

Presbytery Gathering • May 14, 2026

“Holy Belonging” Rev. Carol DeV Vaughan

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
²When you pass through the waters, I will be
with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not
overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be
burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴Because you are precious in my sight
and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the
earth—
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

John 15:12-17

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants^[a] any longer, because the servant^[b] does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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Let me start with a question: Why are you here today? And you will look at me with a kind of skepticism or incredulity and say, “Well, this is where the Presbytery Gathering is.” “This is where someone on the Gathering Planning Team decided we would meet.” Of course, an obvious answer.

But what is it that has brought people from Alton and St Charles, from Union and Ste Genevieve? Folks from close to Farmington are saying “yay, we don’t have to drive into St Louis.” While others are saying, “Where is Farmington, and how long will it take me to get there from Jerseyville or Sikeston? And why can’t I just stay home and join by Zoom? I don’t know most of those people anyway.” Exactly!

Jesus said: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Maybe that’s our clue. We have come together through a connection we call PCUSA and the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy.

Ten years ago, 2016, I volunteered to organize the Presbytery’s hosting of the 2018 General Assembly to be held in St. Louis. It was one of those weird or unexpected moments when you open your mouth and then think, “what have I done?”

I was attending a meeting of the Mission Council (what we now call Vision Team) as a representative of COM. The Presbytery Leader reminded the Council that we were to host GA in 2018 and that meant we needed a local arrangements committee, and to start that we needed a volunteer to organize it. Well, there was a very long uncomfortable silence - what seemed like forever. Finally, I raised my hand and said, “I’ll do it.” To cheers and sighs of relief around the table.

Little did I know what a powerful and enriching process it would be for me and for the whole Presbytery. There were some similarities with the state in which we find ourselves today. We had a Presbytery Leader who was not the right person for the job, and she ended up leaving before GA came around. One of her main concerns was financial; a hosting Presbytery has to raise the money for the hosting expenses. But, in fact, we rallied; more than enough money was raised; almost all of our congregations participated; many people from all areas of the Presbytery volunteered to be part of the various tasks. It was a unifying event for all of us.

We came together, worked together for a common purpose. When there were differences of opinion or obstacles – which of course there were – we talked it out and found solutions.

Much of the Assembly and how things were to be done were pretty firmly determined above our pay grade, but we found ways to innovate – the Friday night party before the official opening of the Assembly. Who will ever forget Third Church’s music that had everyone there stomping their feet and rattling the rafters! Advocating for splitting the Assembly assistant job into two part-time jobs – which allowed two young clergywomen with children to share it.

Hosting GA was a gift to this Presbytery. We discovered how capable we are; people from all regions of the Presbytery came together, and people who might never have known each other became friends united in mission and service.

The two readings today express what I think of as the undergirding of our experience of that event and what gives us hope and promise for the future.

Because above all else, to know ourselves loved by God is our strength. The God who said to those exiles who were doubting themselves as well as their God, “I formed you as a people; you are mine and I love you.”

Then Jesus who said, “You are my friends, I chose you, I appointed you to go and bear fruit. Love one another as I have loved you.”

As a child I experienced – actually still experience - what I think many people are longing for today – to feel accepted and loved, to belong. It may be hard for some of you who know me to accept, but as a child I was shy. I was without social skills, so I hid in books. But I found a community at church. I was accepted. I was given opportunities to connect and to grow. And that grounding in a hometown church community gave me courage to find a church community as I moved away to college and then through more than 20 years as part of an Army family.

I have always been Presbyterian, so whenever possible we found a local Presbyterian church. But sometimes in a military chapel where one was either Protestant or Roman Catholic.

No church community is perfect. Too often it can seem exclusive and judgmental. Too often folks observe the fatal phrase “We’ve always done it this way.” Or “We’d rather die than change.” And believe me, new people cause change.

The Presbytery isn’t perfect either, because the Presbytery is us. And we are burdened and restricted by our need to preserve the institution. Currently we are caught in the dilemma of a messy leadership change and serious financial stress. But think back to GA 2018. We spent two years working together, getting to know one another, learning our strengths and gaining new skills, building connections and community.

Then along came the pandemic. It was a period of such isolation as we had never known. We tried to maintain our communities. We learned how to Zoom and live stream. But it’s not the same, and we are still trying to recover. We are again learning that we need one another.

Friends, we all benefit from hearing and believing that God has called us by name, has claimed us as God’s own. “I am your God; you are precious in my sight, and I love you. I created you for my glory. Do not fear; I am with you.”

And Jesus calls us friends. Jesus has commanded us to be friends, to love one another, has appointed us to go and bear fruit. That does not happen in isolation. That happens through a holy belonging, through a holy community, through you being brave enough to go up to a person here whom you do not know and getting to know them. Admitting that you need to know them and acknowledging you are all part of this holy community. God is always with us, even in the isolation; but God is most richly in the connections and community.