedom.

These are only three examples from the Old Testament where divine conduct mirrors the diagnostic criteria for autism and might be recognizable to people on the spectrum. For Christian theology, then, it would follow that a similar pattern would be observable in the witness of the New Testament. Are there places where the criteria for ASD in *DSM-5* can be seen in the life and ministry of Jesus? The answer, we will see, is yes.

5. Autistic Relationality and Divine Conduct in the New Testament

The last chapter illustrated three examples from the Old Testament, where divine conduct mapped closely to the diagnostic criteria for ASD. This chapter will expand that view to include the witness of the New Testament as well: specifically, the ministry and teaching of Jesus. Are there places where Jesus, too, behaves in ways that resemble neurodiverse relationality? Are there instances where Jesus' teachings about God and God's character provide behavior patterns that someone with autism would recognize in themselves? The answer to both of these is yes. What is more, however, is that in two of the three examples neurodiverse behavior is lifted up as emblematic of faithful Christian piety. But before we begin, however, let me first address why, for all the literature of the New Testament, I am focusing exclusively on Jesus for my examples.

Why Jesus?

The creedal confession of the church is that Jesus is the full human embodiment of the creator God of the Old Testament. There are several of the early Christian letters that articulate this point. The letter the Hebrews explains,

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb1:1-3)

Similarly, the letter to the Colossians asserts that in Jesus, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," and that "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."¹²⁰ John's gospel has Jesus obliquely naming this reality about himself when he

¹²⁰ Colossians 1:15.

prays for his disciples before his passion, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (Jn 17:11) Jesus does it again when answering questions as to whether or not he is the Messiah, "What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."(Jn 10:30)

What these texts and others like them witness to is that Jesus, in word and deed, uniquely discloses divine truth and conduct. The Nicene Creed articulates it this way; he is "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."¹²¹ For this reason, the church confesses that when we see Jesus, we see God. What Jesus says about God and God's nature is what God and God's nature are truly like. How Jesus acts in the gospels is a trustworthy reflection of divine deportment and engagement in our world. And it is for this reason that the three examples I will highlight below all come from the four canonical Gospels. Their witness to the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ provides a constant and unique depiction of divine behavior.¹²²

Let us turn to the Gospel of Matthew for our first example of autistic relationality in divine conduct: Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman.

¹²¹ *Episcopal Church. The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979), 358.

¹²² It is worth noting that Jesus' unique revelation of God does not mean that Jesus was not considered disabled or strange by people in his day. There is a good argument to be made that he may have been perceived as "mad" or "mentally ill". For this argument and more see Joanna Collicutt, "Jesus and Madness," in *The Bible and Mental Health: towards a Biblical Theology of Mental Health* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2020), pp. 34-53. Also, Justin J. Meggitt, "The Madness of King Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29, no. 4 (2007): pp. 379-413, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x07078990>.

The Silence of God and the Canaanite Woman

This is a story about a non-Israelite woman begging Jesus to heal her daughter from a demon, is located in both Matthew (15:21-28) and Mark's Gospel (7:24-30). However, it is the Matthean version I will focus on because the details it adds make it most relevant for this project.

Jesus and his disciples are in a place beyond the borders of Israel, the region of Tyre and Sidon. While there, they are approached by a local woman who begins shouting, asking Jesus to heal her daughter because she is "tormented by a demon." (15:22) Matthew specifies that this woman is a "Canaanite," marking that she is both a non-Jew and descendent of Israel's ancient enemies.¹²³ She cries out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon" (15:22), and yet when this cry comes to Jesus, he does not answer her. He is silent in the face of her direct request for mercy, help, and healing.

The disciples begin to interject, asking Jesus to "send her away because she keeps shouting after us" (15:23), after which Jesus cryptically says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (15:24) Hearing this, the Canaanite woman kneels at Jesus' feet, calls him "Lord," and says, "help me." (15:25). But Jesus' response continues to be unexpected and perplexing. Instead of answering her directly, he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (15:26) The Canaanite woman counters

¹²³ Grant LeMarquand offers the fascinating argument that Matthew's use of "Canaanite" as well as the story placement in the narrative, between two feeding miracles, provides a redemption of the genocide of the seven nations God commands in Deuteronomy 7. See Grant LeMarquand, "The Canaanite Conquest of Jesus (Mt 15:21-28)," *The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies* 33 (2005): pp. 237-247.

this non-answer saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 15:27) This response delights Jesus, and he exclaims, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish", and the scene concludes with the woman's daughter being healed instantly. (15:28)

This story poses a significant challenge to exegetes because, in it, Jesus seems to behave in a very un-Christlike manner. Commentators have remarked that his interchange with the Canaanite woman appears to be rude at best, and chauvinistic and racist at worst.¹²⁴ Such behavior seems to contradict the Jesus seen in other parts of the gospel. Can such dissonance be resolved?

Lawrence Hart observes that most commentators try to explain Jesus' apparently offensive remarks with the kinder gentler Jesus found in the rest of the Gospels by employing one of four explanations. The first is that this an encounter where "Jesus learned something new about acceptance and inclusivity."¹²⁵ According to this thesis, before this encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus believed his ministry to be exclusive to his particular tribe, the Jews. However, during this exchange with the quintessential outsider, he is converted to a more inclusive and expansive understanding of his own mission.¹²⁶ The second explanation posits that this story is about the day "Jesus was bested in an argument."¹²⁷ Here, the exchange with the Canaanite woman is framed as a rhetorical battle that Jesus either loses or allows himself to lose. In either

¹²⁴ Lawrence D. Hart, "The Canaanite Woman: Meeting Jesus as Sage and Lord: Matthew 15:21-28 & Mark 7:24-30," *The Expository Times* 122, no. 1 (2010): pp. 20-25.

And, J. Martin C. Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28: a Test-Case for Jesus' Manners," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19, no. 63 (1997): pp. 21-44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x9701906302>, 24.

¹²⁵ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 20.

¹²⁶ Scott, "Test-Case for Jesus' Manners," 24.

¹²⁷ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 20.

case, the healing of the daughter functions as a reward for an argument well won. Third, "Jesus' remark is explained away as not being as bad as it sounds to modern ears. It was simply good-natured banter with a person of wit."¹²⁸ In this approach, exegetes argue for a more appreciative use of the word "dog" in both scripture and second temple Jewish culture claiming that Jesus' comments were more playful than improper. The fourth and final explanation asserts that "Jesus was tired and wanted to get away. Pressured, he became irritated and responded in a way that was out of character. The woman's clever reply brought him back to himself."¹²⁹

Hart, however, continues by offering a fifth and new explanation. The reason this story feels inscrutable to the modern reader, he advances, is because we do not understand its genre. The whole exchange, Hart argues, is a classic example of wisdom teaching. What is happening between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is that Jesus is operating as a sage. Starting with Jesus' non-response to the woman's question, Hart explains,

Like sages of all great wisdom traditions his method of teaching helped people to see more complex connections than they had ever realized before. We might outline the method of the sage like this:

1.) The teacher waits for the right moment to emerge, and may seem unresponsive to inquirers and disciples who must themselves wait for the *kairotic* moment (John 11: 6,7,21).
- 2) The sage poses questions that require resolving paradox (John 3:1-21).
- 3) Rather than explaining a concept, the wisdom teacher invites disciples into an experience of the reality or truth itself (Matthew 5:1-7:29).
- 4) Utilizing stories, metaphors, signs, and symbols the sage teaches through a sort of 'indirection', circumventing psychic defenses erected against any deeper awareness of spiritual reality (Luke 15:1-32).
- 5) The wisdom teacher fosters an enlightenment experience in which one sees everything differently because he or she is different (John 9:1-44; Luke 19:1-10).

¹²⁸ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 20.

¹²⁹ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 20.

- 6) Sages encourage the toleration of ambiguity and the anxiety it produces through teaching trust over control (Matthew 6:25-34).
- 7) Sages teach more through the quality of their presence than through conventional techniques (Mark 1:22; 10:42).¹³⁰

For Hart, seeing Jesus operate as a sage casts the encounter in an entirely new light. First, consider Jesus' non-response to the woman's appeal for healing. Here, Jesus is not rude. Instead, He is merely employing the first step of a wisdom teacher: waiting for the proper moment to surface so the instruction can continue. "Jesus certainly never shows himself elsewhere to be under assertive. He could have ended the whole matter at any point, but instead waited, and left her waiting, for the right moment."¹³¹

But what about the seemingly dismissive and demeaning exchange that follows? Does the lens of "sage" offer a new perspective here as well? Hart proposes that, when seen through the lens of wisdom teacher, Jesus remarks are not sharp or cruel at all but instead conform to a rhetorical tactic known as *mashal*.

Jesus' words in Mark 7:26 and Matthew 15:27 are in the form of a wisdom saying – a proverb or *mashal*. A proverb or *mashal*, according to Harvey H. Guthrie Jr., 'refers to a form of words, short or long, prose or poetry, descriptive or allusive, in which some attribute of the governness of life is verbalized and manifested for what it is.' The formulation of a *mashal* requires shrewdness, perceptiveness, nimble use of the imagination, and unusual and practical insight into the workings of life; that is, a *mashal* vividly pictures some aspect of life and reality so that it can be responded to sensibly. My contention is that Jesus' phrase: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs,' is actually a proverb – perhaps a form of the fourth proverb idiom.... (as sage) Jesus was inviting this Syrophenician woman to add to the proverb in a way that moves it forward.¹³²

¹³⁰ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 22.

¹³¹ Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 22.

¹³² Hart, "Meeting Jesus as Sage," 23.

Through it all, Hart's contention remains that proper genre identification can assuage our discomfort with Jesus' behavior. This is a similar genre reframing to the one offered by narrative theologian Dorothy Lee as well, except that Lee argues that the proper genre through which to read this story is not wisdom teaching, but instead the lament psalms. Jesus' reaction to the woman is, she contends, is not "cruel and unfeeling"¹³³ but instead what she calls,

a stylized and highly structured...classic genre narrative. Jesus' initially negative response to the woman – his silence and discouragement – reflects a common motif in Jewish and Christian spirituality of the muteness and deafness of God. It is present in psalms of lament (e.g. Ps. 10.1; 22.1-2; 28.1; 44.23-24; 88.14) and in the writings of the mystics. What the Canaanite woman suffers in her experience of silence and abandonment is also endured by Jesus, and they are profoundly linked. His experience of silence and rejection makes possible her belated access, and that of her daughter, to the life-giving table of God. Matthew's theology allows for divine silence and the experience of rebuff.¹³⁴

Melanie S. Baffes highlights the story's connection to the lament psalms as well, pointing to the structure of the narrative itself. Like a classic lament psalm, Jesus' exchange with the Canaanite woman includes

an opening *plea*—with address, complaint, petition, motivations, and imprecations—that leads to words of *praise*—in which there is a shift to words of change and transformation. In using the form of lament psalm, the author of Matthew sets the story against the backdrop of Israel's laments to God.¹³⁵

However, as compelling as Hart's argument is for Jesus as sage, or as attractive as the overlay with the lament psalms may be, J. Scott Martin maintains that we simply

¹³³ Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 1 (November 2014): pp. 12-29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1740355314000187>, 19.

¹³⁴ Lee, "Faith of the Canaanite Woman," 24.

¹³⁵ Melanie S. Baffes, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: A Story of Reversal," *Journal Of Theta Alpha Kappa* 35, no. 2 (2011): pp. 12-23, 16.

cannot let the plain sense reading of the story off the hook." At least one thing is surely established here: that Jesus fails the test of good manners in this story—no amount of intellectual, historical, sociological, or psychological gymnastics can save us from the conclusion that he is simply rude."¹³⁶

Whichever of these arguments one finds most compelling, they are all addressing the same problem; Jesus' apparent bad behavior needs to be explained. Over and over again, the story leaves contemporary readers troubled by Jesus' unrecognizable conduct. Why would he act this way toward this woman? Why would he not speak when spoken to? Why does he seem to miss the pain in her plea and demonstrate no discernable empathy? Because these questions upset the modern reader, explanations become required. However, one group of people who may find no part of the exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman troubling or unfamiliar are people on the autism spectrum.

The first criteria for an ASD diagnosis according to *DSM-5* includes "persistent deficits in social communication and interaction" (Criterion A) with the first example being "deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation" (A.1). Examined through the lens of these diagnostic criteria, the story between Jesus and the Canaanite suddenly becomes exemplary.

The Canaanite woman comes to Jesus in desperation, begging for her daughter's healing. Yet Jesus demonstrates no empathy and does not even respond. Exegetical

¹³⁶ Scott, "Test-Case for Jesus' Manners," 43.

explanations or not, can this be read as anything but a lack of "social-emotional reciprocity" on his part? Furthermore, when Jesus finally does respond to the Canaanite woman, he does not answer the question he is asked. Instead, he says something rude. Would not such behavior meet the criteria for an "abnormal social approach" or at least the "failure of normal back-and-forth conversation"?

Again, I am not arguing that Jesus is autistic. I am instead only highlighting a place where Jesus' behavior does not conform to neurotypical conventions of politeness and propriety. What is more, when the story is read through the lens of the autism spectrum, it calls into question the modern exegete's desire to explain Jesus' behavior in the first place. This is because, for the neurodiverse, Jesus' behavior may not seem troubling at all and therefore require no explanation. It might it even be experienced as familiar or even comforting. In fact, could it be that the reason modern scholars spend so much time trying to reframe Jesus' anti-social behavior that they are simply mindblind to other ways of relating?

Perhaps, then, the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman does not require an explanation. What if, instead, it invites a unique form of participation where the neurodiverse might see their way of relating in Jesus' words and actions and be able to uniquely say, "me too."

The Call of Levi and Social Transgression

Another example of Jesus' behavior following a neurodiverse pattern is the call of Levi. This story is found in all three synoptic Gospels, with Matthew telling it autobiographically while both Mark and Luke recount the same story using the name Levi. Beyond the difference in names, the essential details of the accounts remain the same. For this section, it is the Marcan version upon which I will focus.

Jesus has just healed and, more scandalously, forgiven the sins of a paralyzed man (Mk 2:1-12), and having left the village, he is on the move out by the Sea of Galilee, teaching large crowds (2:13). As Jesus is walking along, he encounters a tax collector in his collection booth. The man's name is Levi, son of Alphaeus, and Jesus invites him to become a disciple using the classic formulation, "Follow me" (2:14). Levi immediately leaves his collection booth and follows Jesus when the story jumps to dinner at Levi's house. Here Jesus and his disciples are eating with "many tax collectors and sinners" (2:15), and the religious leadership of Levi's town, the Pharisees, are scandalized. They ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (2:16) But Jesus overhears them, and the story concludes with Jesus answering the question for himself, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (2:17)

The story is short, punchy, and contains similar details to the call stories of Peter, Andrew, James, and John from earlier in the gospel.¹³⁷ What is necessary for our purposes here is to underscore that Jesus seems to act in a way that intentionally scandalizes the Pharisees. When they ask the disciples why Jesus is eating with tax

¹³⁷ The scene happens beside the Sea of Galilee, the future disciples are engaged in their daily occupation, they immediately leave their jobs and follow Jesus.

collectors and sinners, it almost appears that Jesus was waiting for their question. When he overhears them ask it of the disciples, he jumps in, ready to answer for himself. To understand this dynamic and why it matters for this project, let us take a closer look at two of the groups featured in the story: the tax collectors and the Pharisees.

Tax collectors frequently appear in the Gospels. In Jesus' time, they were universally reviled, and he made use of their reputation to punctuate his teachings (Mt 5:46, 18:17, 21:31; Lk 7:29) and parables. (Luke 18:9-14) Tax collectors were also among the crowds of those who came to hear Jesus, and he eats with them frequently enough that it becomes a chief accusation as to why he is an untrustworthy teacher. (Lk 7:29, 15:1) When Jesus first meets Levi, Mark tells us he is "sitting at the tax-collecting booth." (2:14) This setting indicates that the kind of "taxes" Levi collected were customs on goods crossing the border. In explaining how a seemingly banal and clerical profession could elicit contempt, New Testament Scholar PHEME PERKINS explains,

Since toll collector determine what price persons bringing goods across the boundary must pay, a toll collector might enrich himself by demanding more than the required amount. As long as the toll collector was able to cover the tax revenue promised in his contract with the authorities, he could keep whatever was left for himself. They were unpopular among the people, who suspected them of dishonesty. Those who managed to exploit the system to become wealthy employed slaves and other agents to do the actual collecting.¹³⁸

As such, tax collectors were not only despised facilitators of imperial oppression, but Jewish ones like Levi were also considered traitors because they made their wealth exploiting their own countrymen. For this reason, the word "sinners" was frequently

¹³⁸ PHEME PERKINS, *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles on the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark*, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 552.

applied to tax collectors because a sinner "designates persons who deliberately reject(ed) or flaunt(ed) the law."¹³⁹ Levi, then, would not have been considered a righteous or upstanding member of his community, especially by its religious leadership: the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were one of the major sects of Judaism that emerged in response to the twin pressures of Roman oppression and cultural Hellenism. As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, these "well-known "sects" of first-century Judaism were (often) politically as well as theologically opposed. The Pharisees were largely Judean, urban, and middle-class; they began with definite and active political affiliations (see Ant XIII.10.5–6; XVII.2.4), but became increasingly apolitical, neither cooperating with Rome (JW I.5.2), nor actively opposing it."¹⁴⁰ This socio-political posture had to do with the fact that the Pharisee's chief aim was holiness. Their teaching of the law emphasized Levitical admonitions to "distinguish between the holy and the common" (Lev 10:10) and established rigid and amplified boundaries around what was considered wicked and what was righteous.

A hallmark of Pharisaic determination to reach perfection was the tendency to control sinfulness by a kind of exaggeration. For instance, it was "wiser" to wash one's forearm to the elbow so as to make sure that one's hand is truly clean, as the Law insists on cleanliness of hands. A farther nuance of this kind of thinking is the demand that one avoids sinners, especially in matters which suggest a sharing of ideas. What also seems to be behind this way of thinking about the possible influence of evil men upon good is nothing less than the large history of Israel; it seemed that every time a Jew would associate with "the impure," "the Jew came away with a lessening of his devotion to Yahweh. Such associations should not be

¹³⁹ Perkins, *Gospel of Mark*, 552-553.

¹⁴⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: an Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 43.

encouraged or even tolerated. Not only should one not suggest an indifference to the lives of sinners, but one should avoid them lest one fall into their sinfulness.¹⁴¹

For a Pharisee, therefore, eating with a tax collector would be unthinkable. In the ancient world table fellowship symbolized spiritual unity.¹⁴² Therefore, dining with someone who was engaged in an impure occupation like tax collecting could never be tolerated because if it were, it would not only communicate approval of the bad behavior but threaten to corrupt the worshipper as well.

With this background, it becomes clear that Jesus' presence at Levi's table is not only transgressive but intentional. He is strategically violating social norms as part of his "kingdom of God" proclamation to demonstrate that it is "not from this world" (Jn 18:36). It functions with an alternative set of values, and Jesus shows this with his actions. So, as opposed to the crowds who have come to hear Jesus, Jesus goes out to meet Levi. As opposed to religious teachers that call Levi a sinner, Jesus calls him a disciple. As opposed to the Pharisees who would not eat with tax collectors, Jesus reclines at table in Levi's home. The kingdom Jesus proclaims seeks out "those whom society considers evil. He accepts their hospitality, and with it, the complex reciprocal obligations that go with such a relationship."¹⁴³ This kind of tactically disruptive behavior is such a hallmark of Jesus' ministry that some scholars have given it a title: the Transgressive Christ.

The Transgressive Christ arises out of the reality that Jesus Christ was crucified by the religious and political authorities of his day for refusing to conform to their standards of behavior. Indeed, Jesus is constantly seen in the gospels as transgressing the commonly-accepted religious and legal boundaries of his day. In a world obsessed by purity codes, he touches those who are unclean, including

¹⁴¹ Kilgallen John, "Was Jesus Right to Eat with Sinners and Tax Collectors?," *BIBLICA* 93 (2012): pp. 590-600, 591.

¹⁴² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 99.

¹⁴³ Perkins, *Gospel of Mark*, 553.

lepers, bleeding women, and the differently abled. He eats and drinks with outcasts such as tax collectors and sinners.¹⁴⁴

The classical hermeneutic applied to stories like the call of Levi is that Jesus' followers are expected to continue the work of the "Transgressive Christ." Because Jesus' mission is not to the righteous but sinners, then the church's mission should also be to those on the margins as well. The body of Christ should "take care to make our celebrations the occasion for healing and reconciliation for breaking down barriers that exceed others and even for reaching out to invite others to discover God's presence in our midst."¹⁴⁵ This missional interpretation of Jesus' ministry has propelled the church's mission of serving the poor and protecting the vulnerable for generations. However, consider what happens when, as with the Canaanite woman, we view this story and its hermeneutic through the lens of neurodiversity.

As mentioned above, section A of *DSM-5* notes that an autism spectrum diagnosis requires "deficits in social communication and social interaction." Subsection A.2 offers as an example of these deficits "difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts." For the neurodiverse, this can manifest itself in the intentional and unintentional violation of social and cultural norms. However, when these diagnostic criteria are applied to Jesus' behavior in the call of Levi, a fascinating dynamic emerges.

When Jesus eats at Levi's table, he is purposefully not "adjusting (his) behavior to suit various social contexts." That makes his "social communication and interaction"

¹⁴⁴ Kittredge Cherry, "Transgressive Christ / Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People," *Transgressive Christ / Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People*, December 9, 2010, <http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2010/12/transgressive-christ-rethinking-sin-and.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Kilgallen, "Was Jesus Right to Eat," 593.

entirely and deliberately "deficient" for the context. The social hegemony of first-century Galilee was to move away from tax collectors like Levi, yet Jesus does the opposite in this story. He moves toward Levi, eats with him, and says, "follow me." Can such conduct be designated as anything other than what subsection A.2 describes as not "adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts?"

Furthermore, when we consider this story's hermeneutic through a neurodiverse lens, another fascinating dynamic emerges. One of the most popular hermeneutics of this passage is that, because Jesus broke social norms and crossed cultural barriers in order to care for the outsider and the marginalized, the church should go and do likewise. This means that in the call of Levi, neurodiverse behavior is not just something to be recognized in the conduct of Jesus, but it is also lifted up as the very conduct the church is meant to emulate. This means that in this instance, it is neurodiverse behavior that is paradigmatic of faithful Christian piety, not neurotypical behavior. When Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1), must that not also include these particular contours of autistic relationality?

In this light, neurodiverse behavior uniquely provides a standard by which the church imitates Christ. However, as I will demonstrate in my final example, this is not the only place we find this in the New Testament. Pivoting from an examination of Jesus' behavior to his teaching, the Parable of the Persistent Widow provides another example where neurodiverse behavior supplies the benchmark for Christian faithfulness.

Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Instructive Nature of Autistic Conduct

The parable of the Persistent Widow (also called the Unjust Judge) is found exclusively in the gospel of Luke. It is located in chapter 18 and begins with the gospel writer revealing Jesus' motive in telling the parable, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1). After this, the narrative shifts to the parable proper, where Jesus introduces the two main characters: a judge and a widow. The judge is identified as "unjust" because, as Jesus adds, he "neither feared God nor had respect for people" (18:2), yet it is this judge that the widow must petition. She comes to him repeatedly demanding that the judge, "'Grant me justice against my opponent'" (18:3). The unjust judge refuses her for a while, but finally grants her request, reasoning that, "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (18:5). Jesus then points to the words of the judge in the parable and asks, "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them" (18:7-8). He concludes the teaching with a final rhetorical question to his disciples, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (18:8)

Jesus deploys this parable about maintaining persistence in prayer in classic, rabbinical fashion. The hearers are invited to relate to the characters in the story and then, seeing who acts faithfully, challenged to go and do likewise. In this case, the interpretation seems straightforward. Even when it feels as though God may not be listening, do not give up praying. For if an unjust judge could be persuaded by the persistence of this widow, how much more will God assuredly hear God's own children who are loved? Therefore, be like the widow. However, a more in-depth examination of

these characters and the way Jesus makes use of them problematizes this hermeneutic. To explore this, let us look at each character in turn.

First, there is the unjust judge. Because judges, as Richard Lischer notes, have long been "a symbol for God in the religion of Israel," the hearer prepares to code the behavior of the judge as that of the divine.¹⁴⁶ The judge's action, it is assumed, will show us what God is like. This, of course, makes Jesus' characterization of the judge as "unjust" all the more surprising because in this parable, the "God character" does not act like the God of Israel. In fact, his actions are quite the opposite. Here again, Lischer notes that because this judge

“neither feared God nor had respect for people.” His life is a photographic negative of the summary of the law in Luke 10: love of God and love of neighbor. He has no regard for either, and he admits such in a characteristically Lukan interior monologue. Although he occupies an exalted position in Jewish society, this judge's inner attitude and outward actions represent violations of role.¹⁴⁷

Lischer argues that by characterizing the judge this way, Jesus is encouraging persistence in prayer, especially when the divine seems distant and far away. This is why Jesus uses the word "God" (18:7) as the object of prayer in this parable and not the more familiar and pastoral, "heavenly Father" (Lk 11:13). "The parable turns on the absence of God in the world. Jesus' followers will serve God in a world from which the comforting evidences of the sacred are missing."¹⁴⁸

Robert Capon offers an alternative reading of the "unjust" nature of the judge. Instead of insinuating a context of divine absence, Capon argues this is another example

¹⁴⁶ Richard Lischer, *Reading the Parables* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 114-115.

¹⁴⁷ Lischer, *Parables*, 115.

¹⁴⁸ Lischer, *Parables*, 115.

of Jesus' use of an anti-hero in his parables. Along with the *good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25-37) and the *dishonest manager* (Luke 16:1-13), Luke's Jesus' uses an *unjust judge* to reveal divine truth through reversal and irony. That truth, in this case, is the scandal of grace. This is because, for Capon, it is only an unjust judge or a judge who is incompetent at their job that would render a favorable verdict to one who does not deserve it. He explains in his whimsical prose,

There is no condemnation because there is no condemner. There is no hanging judge and there is no angry God: he has knocked himself clean off the bench and clear out of the God Union. Nobody but a bad judge could have issued a favorable judgment on our worthless cases; and nobody but a failed God - a God finally and for all out of any recognizable version of the God business - could possibly have been bighearted enough to throw a going-out-of-business sale for the likes of us.¹⁴⁹

With this reading, Jesus is inviting his disciples to reconsider how they see the economy of the kingdom of God and their anxiety about God's justice. In this light, the parable operates as one of contrast, not comparison. If this unjust judge will give grace out of annoyance, how much more quickly will God give justice to his "chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" (Lk 18:7) Such a reading is consistent with Luke 11:10-32, where Jesus encourages perseverance through a similar analogy of contrast, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" All that being said, however, whether the context the unjust judge provides is overwhelming divine grace or the experience of divine

¹⁴⁹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 283.

absence, the hermeneutical momentum of the parable seems to remain the same: be like the widow.

Widows were common in Jesus' day and makeup one of the three groups Israel was expected to care for in order to demonstrate covenant faithfulness (Deut 14:29, 24:17, 24:19-20, 27:19, Jer 22:3, Zech 7:10, Mal 3:5). Widows were also considered a divinely protected class in the Hebrew scripture due to their vulnerability (Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11-14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13). Jesus' use of a widow in the parable provides a poetic foil to the unjust judge: The former character is close to the heart of God, while the latter keeps God far from his heart. This interpretation of the characters further reinforces the assumption that the widow is who the hearer is meant to emulate. Does it change the parable, however, if the characterization of widows in the Old Testament is not so straightforward?

New Testament scholar Febbie C. Dickerson argues that the widow in Luke 18 might not have been asking for justice from the judge at all, but instead revenge.

Dickerson explains,

The biblical image of widows is not monolithic. Therefore, one should not lock the parable's widow into a specific characterization. The Greek verb *ekdikeo* can refer to justice or vengeance. There is a thin line between the two words; what is justice to one is vengeance to another, but it is often difficult for us to consider vengeance as a motive in the biblical narratives because the idea of vengeance is harsh. Moreover, both the Old Testament writers and Paul declare that vengeance belongs to God (Lev 19:18; Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19). If the widow is seeking vengeance she may not be the positive model the audience for the parable envisions her to be.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Febbie C Dickerson, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow: Does She Want Mercy, Justice, or Revenge?," *The Bible Today* 57, no. 1 (2019): pp. 21-26, 22.

Here, the widow would not necessarily function as a positive role model, but rather a more ambiguous character, about whose motives the hearer is left to wonder. Dickerson contends that the way in which we identify with the widow affects the way we read the parable.

When we read her as seeking justice it is easy to identify the widow as a positive exemplar. However, when one considers the range of characterizations possible for widows, the meaning of the story expands in surprising and not-so-positive ways. This is a good thing; it forces us to see that context is a large factor in how we interpret biblical stories.¹⁵¹

Therefore, sometimes hearers should pray like the widow, seeking justice. However, we must always be aware of the times we think we are seeking justice, but instead desire revenge. The difference, says Dickerson, is our context and what the hearer brings to the parable when interpreting it. This observation about context provides a segue to a most fascinating reading of this same parable offered by Sam Wells, who interprets this parable from the context of neurodiversity.

In an article in *The Christian Century* Wells tells a story about reading this parable with Christians on the autism spectrum. Through their observations together, Wells found that people on the spectrum related not only to the widow, but also to the unjust judge. This is because from their perspective, both demonstrated classic traits of autistic relationality. First consider the judge:

You could say he displays neurodiverse characteristics that amplify the stigmatization of neurodiverse people. He seems set on his own purpose, and he doesn't see why the widow should alter it. He has a public role but a very limited understanding of how best to carry it out. He doesn't fear God or the opinions of others. He seems rather caught up in his own world. It seems almost impossible for

¹⁵¹ Dickerson, "Persistent Widow," 26.

him to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. It doesn't seem to matter how much distress he causes the widow—he won't be diverted from his course of action. It seems not so much selfish as blinkered. Eventually he changes his approach—not because he changes his mind, but because the new course of action seems convenient to him. One might argue that such an interpretation is unduly negative about autism. But remember that what we're being given here is a portrayal of God. It's God who is portrayed as having these neurodiverse characteristics.¹⁵²

Wells next offers a similar, neurodiverse reading of the widow,

You could say she is slow to pick up the social signals. We can imagine how in various subtle and unsubtle ways the judge makes it clear he isn't interested in her petition. Today we might say these would include not replying to her letters, letting his assistant answer the door to her and always being too busy to see her, getting a security device fitted so that she could not get near his home, and avoiding his front door so he would never meet her pleading at the gate. We might say a neurotypical person would pick up the hint that he wasn't interested.¹⁵³

Both characters in the parable depict a relationality that would be, and in the case of Wells' experience at this conference *actually was*, recognizable to people on the autism spectrum. The judge, as we have discussed, represents the God character and as such, provides yet another example of autistic relationality in divine conduct. Yet the widow, on the other hand- the character who, in all classical readings of the parable, we are meant to relate – also demonstrates neurodiverse characteristics. This means that if the hearer is meant to follow her example, then it is precisely her neurodiverse traits that provide the example of what to emulate. Wells explains,

Maybe this parable is telling us that if disciples are to pray, they should pray in a neurodiverse way. They should be relentless, not back off, not take no for an answer, refuse to accept a logic that yields to whatever malpractice the judiciary is prone to.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Samuel Wells, "Does God Have Neurodiverse Characteristics?," *The Christian Century*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/neurodiverse-god>.

¹⁵³ Wells, "Neurodiverse."

¹⁵⁴ Wells, "Neurodiverse."

He continues by suggesting that this neurodiverse reading of the parable does something else as well: provides space for the hearer to flip the character with whom they identify. If both characters exhibit behavior familiar to people on the spectrum, it actually makes space for the hearers of the parable to also relate to the judge, while seeing the divine in the widow character. Wells speculates,

Maybe God is the widow—the one who is constantly seeking to get our attention, who will work on our conscience or our pride or our pity or anything within range in order to move us to respond to the divine call and live lives of righteousness and mercy. And maybe we are the judge—the one who is impervious and wrongheaded, who has no care for God's favor or for human esteem. Maybe it's only when we turn the parable around in this way that it begins to make more sense. God is the one who in a neurodiverse way perseveres against impossible odds and trudges on when most would back off.¹⁵⁵

In either case, Wells wonders, "could we be seeing here a portrayal of neurodiverse behaviors that are regarded as normative for Christians?"¹⁵⁶ Like with the call of Levi, the answer is, again, yes.

Which then points us at last to the final chapter of this project. If people on the spectrum can find their relationality authentically reflected in divine conduct, what does this new awareness offer the church? How might the relational witness of the neurodiverse disclose new truths about God and how might those truths be surfaced faithfully in the community? It is to these final questions we now turn.

¹⁵⁵ Wells, "Neurodiverse."

¹⁵⁶ Wells, "Neurodiverse."

6. Toward a Neurodiverse Hermeneutic

I will conclude this project by demonstrating how to employ the theological insights from preceding chapters in a congregation. Too often, exegetical inquiry done in the academy does not continue its good work through to the people in the pews, and this project does not want to perpetuate that dynamic. Furthermore, when churches do engage people with disabilities in general and autism in particular, most of the effort goes into projects of inclusion: parish and clergy education, adaptive worship gatherings, curricula, and sacramental rites of passage.¹⁵⁷ This is all excellent and needed work, but it is not the approach I wish to take.

All along, I have argued that people with autism can find their kind of relationality present in descriptions of divine conduct in biblical texts. Because of this, their neurodiverse projection offers an expanded perspective on what it means to “be in

¹⁵⁷ For clergy education and church leadership see, Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: a Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021) and Katie Terry, “Terry, Katie A Wrinkle in the Fold: Inclusion of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Faith Communities,” *Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work* 42, no. 4 (2015): pp. 449-469.

For adaptive worship gatherings see, Audrey Scanlan and Linda Snyder, *Rhythms of Grace: Worship and Faith Formation for Children and Families with Special Needs* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Pub Co, 2010). Or Audrey Scanlan and Linda Snyder, “Rhythms of Grace,” Rhythms of Grace, accessed January 18, 2021, <http://www.rhythms-of-grace.org/>.

For curricula see, Friendship Ministries, “People with and without Disabilities Growing in Faith Together,” Friendship Ministries, January 4, 2021, <https://friendship.org/>. and Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Friendship Ministries, 2011).

For Sacramental rites of passage see, Steven Swank, “A Review of ‘Adaptive First Eucharist Preparation Kit: For Children with Autism and Other Special Needs,’” *Journal of Religion Disability and Health* 16, no. 2 (2012): pp. 226-227, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.673408> . and Diane Mcgee, “Widening the Door of Inclusion for Children with Autism through Faith Communities,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 14, no. 3 (December 2010): pp. 279-292, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228961003622351>.

relationship” with God. How can this expanded perspective offer unique “good news” to the whole church? To demonstrate, I will present two sermons - each based on a text covered in a previous chapter.

Before I go further, now is an appropriate time to acknowledge the intricacies and boundaries that must accompany addressing disability from the pulpit.¹⁵⁸ As the body that God is partnering with to implement what Jesus accomplished on the cross, the church’s common life must be marked by the contours of resurrection and the inbreaking Kingdom of God. However, as Brian Brock points out, the cutting edge of resurrection is in the renewal of social relations. Christian hope is not only in resurrected bodies, but also a resurrected body politic.¹⁵⁹ As such, the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in the life of church is essential. We cannot embody the fullness of God’s Kingdom without the fullness of diversity of all our members. However, the witness of the church will not simply come from the way we are inclusive, but instead from the way we open ourselves to the Spirit’s healings of all of us, through the full participation of all people – especially Christians with disabilities. As Amos Yong notes, the healing work of the Spirit will not be found in simply including the disabled “so they can interact with us on our own terms, but by transforming and fixing all of us so that we together can be the people of God.”¹⁶⁰ Christian hope is nothing less than this.

¹⁵⁸ For a theological account for why and how to read the Bible through the lens of disability, see Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: a New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). Yong contends that the presence of the disabled in the church is one of the most perceptible public witnesses of God’s way of working in the world where “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

¹⁵⁹ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 232-236.

¹⁶⁰ Yong, 72.

However, being a faith community that names and centers disability requires sensitivity and wisdom, especially in the pulpit. Some of the most helpful guidelines for for this work can be are found in the work of Kathleen Black. Black is an ordained Methodist minister and a Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics the School of Theology at Claremont. She herself lives with a disability and ministers to others who are Deaf and disabled. This gives her a unique perspective, which she brings to bear in her book *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*.¹⁶¹ Black is keen that when stories of healing from the Bible surface in public worship, Christians with disabilities are not marginalized by a preacher’s unexamined assumptions or language. In *A Healing Homiletic*, she provides guidelines for preaching disability so that every preacher can proclaim a gospel that is “healing and liberative” to all.¹⁶²

Black begins by explaining that the preacher must distinguish between “cure” and “healing.” To cure something is to relieve the symptoms of a particular disease or condition. This category becomes a problematic when applied to disability, however, because a “cure” may not be possible for some disabilities or even desirous by people who feel they are only considered disabled by others. Cure, especially of disabilities, is not required for a person to be fully human and whole. Healing, on the other hand, is the process of making something sound and healthy again. This is can include “cure” but is not limited only to alleviation of symptoms. Black explains that a homilist should not “use the words interchangeably. Although cure almost always means healing, the

¹⁶¹ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹⁶² Black, *Healing Homiletic*, Location 2539.

opposite is not true; healing often does not mean cure."¹⁶³ Operating from this paradigm, she proposes the following five guideposts.

First, when preaching about a text that includes a disability, like Jesus' healing miracles, Black encourages preachers to avoid speaking of the disability as either metaphor or the result of sin. So instead of saying, "we are blind, deaf, mute, or paralyzed to the will of God, we should say what we mean: "we do not understand who Jesus is," "we ignore God's will for our lives," "we do not testify to God's presence in our world," "we refuse to act on God's behalf."¹⁶⁴ Second, she suggests that preachers draw their hermeneutic from the person's situation with the disability in the text. So, for example, if their community marginalizes a disabled person featured in the story, the preacher might ask, "When have we marginalized someone from our community?" or "When have you been isolated from your community because of who you are?" Third, Black suggests that a preacher may emphasize the religious and cultural boundaries that Jesus crossed in many healing narratives. She notes that, while we may not have written purity codes today, the homilist could explore what unwritten purity codes function in our congregations and communities. This opens the door to investigating how Jesus' transgression of these codes might give us imagination for what faithful Christian practice looks like today. Fourth, Black argues that the preacher emphasizes the activity and agency of the person with disabilities in the text. She uses the example of Bartimaeus and his boldness in pursuing Jesus in the face of a crowd that is trying to silence him. What can we learn from his example? How can we be bold in a similar manner? Fifth and

¹⁶³ Black, *Healing Homiletic*, Location 2559-2561.

¹⁶⁴ Black, *Healing Homiletic*, Location 2582-2584.

finally, she suggests that the homilist can focus on the crowds' response in texts that feature disability. Her example is, once again, Bartimaeus. How do the crowd's attempt to silence Bartimaeus serve their expectation that he acts like a typical beggar? Where might we be doing the same to those at the margins in our midst?

Black's guidelines move the disabled person from the margins to the center of the hermeneutic and open up new possibilities for theological insight and practical application. Such preaching may feel daunting, but it is not meant to be the work of experts alone. As John Swinton emphasizes, preaching disability brings the hearer to near to the heart of the Gospel,

New hope and fresh possibilities is the essence of a disability homiletic. Thinking through issues of disability in the context of preaching is not something that is a "specialist enterprise" or that only has significance for those who are "interested in such things." Rather, preaching disability takes us to the heart of the Gospel and draws us into the presence of Jesus in new ways which bring healing and revelation to those who have ears to hear.¹⁶⁵

Therefore, with Swinton's encouragement and Black's boundaries firmly in mind, I will turn to my first sermon. By way of context, I am preaching in the Episcopal tradition where our congregational worship is liturgical, including word and sacrament. The preaching act usually encompasses about twelve to fifteen minutes of the service time, and the length of both sermons will reflect this. Furthermore, the Episcopal Church is a lectionary-based tradition, so I will be incorporating other texts the Revised Common Lectionary assigned for that day and the season of the church year.

¹⁶⁵ John Swinton, "A Disability Homiletic: Opening the Church to the Fullness Of Our Humanness," *Journal for Preachers*, 2014.

Lastly, I will employ the more casual tone I would take if this message were given to an actual congregation. The way I have explained the historical context of the scriptures is similar to how I would include this information in an actual sermon because I am a teacher by nature. I expect preachers in other traditions and with different gifts to adapt this content to their context accordingly.

With all that said then, let us turn to my first offering: a sermon about Jesus and the call of Levi.

Grace Makes It Weird – On Purpose

Week 8 of Epiphany (Year B)

Hosea 2:14-20 • Psalm 103:1-13, 22 • 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 • Mark 2:13-22

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was a psychology major in college, and during my junior year, I took a class in abnormal psychology. Part of the curriculum included learning about specific psychological experiments designed to break social rules and norms intentionally. The researchers then observed how other people reacted when cultural norms were violated. Imagine an academic version of those practical joke, hidden camera shows. I remember delighting as I imagined how awkward these experiments must have been for everyone involved– that is until my professor informed the class that we would be replicating these experiments ourselves!

As it turns out, our mid-semester project required us to reproduce one of the experiments we studied. The one I chose required me to ride on a crowded elevator, except I had to walk into the elevator backward and to stand facing the opposite direction

as the rest of the passengers in the car, and then walk out onto my floor, all the while continuing to face the wrong direction. Lastly, I had to record how the other people around me reacted. It was so weird, and I can still remember that pit-in-the-stomach awkward feeling I had during the whole affair. It was my first introduction to what ethicists call “the social contract.” A social contract is a society’s agreement about the moral and political rules of behavior. These can be implicit (like raising your hand if you want to speak in a group) or explicit (laws), but they form the basis for harmony in a society, which is why it felt so strange for me to break them during these experiments willfully. I was making it weird – on purpose.

Our Gospel today includes two stories about Jesus is interacting with some of the religious leaders of his day: the Pharisees. The first involves Jesus calling a tax collector to be his disciple, and the Pharisee’s subsequent questions as to why Jesus eats and drinks with him. The second involves questions about why Jesus’ disciples do (and do not) fast, ending with a metaphor about new wineskins. I will start with Levi and end with the wineskins.

The story of Levi’s call shows up in all three of the synoptic Gospels, so the details may feel familiar. Jesus is in the countryside, where he encounters a tax collector in his collection booth. The man’s name is Levi, and Jesus says to him, “Follow me.” Levi immediately does, and later Jesus and his disciples all end up at Levi’s house for dinner. Only there are other guests there as well- more tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees see Jesus at this meal, they are confused and offended, and they start asking questions, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”.

Jesus overhears their grousing and answers, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Done. Conversation over. Mark immediately moves to the next story as if the power of Jesus' response is self-evident to the reader. What exactly is going on here? Perhaps a little context will make things clearer.

During Jesus' time, his people were under Roman military occupation. Unlike the Greeks who had come through centuries earlier under Alexander the Great, Rome didn't want your culture as much as they wanted your obedience and your money. Their war machine would roll into your village and announce that they were here to bring you "peace" and the gift of imperial inclusion. You need only recognize Caesar as Lord and pay taxes to him accordingly. In exchange for these taxes, you receive the benefits of the empire like education, roads, and aqueducts, but you would receive the "benefit" of a state execution on a cross if you resisted. It was the kind of peace that really depended on which end of the sword you were on, yet the only folks Jesus' people despised more than the Romans were possibly those who collected these taxes on their behalf— other Jews.

Rome enlisted locals to collect taxes in their conquered lands, and they incentivized this process by allowing local tax collectors to gather as much money as they wanted to from their peers. As long as the Romans got their share, the tax collector could keep the rest. As such, in Jesus' time, many tax collectors had become very wealthy, some even flaunting it with ostentatious lifestyles and lavish living. For this reason, they were doubly hated: first for selling out to the empire and second for getting rich on the

backs of their fellow Jews. Tax collectors were seen not just as immoral and greedy, but they were also considered to be traitors.

This is why when Jesus is eating at Levi's house, the Pharisees are upset. In the ancient world, eating with someone demonstrated relational solidarity. How could Jesus be OK with someone like Levi? Doesn't he know what Levi does for a living? Doesn't Jesus realize that the food he is eating and the hospitality he is enjoying is the fruit of ill-gotten gains? No wonder these people are known as "sinners" – they flout God's law! How can Jesus and the disciples sit there and eat with them? Don't they know what this says and how it makes them look?

All these questions are questions of the social contract, are they not? The Pharisees are offended because Jesus is transgressing their categories of holiness and the conventional wisdom about tax collectors. He is actively ignoring and subverting the social contract of his day. If the culture expected that tax collectors be rejected, distrusted, and pushed away, then Jesus is doing precisely the opposite: He goes out *to* Levi, calls him to be a disciple, and demonstrates solidarity with him by eating in his home. It is as if Jesus is making it weird – on purpose.

It is like there is something he is trying to announce about God's Kingdom that can only be revealed through a transgressive act like this. The reign of God he proclaims has a different set of values. It functions under alternative priorities and unconventional ideals. Another way to say it is: the Kingdom of God has a different social contract.

Operating with a different social contract is something I got to know first-hand when my son was diagnosed with autism at age three. As I learned about his neurology

and how his brain worked, I came to understand that social contracts were not going to be things that he easily intuited. It was explained to me that social skills were things that were going to be “taught, not caught.”

However, what I came to realize that it was not that my son had no social contract and had to learn one. Instead, it was that he had a *different* social contract. He valued lots of things socially; they just sometimes cut across the grain of the dominant culture around him. One place this showed up was in our family was how we parented him in early adolescence. I remember expecting him to follow the typical path of withdrawing and feeling awkward about specific conversations the more he got into puberty. However, this was *not* the case at all! Not only were certain more taboo subjects not uncomfortable for him to talk about, his straightforward questions and matter-of-fact attitude about everything made me confront *my* awkwardness. His distinct social contract challenged mine, yet as I leaned into that challenge, I felt liberated. It actually deepened the trust between the two of us and made me a better dad.

Is this what Jesus is up to at Levi’s dinner party?

Jesus is crossing firmly held societal boundaries not because he simply wanted to make trouble or because he was aloof. No, he is operating with a different social contract that views the world according to divine reality. According to this reality, many outsiders are insiders, strangers are friends, and the despised are loved. Jesus is merely acting as if this reality is currently the case everywhere (the Kingdom of God is at hand!), which means the friction comes in the spots where others (like the Pharisees) believe that it is not.

This is part of why Jesus speaks of needing new wineskins in verses 21 and 22. The new thing God is doing in Jesus cannot be contained in the old conventions of the present age. They won't work. They don't fit. With Jesus and Levi, the new wine is the values of the Kingdom of God, and the new wineskin is the Kingdom's social contract.

And what would the name for this alternative social contract be? It's quite simple: grace.

Verse 10 of the Psalm today reads, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Psalm 103:10) What is this, if not the declaration of an alternative social contract anchored in divine grace? Conventional wisdom would invite retribution for sins and repayment for failures –God isn't playing that game. The divine demonstrates a different set of values where iniquity is met with mercy and sin with forgiveness. Such energy moves against our egos' inclination, and yet it is indeed the present reality of the reign of God and new creation.

All of which brings me back to those awkward parenting moments with my son. When I engaged his neurodiverse social contract during those birds-and-the-bees conversations, *I* was the one who was changed. His alternative social contract made me confront my unhealed hang ups and assumptions, but in so doing, I was set free.

Jesus seems to be interested in the same thing at Levi's house. His actions and activity at the dinner are surfacing things in the Pharisees that need to change. Not only do they not get it, but more so, they also are not free. They cannot celebrate the grace being demonstrated at that dinner table because they keep insisting that that's not how the world works. They are *literally* unable to join the party. When Jesus asks them about who

needs a doctor, the well or the sick, it's a question about how they will respond to this grace. Will they double down their preconceived notions about how things are supposed to be, or will they be open to having their perspective shifted based on their encounters with the Kingdom's social contract?

I believe that same question is on the table for us today.

Is there anywhere you are resisting Jesus' alternative social contract of grace? Are there places divine grace wants to challenge the way you insist that the world has to be? For example, are there any instances from your past—things done and left undone—that you are still beating yourself up over? Is there anywhere you are trying to work off your guilt through some sort of inner self-flagellation? If within the social contract of grace God says, "I'm not holding your past against you, so why are you?" can you accept that? Will you receive it as a gift, or like the Pharisees will you stay outside the party?

Or is there someone who has wronged you, and you are resisting to the Spirit's nudging to forgive them, and you are nursing a grudge? Perhaps there something that *they* did to you years ago, and you keep telling the story to anyone who will listen? That's not freedom. That wound still has power over you. Forgiveness can change that.

Or maybe you've kept the story going because you actually want revenge? Smearing their reputation is how you plan to get back at them. Is your heart is saying, "Well, God may not repay us according to our iniquities, but I sure plan to!" How is the Kingdom's social contract of grace inviting you to let it go? This may not seem like good news in the moment, but it is, because often when we forgive those who have wronged us, we are the ones who get set free.

But that's what happens with grace, isn't it? It walks into the elevator of our hearts backward, taking note of how we respond, and then pulls us forward toward a better future. It seems that God loves us enough to keep making it weird - on purpose.

Amen.

Leviticus in Love

Saturday of Week of 5 Easter (Year Two)

Psalm 75, 76 • Lev. 23:23-44 • 2 Thess. 3:1-18 • Matt. 7:13-21

In the Name of God: Father Son, and Holy Spirit

Weddings are joyful events, and it's hard not to love their energy. Everyone is usually in such a good mood, and (if everyone is sober) they make for wonderful occasions.

Over the years, I have become increasingly aware that when the couple is making their vows, they actually have no idea what they are doing! They are promising lifelong, monogamous fidelity to each other until one of them stands over the grave of the other. That's a huge commitment, especially given that they don't know what's they will face along the road of their marriage. The conventional wisdom of a wedding is that we are there to celebrate the couple's love for one another, but the truth is, they don't know what it means to love each other yet. It will only be when they look back over years of marriage and reflect on what it took to keep the promises they made on this day that they will know what their love really looks like.¹⁶⁶ This is because love is far more than a feeling.

¹⁶⁶ This is a synthesis of some of Will Willimon's observations about weddings in *Worship as Pastoral Care*. See, William H. Willimon, "Liturgy and Learning: The Wedding," in *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 122-146.

The weeks of Easter 5&6 in the Daily Office lectionary are among my favorites as a preacher because we get to address the book of Leviticus! As much as I love lectionary preaching, one of its poverties is how it curates the scripture, limiting our exposure to certain Biblical texts. Not so during Easter 5 and 6! During these weeks, we are confronted with the beautiful strangeness of Leviticus, and for these past two days, we have been reading about the great appointed festivals.

Now, if the text felt tedious or like the “Terms and Conditions” on your iTunes account when we read it, you are not wrong. Leviticus is full of very specific instructions regarding how this newly freed tribe would arrange their common life. The statues found throughout the book were often based on actual problems the nation was dealing with (I’m just going to leave that out there for your imagination), yet today is not about food laws or how to deal with blood, but instead about holidays.

The entirety of Leviticus chapter 23 contains instruction for seven festivals. Each one of them is tied to an event in the history of this fledgling community. The instructions began with instructions for the Spring feasts (Passover, First Fruits, Unleavened Bread, and Shavuot – Pentecost) and concluded with the instructions for the Fall Feasts (Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Sukkot or Tabernacles), which we heard read this morning.

What is important for our purposes is that these feasts represent an opportunity for the community to express their gratitude, regret, trust, hope, and joy. They are not draconian laws that represent the demands of a tyrannical God. Instead, ritual, liturgy,

and sacrifice were how God asked the people to express their commitment to the covenant and love of the Lord. In fact, the word for “sacrifice” in Hebrew (*koran*) means “to draw near.” So, in Leviticus, we get a picture of how love is much more than a feeling – like a marriage vow, it takes expression through action.

Jesus underscores the same point in the Gospel this morning when he talks about being able to “tell a tree by its fruit.” There will be false prophets who talk a good game but are actually “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Jesus reminds us that we will be able to suss out who is a true and false prophet by the fruit that they bear. Faithfulness, again, here is discerned through external action and outcomes.

All of it reminds me of an article I read by Mennonite theologian Christine Guth. Guth’s child was diagnosed with autism, and through that process, her husband also recognized that he was on the spectrum too. Guth says that this revelation explained much in her marriage and shifted her perspective on what love could look like. Here’s how she says it,

Long before we had a name for it, Asperger differences were already colouring Bob's and my relationship. During our courtship, Bob and I had caused a pastoral counsellor to wonder at his lack of being "in love" and to worry about our future together. For decades to follow, including the trying years I described above, I wondered too. Where was the love in this strange relationship? Now, after 28 years of married life, I know that love is here, too. Though his love for me has pulverised my preconceived notions and stereotypes of love, who am I to say it does not qualify as love? Bob's version of love is marked by dogged commitment, persistence through agonising struggles, willingness to give and take, enjoyment of companionship, and other treasured aspects of shared living. Folks with Asperger's thrive on predictability, so their love may shine in predictable routines. Bob's commitment to spending the last half hour of every evening with me, reviewing the day's ups and downs, has, in its very reliability, breathed new life into our marriage. Likewise, I have learned that Bob values when I express my love for him predictably. When I make sure the refrigerator always holds the

items he invariably carries in his lunch, he feels my care. Who says you need roses for romance? ¹⁶⁷

Isn't that beautiful? Love expressed in actions, routine, and commitment – this sounds an awful lot like the kind of worship that the feasts of Leviticus invite us into, does it not? And while Guth's example feels natural because of its marriage context, what about other places we are called to "love" God and neighbor in the scriptures. How might a view of love defined by actions, routine, and commitment provide a different perspective on those?

Take, for example, the classic formulation of prayer in Deuteronomy 6, where we encounter the admonition to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." How do you imagine your piety would grow if that love took on the contours of predictability and commitment? What does it look like love God with all your might through routine? Or what kind of practices should one adopt to grow in loving God with all your heart through their perseverance?

Or, what about Jesus' instruction to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44) As a priest, I frequently talk with people who struggle with this teaching because the emotional barrier to blessing enemies feels insurmountable. They feel like they can't love their enemies because they do "want" to love them. Their heart is closed to the person, and so love feels out of reach. A teaching like this opens up new possibilities for how enemies can be loved, doesn't it? Maybe it does not have anything to do with our feelings but can instead be located in behaviors. Such love could find

¹⁶⁷ Guth, "Horses Live to Run," 27.

expression in acts of kindness, benevolent assumptions, or even just refraining from rolling your eyes when their name comes up.

Isn't this the same dynamic Jesus is getting at in his parable of the Sheep and the Goats? At the end of the age, the sheep are commended for how they lived – in this case, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, and caring for the sick. When Jesus tells them, “Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me?” (Mt 25:31-46) is it not an echo of Leviticus? Love of God, again, finds expression in faithful action.

In all this, what starts to emerge is a more fully orbbed picture of how we love God and neighbor in our world. As we close out Eastertide and move toward Ordinary time, what habits or rituals could you adopt during the “growing season” of the church year to deepen your faith and grow your heart? Indeed, this where historical practices like a “rule of life” have come into play, but how else might this scripture inspire your imagination?

Maybe this is where that couple from the wedding and the Sheep and Goats all fold together. When we finish the race of our lives and look back across what we have done and left undone, may we see ample evidence of love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. May we identify not simply the sentiment but all the ways the words took on flesh and blood in our actions, routines, and commitments. And may it be true, whether we knew it or not.

Amen.

Both of these sermons provide examples of Swinton's argument that disability brings us to the heart of the Gospel. First, the sermon about Jesus and Levi highlights how crossing social boundaries is desirable and, in some cases, required for Christian faithfulness. Jesus is not violating social codes for the sake of making a scene. Instead, he is functioning with an alternative social contract, and the conflict arises when conventional wisdom does not sync up with divine reality and a choice must be made. Operating with an alternative social contract is often considered a challenge for people on the spectrum. Still, I wanted to problematize that assumption by offering a personal story where my son's neurodiverse social contract invited me to grow. By confronting my presuppositions, grace was mediated. This dynamic becomes the hinge of the sermon as the hearer is invited to have the same experience with God's social contract of grace.

Second, the sermon about the feasts in Leviticus provides a beautiful platform to expand the definition of love. Christine Guth's story about her husband offers a unique example of how authentic love in a marriage can take expression in perseverance, routine, and ritual. I used this example in chapter 4 but found it far more powerful coming from the pulpit. Here, autistic relationality expands the categories for how love functions while also capturing the imagination. The hearer is left to contemplate how they can put love into concrete action with a neurodiverse experience serving as a catalyst for faithful ingenuity.

Learnings

Writing this project has been very personal for me. As I mentioned in the Introduction, my son's autism has been a constant dialogue partner as my wife and I raised him in the faith. As this project developed and I have thought deeply about the pastoral applications of scholarship like this, a few learnings, not dissimilar to what Kathy Black has offered above, crystallized. These observations are not about preaching disability in general, but more so about autism in particular. Consider them guideposts for the neurotypical who is preaching neurodiversity.

1.) Dialogue With People on the Spectrum as You Do The Work

There is a maxim in disability theology, “nothing about us, without us.”¹⁶⁸ I encountered this phrase early in my research, and it proved invaluable as the work progressed, especially as I pivoted to the preaching application of the final chapter. As a researcher and homilist who is engaging neurodiversity but is not on the spectrum, I found it crucial to include the voices and experiences of people on the spectrum both through published works and interpersonal dialogue. Christopher Barber's “On Connectedness” in Chapter 3, for example, was deeply helpful. His reflections on the tedious nature of the church's emphasis on “connectedness” articulated the problem I wanted to engage. The experiences of those on the spectrum were essential for understanding the problems that I wanted to address.

¹⁶⁸ James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2011).

Furthermore, at every turn of the project, I would invite feedback from my son. At first, it was informal as he would politely ask what I was working on. However, as the exegetical work developed, our check-ins became more intentional. I wanted to know if the connections I was making between divine conduct in the Bible and neurodiverse relational patterns resonated with him. Did he find them liberating, or were they uninteresting and unhelpful?

This feedback was essential when I moved into writing the two sermons. There were early drafts where the way I applied a neurodiverse hermeneutic did not sit well with him (more on that in number two), and his feedback challenged me to hone my approach further. All of it made me deeply aware of why dialogue with people on the spectrum is critical if you are neurotypical and lifting up a condition that is not your own.

2.) Autism as Invitation, Not Exemplar

When utilizing a neurodiverse hermeneutic, autism should function as a condition that invites faithful practice and desituates assumptions, not as a direct example of practical application. In my first few drafts of the sermon about Jesus and the call of Levi, I deployed the same exegetical reading of Jesus' violation of social contracts and the similarities with neurodiverse relational patterns. However, when the time came to apply that insight to the hearer, I found myself telling the listener to follow Jesus' example by breaking social contracts in your own context. Essentially, in the name of Jesus, go and "be like someone who is autistic." Here, autism became the direct example to follow, and the hermeneutic functioned like a simile.

The problem with this approach was two-fold. First, even though I preaching in order to lift up autism and give neurodiversity a sense of empowerment, I was actually exploiting it. By taking a personal story about autistic relationality and using it to make my point in the sermon, it read to my son like appropriation. I was instrumentalizing the story instead to make my larger point and not letting it have a voice of its own. The second issue was that, by directing my congregation to “act like someone who is on the spectrum,” I was, in fact, mirroring the problem I was trying to correct. I was falling into the trap Kilby warned us about by centralizing a projection. If disrupting neurotypical hegemony was one of my hermeneutical goals, then replacing it with a neurodiverse hegemony was not the solution.

So, when I reworked the sermon, I adjusted the metaphor to underscore the change in *me* when I was confronted by my son’s alternative social contract. That shift in the metaphor meant that the characters I was inviting my hearers to identify with also shifted. Instead of asking them to act as Jesus was acting, I asked them if there was anywhere they were like the Pharisees. I then moved into giving options to consider based on the presence of grace in the Psalms. This rearrangement of the sermon allowed a neurodiverse hermeneutic to challenge conventional wisdom (my stated goal) and inspire new imagination for faithful living.

The principle I extract from this story is to let a neurodiverse hermeneutic function as an invitation to an expanded imagination for the contours of God’s love, not as a direct example of how the hearer should behave. Sam Wells does this well in his *Christian*

Century article that I reference in Chapter 4, and I have tried to follow suit in both my sermons above.

3.) Consider/Acknowledge the Spectrum

As I have mentioned before, autism remains a spectrum. Though there may be wisdom in avoiding qualifiers like “high functioning” and “low functioning,” the fact remains that the impact autism has on an individual and their family can be as unique as the individuals themselves.¹⁶⁹ This means that there are people on that spectrum whose challenges are not as reframeable as what I have offered here. The struggle, trials, and even grief that may be present in their families need to be considered by any writer or homilist who will surface a positive account of neurodiversity. For those families, the severity of the challenge autism brings into their life may make it difficult to view appreciatively. This does not mean, however, that autism should be avoided from the pulpit or that it become forbidden as a topic of discussion.

The way I have attempted to balance this reality is by surfacing stories in each sermon that relay the specific experiences of one person with autism. This allows their particular experience of autism to speak with its own authority and avoids universalizing one person to be illustrative of the whole spectrum. Surfacing autistic relationality in this way can allow families who may be hesitant to discuss their experiences with ASD to open up about it, especially if those experiences are trying.

¹⁶⁹ I first heard this from John Swinton who put it like this, “If you’ve met one person with autism, then you’ve met one person with autism.” This maxim is not original to him, but he was my first exposure. John Swinton, “Reflections on Autistic Love,” *Practical Theology* 5, no. 3 (2012): pp. 259-278, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v5i3.259>, 269.

4.) Do Not Idealize the Spectrum

Grant Macaskill notes that, as much as the church should work hard to include the neurodiverse into our communities, it is important that we not forget people on the spectrum need to grow and learn too. In fact, as members of the body of Christ, this is expected.

If those with ASD are identified as part of the church, then they too must be prepared to identify themselves as objects of moral criticism. The point must obviously be handled with care, and with awareness of the varying capacities for change associated with individuals at different points on the spectrum: it will devolve rather differently upon someone with severe classical autism to someone with Asperger syndrome. But there is a growing recognition of the capacity of individuals on the spectrum to develop in their social interactions. In secular literature, this may be rendered simply in terms of their greater capacity to function happily and beneficially within society. In Christian terms, we might instead emphasize their capacity to attain new ways of fostering and enjoying the love and fellowship of the community, even if this is quite different for them than for neurotypicals.¹⁷⁰

In the spirit of inclusion and justice, it is possible to dehumanize people with ASD by failing to recognize that they are, indeed, people. As Christians, we believe that all people are created in the image of God and have a place in the church. However, we also recognize that sin transcends neurological categories and remains a present reality in all human beings. This means that because the neurodiverse are part of the common life of the church and salvation in Jesus Christ, they will necessarily be invited into repentance and the forgiveness of their sins just like everyone else. If the church idealizes people on

¹⁷⁰ Grant Macaskill, "Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, no. 1 (November 2017): pp. 15-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2017.1373613>, 25.

the spectrum or romanticizes their struggle, it may actually strip someone with ASD of their humanity in the name of including them.

Next Steps: Autism and Christian Practice?

A hope I have for this project is that it will inspire future research and conversation. One direction future study could take is examining the overlap of DSM-5's diagnostic criteria for ASD and Christian practice. In the same way neurodiverse relationality can be found in the Bible's witness to God, so too can it be found in some of the oldest spiritual practices of the church.

John Gillibrand is an Anglican priest whose son has autism and is also a non-speaker. In his book *Disabled Church-Disabled Society* he describes finding parallels between the experience of living with his son and the monastic practices of silence that accompany communal life. He goes on to observe that, "One could imagine for a person with autism the high levels of structure within the daily monastic regime, the provision within that daily routine of productive work alongside the removal of the constant need to communicate with others could prove highly beneficial."¹⁷¹ Silence in community is an ancient Christian discipline, that might also be familiar to the neurodiverse. Further research might illuminate fascinating connections.

¹⁷¹ John Gillibrand, Rowan Williams, and Anthony J. Bailey, *Disabled Church - Disabled Society: the Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2014), 67.

Gillibrand also draws parallels between his son, Adam's, atypical desires and Christian mysticism. Because the telos of contemplation is often described by the mystics as wanting nothing but God alone, Gillibrand notes,

Adam in one way, because of his autistic obsessions, wants everything...In another way, he wants nothing. All those wants which we in mainstream society have - a good income, car, holiday, and so on- are beyond his apprehension. For many of us, the ascent of that ladder of contemplation which puts aside our wanting is an arduous task. Adam is, at least in some ways, further upon it.¹⁷²

The parallels extend to other forms of prayer as well. As a person with autism, Christopher Barber explains that the predictability of liturgical prayer is a helpful practice for him as well as others on the autism spectrum.¹⁷³ He notes that,

Ritualized prayer can also be helpful because for people with autism there is a need for predictability and order in almost all aspects of our lives. Prayer as connection to God is no different. By predictability I mean prayer that has a clear beginning, ending and structured path or route between these two points. Prayers such as the Rosary, the Divine Office and the Mass are good examples of predictable prayer in that they all have a clear structure.¹⁷⁴

While Barber's observation is helpful, it cannot be overlooked that the nature of this kind of prayer also mirrors neurodiverse relationality. Liturgical prayer is not just helpful to people on the spectrum, its repetition and forms, are at least in some ways, reflective of them as well. The same could be said about patterns of social withdrawal in ASD and ancient Christian practices of retreat and solitude. The connections are worth deeper exploration and I surface these examples to point out areas where more could be written.

¹⁷² Gillibrand, *Disabled Church*, 65-66.

¹⁷³ Barber, "On Connectedness", 206-207.

¹⁷⁴ Barber, "On Connectedness", 207.

Autism is a gift to the church. Neurodiversity invites faith communities into a more fully orbbed and dynamic experiences of what it means to be human while also catalyzing new avenues of theological imagination. My prayer is that this project has born witness to that truth. May our borthers and sisters on the spectrum continue to expand all our hearts and minds to see that a relationship with God can be more than we have ever imagined.

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Biography

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