

“Who Is God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 7, 2026

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 36:7-10

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

1 John 4:7-12

*A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our
Neighbors, and Ourselves – Week One*

God is love. God loves as the sun shines. Love expresses who God is.

Today's passage from 1 John contains some of the most profound and moving teachings on love in the New Testament. The depth and power of these three words – “God is love” – are often lost on us because of the contradicting ideas of love that are all around us. When we love a pair of jeans, or a favorite flavor of coffee creamer, we essentially make idols out of love and equate all love with God.

To know God is to know something about God's character. That “God is love” means that everything God does emanates from God's own loving nature. Love, while not an exhaustive description of God, is a defining characteristic. People can be described as loving, or loveable, but only God can be equated with love.

1 John, however, speaks of love in a specific, distinctly Christian way. Love is not God, but God is love, meaning that believers are to understand love according to God's character and on God's terms. Those who know God show God through their love for others. That divine love is manifested most perfectly through the love of God in Christ is a reality that God desires us to know, to inhabit, and to share.

God's love is not an abstract concept, but passion expressed in action. God made love present and real by sending Jesus to live among us and die for us. God continues to show us love through Christ's life-giving presence among us – including in the church. And, if ever we should question whether God loves us, the gift of the Holy Spirit confirmed it once more: we are God's beloved. God's love is a truth as reliable as the ground we walk on and the air we breathe.

This sermon series, *A Curriculum of Love*, offers us an opportunity to reflect on our understanding of and relationship with God and how we live out love for God, for ourselves, and for others. Each week, there will be questions to ponder or discuss – sometimes we will do this in worship, other times they will be left for you to consider on your own. Additionally, there will be one weekly spiritual practice for you to try at home in an effort to deepen relationships and better live out the love for which we are created and called.

One of the suggested questions for reflection/discussion this week is, “When you think of God, what image comes to mind?” For me, it is the father in the Parable of the Prodigal. Maybe this is because my own identity is so deeply rooted in being a father, and acting in fatherly ways, or – in some cases – having had the privilege of serving as a father-figure for others. This image that sticks in my mind is of the God the Father acting with unconditional love for his child, running to welcome the prodigal home, and showing absolutely no hesitation to embrace the son upon his return.

The follow-up to this question is, “Has your image of God changed over your lifetime?” And the answer here is definitely, yes. I grew up in a church in which – though Presbyterian in name and filled with many caring members – the message proclaimed from the pulpit was of a God that deserved and needed to be feared. And I grew up in a home where my own father – though I knew he loved his family – was sometimes filled with anger and took it out on those around him. While he was later diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, when I was a child and then a teenager, this meant that we sometimes walked on eggshells and protect one another from his occasional fits of rage.

The series author suggests another image for God; that – again, lending from the parables of Jesus – God may be like buried treasure in a field for which you would be willing to pay a great price to purchase. “There is only one reason I can think of,” she writes, “why we do not truly and wholeheartedly love God with our entire being: we haven’t actually encountered God. Anyone who truly encounters God cannot help but fall in love.”¹

Some of the messages that come to us from pulpits, as well as in the culture, can make God seem like the kind of Being you’d rather not encounter, that don’t want

¹ SiriAnn Stroman, “A Curriculum of Love”

to get any closer to: a God who judges our every thought, feeling, and behavior; who favors some above others; who is violent, jealous, capricious, and vindictive. A good deal of religious trauma is caused by this particular image of God. If Christians are loving and worshipping God to avoid ending up in hell, that's not a great invitation. A lot of people have been harmed, turned off by, or opted out of organized religion for this very reason.

But when we truly encounter the God of love during worship and in community, through the scriptures and spiritual practices, then our image of God can change. We can begin to see, or to remember, that God is love; and that, therefore, we are God's beloved. As God is the treasure in the field for which we would offer all we have, so God already has through Jesus Christ. God loves us unconditionally, without strings attached. It is a gift without price that we are free to encounter and receive.

Christian writer Judith Jones puts it this way:

*God's love does not depend on our initiative or on our worthiness. We don't have to reach out to God or even believe in God in order to be loved. We don't have to clean up our act before God can love us. We don't have to measure up to some standard in order to be lovable. No, God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not. And honestly, who could ever deserve such amazing, immeasurable love?*²

Thus, according to I John, God's love is perfected in us when we love others. God's love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. Jesus ignored the limits that religious communities imposed. He ate and talked with people whom the religious leaders had rejected as heretics, as sinful, as filthy and despicable. He touched people who were considered untouchable and welcomed people whom everyone else had kicked out. His harshest words were reserved not for the impure, but for unloving, self-righteous people who saw some of God's children as beneath their attention and certainly as unworthy of their love. If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then our love for others must extend to every single, living human being.

Jesus embodied and revealed a God who truly sees and values us. When it seems as if the world judges, condemns, and attacks us, Jesus forgives, heals, and sets us free. When Jesus did at times speak sharply, it was directed at religious leaders and

² Judith Jones from *WorkingPreacher.com*

those in power, as a wake-up call to take their responsibilities seriously. To those who were already hurting, Jesus offered release.

So, this is a time – as we work through this *Curriculum of Love* – to be honest about what kind of God we have; maybe, to do some repair work with the Source of all creation and being; because love does not grow in the shadow of fear. We are not to blame for the perceptions of God we have received from the world, from church, or from our families; but the truth is, we are the only ones who can shift that perception.

Even if what we learned was mostly positive, it was not in its fullness. How could it be? We can only understand God to the level that we have understanding ourselves, and – as I John reminds us – we, as humans, have never seen God; the divine is, and always will be to some degree, a mystery. Nevertheless, we all have room to grow.

And so, we begin this week with this grand question, *Who Is God?* and we ponder what, maybe, has gotten in the way of our love for God; what prevents us from experiencing the living God; and what could help us fully encounter and completely fall in love with God?

Let us pray:

God of never-ending love, our Source and our End, you watch over us as a Mother to her child, you run to meet us like a Father welcoming the prodigal home. Heal our hearts and minds of anything that keeps us from you, including our own fear. In the name of Jesus, who bridges us to you, Amen.