

May 2, 2021  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 8:26-40  
Psalm 22:24-30  
1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

In 2012, the writer Andrew Solomon published an award-winning non-fiction book called *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*.<sup>1</sup> I came to it as a big fan of his previous award-winning non-fiction book, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*. At nearly a thousand pages, *Far from the Tree* is a tome, but a worthwhile one. Solomon came to his subject after doing an article for *Time* magazine about deaf culture. A gay man, he began seeing parallels between deaf culture and gay culture. In *Far from the Tree*, Solomon posits that there are two types of identities: “vertical identities” and “horizontal identities.” Vertical identities are passed down from parents to children; parents and children have them in common. Vertical identities might include ethnicity, nationality, or language. In contrast, horizontal identities are alien to the parents, they are learned by children from a peer group, and they have almost always been subject to “cure.”<sup>2</sup>

The horizontal identities Solomon considers in his book include Down syndrome, dwarfism, and autism. Though the book is about parenting children with horizontal identities different from your own, it's really about parenting writ large. A documentary film of the same title based on the book was released in 2017.<sup>3</sup> It's currently available on Hulu. In the film, Solomon says this: “In some ways I wrote the book to forgive my parents. And in telling these stories I was investigating the very nature of family itself.”<sup>4</sup>

What I really want to focus on here is the idea of horizontal identities—that there are identities that set us apart from our families of origin. I have the horizontal identity of being a lesbian. It's a horizontal identity from which I ran for a very long time. I finally came out, not with help from my family of origin. It took seeking and finding a peer group. I was fortunate to then be living in a big gay-friendly city—Seattle. And I was fortunate to be working in an office building located on the edge of the gay district. Looking back, many of the stories I tell about that time are utterly comical. For example, picture me—ME!—skulking around, terrified that someone might *think I was gay*. It's funny, and it's not.

That was nearly thirty years ago. Today, it's so much easier for *many* LGBTQ+ people to come out. But coming out is still not safe for everyone. Unfortunately, Christianity remains disproportionately responsible for that lack of safety. But that's not what this sermon is about. Two Sundays ago, The New York Times ran an article titled, “How Are There Only Three Lesbian Bars in New York City?” I thought that was a great question. On one hand, it's probably a good sign that LGBTQ+ people are so accepted lesbian bars aren't needed like they used to be. But on the other, it's hard not to experience their demise as a loss. That points to what this sermon *is* about, and that's *identity*. Coming out in Seattle allowed me to develop an incredibly strong sense of identity as a lesbian woman, an amazingly strong sense of support for that identity, and the desire to use that identity to help others.

I don't feel the power of that identity as strongly now as I used to, and sometimes I miss that. Perhaps ironically, this Christian misses it especially when Christians are being jerks about LGBTQ+ people. But the thing is, it's entirely possible that *those* Christians who *are* being jerks feel a stronger sense of Christian identity than those of us who are *not* being jerks. They have constructed a narrative for themselves that paints themselves as the marginalized minority. We might not agree with that narrative, from historical, sociological, or biblical perspectives. But I don't think we can argue with the power of that narrative to unite and to galvanize.

That binding together of the marginalized religious minority is actually a theme throughout the Bible, in scriptures old and new. You can find it in all four gospels, but most it's most obvious in the Gospel of John. Today we began a three-Sunday run of readings from John in which that theme rings loud. Today it came through one of the "I am" statements that John has Jesus say. Last week we heard "I am the good Shepherd." Today it's "I am the true vine." Rather than sheep, the disciples here are branches. Here, then, Jesus and disciples are one organism tended to by God. There is a synergistic mutual abiding that will yield "much fruit."

I want to take a look at the book, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. I've referenced these authors before, but I want to explain anyway. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh wrote a set of commentaries on the New Testament from a social-science perspective. They argue that you can't understand the scriptures unless you understand the societies of the people for which those scriptures were written. Now, it's generally recognized that the Gospel of John is very different from the other three canonical gospels. But these two scholars have some particular ways of looking at those differences. One example is this: they say that John features an "antisociety" of disciples who use an "antilanguage." For those terms, they use these definitions from another scholar: "'Antilanguage' is the language of an 'antisociety,' that is, a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance ...."<sup>5</sup> They describe John gospel as a "resocializing story."<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on this particular section of the Gospel of John, the authors include a section titled "In-group and Out-group." I want to read for you a part of it.

Readers of the Synoptic Gospels are familiar with the phenomenon of Jesus giving special information to insiders that is unavailable to outsiders (Mark 4:11-12; Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10). Equally familiar is the insistence that the world is divided into two groups, those with us and those against us (Luke 11:23). What is true in the Synoptics is even more emphatic in the Gospel of John, as one would expect of an antisociety. Sharp lines are drawn between insiders and outsiders.

These attitudes are indicative of a fundamental Mediterranean perspective. One of the basic and abiding social distinctions made among first-century Mediterraneans was that between in-group and out-group persons. A person's in-group generally consisted of one's household, extended family, and fiends. Yet the boundaries of an in-group were fluid; in-groups could and did change, at times expanding, at others contracting.<sup>7</sup>

In all the gospels we hear Jesus tell the disciples to leave their families and commit themselves to this new group of what he calls “friends.” In other words, they must leave one in-group in order to occupy a different in-group. In-group and out-group behavior was distinctly proscribed in first-century Palestine; it’s not something we can completely relate to today. But it might still be helpful to draw a dotted line from there to Andrew Solomon’s idea of vertical and horizontal identities. Each of those disciples had to leave the in-group that they inherited—a vertical identity—in order to join the out-group to which Jesus called them—a horizontal identity. This out-group becomes their new in-group, the energizing center for their relationships and their allegiances

Solomon notes that religion is often a vertical identity. I would argue that, in this place at this time, it’s actually more of a horizontal identity. How many parents in New England today really expect their children to follow in their church footsteps? We may hope for it, we welcome it if it comes, but we don’t expect it. But maybe that’s okay. In fact, in the building of a more progressive Christianity, maybe it’s helpful to think about Christianity a horizontal identity, as something recognized and chosen, and therefore as the source and object of passion. I wonder whether that idea has some usefulness as we think about what it means to be church in our increasingly secular age.

Mostly I hope that you will think about all this for yourself. What are your various identities? Which ones do you feel most invested in and passionate about? How does all that relate to your Christianity and your expression of your Christianity?

I want to add one point, related to where thinking about all this led me. The truth is, I’m completely over the shame I used to carry about being queer. But I’m sad to report that I realized that I still carry some shame about being a religious and practicing Christian. I expect I will carry that kernel of shame as long as the vast majority of Christians are anti-queer, though I do hope to peck away at that shame. Maybe it would help to be more intentional about claiming my horizontal identity as a passionately progressive Christian, and as a member of an in-group of other passionately progressive Christians. Now, that doesn’t mean we turn our backs on the realities of world, or that we deride those who are different from us. It means that we are branches who abide together in relationship to the true vine who is Christ. Abiding in one another, *every day we live* God’s promise of salvation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon offers a good overview of his work in this book in his 2013 TedMed presentation, “How does an illness become an identity?,” available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=jw6LGEpb7OQ> (accessed May 2, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Far from the Tree*, directed by Rachel Dretzin (2017, Ark Media/IFC Films).

<sup>4</sup> This clip of Andrew Solomon is in the trailer for the film, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=v\\_1bVhenzZ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=v_1bVhenzZ0) (accessed May 2, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Michael A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Baltimore: University Park, 1978, 171, as quoted in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, 11-14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 238.