

“Loving Your True Self”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 5, 2026

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

II Corinthians 4:16—5:7

This past Friday, on July 3, the 227th of what are now biennial General Assembly meetings of the Presbyterian Church (USA), came to a close. This year’s gathering, held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, included over 600 voting delegates and other representatives of the church who worked on fourteen committees – in areas ranging from Finance to Preparation for Ministry to World Mission to Public Policy – to craft, propose, debate and eventually vote on resolutions and amendments to our denomination’s by-laws and constitution. Some of the needed changes are painful to contemplate and, subsequently, debate can get quite contentious.

Of course, having been a delegate to the last General Assembly, in 2024, I realize not everything that goes on is so detail and head focused. It is also incredibly heartwarming to meet and connect with people from all corners of this country and beyond, painful to acknowledge past and present sins of the church that have done so much harm, encouraging to hear shared stories of innovation, collaboration, and positive innovation, and profoundly moving to worship and sing as a united body, led by many gifted musicians and preachers.

This year’s closing sermon was offered by Rev. Laura Mariko Cheifetz who works in the Presbytery of San Francisco. A reporter from the Presbyterian News Service wrote this:

Amid all of this conflict, Cheifetz stepped up to bring a message of hope and healing. With her trademark snark, she acknowledged the challenge of the work, earning knowing laughter when she said her presence in such a significant pulpit as a queer biracial woman would make “generations of the white heteropatriarchy spin in their graves and squirm in their seats.”

The sermon boldly proclaimed the transformative power of a faith that we do not simply have, but which “has us.” However, with a frankness for which she is well known, Cheifetz pulled no punches in calling out the PC(USA)’s past and present harms, naming the “audacity” of believing we could be agents of healing when we’ve participated in so much harm.

Her message clearly struck a chord with those in the room.

“Quoting Scripture while mistreating your employees will not make you righteous,” she said. “Declaring oneself agents of a true faith while committing spiritual violence against your siblings will not make you holy. Spirituality ... is not about what goes on inside one’s heart. It is also what one actually does out there in the world.”¹

I love her observation about faith, that it is not something that we simply have, but which, also, *has us*. This morning’s scripture reading ends with the bold proclamation that, “we walk by faith, and not by sight.” This is not because we have individually or collectively amassed such a vast reserve of faith that we no longer need sight. It is, instead, because our eyes – and all our other human faculties and abilities, as powerful as they may be – are sometimes not enough. We need the love and grace of God to guide us on our way.

For the first four weeks of our *Curriculum of Love* summer series, we have focused on Loving God: talking about how the way God loves us is unconditional, how we can grow our trust in and deepen our connection with God, and how Jesus provides the example of all the means and habits by which we are meant to love God.

We turn now to the second of the three parts of the Greatest Commandment, that God calls us to love ourselves. In addition to love for God and our neighbors, Jesus confirms that we must also cherish and care for ourselves. This idea that we should love ourselves makes some people uncomfortable, even angry. Often people wrongly assume that loving yourself “too much” is what can make you self-centered and narcissistic. We fail to understand that the vast majority of humans, including narcissists, suffer – in some way or another – from a lack of self-love. Many – and maybe almost all – of the problems in the world are created because deep down, we are afraid that we are unlovable and unworthy.

Writing to the Christians in Corinth, the Apostle Paul compares our outer selves – things like physical measurement and characteristics, skin tone, and hair color (or lack thereof); our bodies, what we look like to others and ourselves – with a tent, a temporary dwelling place. During much of the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord was found within a tent, or tabernacle, that the Israelites would take with them when they traveled. While the outside matters – multiple chapters in Leviticus and Numbers are devoted to describing its proper dimensions and adornments – what is found

¹ Layton Williams Burke, *Presbyterian News Service*

within, on the inside of the tent, is most holy. Earlier, Paul had offered another comparison, that we are like clay pots – earthen vessels – that may have cracks or flaws on the outside, but it is what the vessel holds that is most important.

Series author Siri Stromann calls this interior, true part of ourselves our *Child of God Self*. “The path to discipleship,” she says, “is to find the True Self inside, the Child of God Self, the one holding the memory of God, Love, Compassion, Courage, Collaboration, Curiosity, Creativity, and Peace. This is what we seek when we say we are trying to find our Selves. We have a compass inside that aches to reunite with the Living God...When we find this Beloved part of us, we generate a true love that not only sustains us, but is capable of loving others more unconditionally.”²

I believe this is what Rev. Cheifetz was trying to tell the attendees of the General Assembly in her closing sermon. In order to practice our faith – to serve the world around us and love others more unconditionally – we need to discover and cultivate a love for the interior, true, beloved, Child of God Self. We may love or not really like certain parts of our exterior selves – the way we look, our eloquence in speaking, the fitness or frailty of our bodies – but those are only the tent, the clay pot. Likewise, if we treat other people according to their exterior characteristics, it is important to remember that each and every person also has an interior, true Child of God Self that was wonderfully made and beloved by the Creator.

The Scriptures begin – as we know – at the beginning; with two accounts of the creation of the world and all that inhabits it. In the first creation story of Genesis, chapter 1, God makes human beings “in” or “as” God’s own image. This does not mean that we look anything like God, but what is within us holds the capacity for love, compassion, courage, collaboration and so much more. And, as the image bearers of God, human beings are called by God, in Genesis 1, to be faithful stewards of the earth and cultivate good relationships among all of creation, including one another.

In Genesis 2, the scriptures offer us another creation account. Here, humans are fashioned from the earth’s clay and God breathes life into them. That breath – or Spirit – provides us with identity and purpose. God makes space for human agency by giving us tasks to do; the first in Genesis 2 is to name the other animals. God also makes us partners by creating us as male and female. Thus, the image of God extends to all humans; regardless of gender, race, marital status, or economic situation. We are

² Rev. Siri Stromann, *A Curriculum of Love*

intended to be in relationship with each other as partners in a shared purpose of good stewardship and building community; not to march around Washington, DC with our faces covered and a delusional narrative that ours who we are represents a superior image of God than that of anyone else. Things like racism and sexism, discrimination and exploitation are anathemas to our divinely created Child of God selves.

Because, as Paul reminds the people of the Christian community in Corinth, the tents that we live in – the ways we appear on the outside to ourselves and each other – are merely temporary shells. Our eyes – whether they are looking in a mirror or upon others around us – often deceive us. Therefore, we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. This includes the faith that we develop through our church traditions and spiritual practices – the faith that we have – as well as the faith that *has us*, that comes from being created in the image of God and which holds the capacity for love, creativity, curiosity, compassion, and peace.

Let us pray: *Dear God, you see my Child of God Self underneath all my defenses, hurts, scars, and fears. Help me to love myself as you love me, so that I can be all that you know I can be, in Jesus' name. Amen.*