

## Sermon—Closing Worship

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Grace to you and peace from God our father and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

The summer I was about ten years old, “Fruit of the Spirit” was the theme for the annual “Vacation Bible School” at my home congregation. There was even a cute theme song, and since I don’t remember the whole thing, I won’t sing it for you. For the closing worship service at the end of that week, my class decided to put on a skit wearing T-shirts with each fruit listed. I think I got to be “Gentleness.” What I do remember clearly is that no one in my class wanted to wear the shirt that said “SELF-CONTROL.”

We were only ten or eleven, but we already knew that “self-control” was something we all secretly wanted to avoid. Self-control was not as “cool” as love, joy, and peace. To describe someone as being “self-controlled” is not complement we normal hear. And honestly I never pray for God to make me more self-controlled. Self-control seems to be freedom’s opposite, especially if Christ makes me “free.” Why do I need to control my SELF? I like to think that my SELF tends to be pretty decent and generally steers me right, at least under the right circumstances. But as Paul very well knew, when we think that way we could not be more wrong.

The truth is, when I let my SELF guide my day to day life, I am not very loving, joy-filled, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, or particularly faithful. When my SELF is at the lead, I suddenly find myself marching in the wrong kind of parade, to the tunes of buying more stuff, acting unkindly, being afraid of my neighbor, and generally being too concerned about myself.

These devious tunes lead us into captivity while disguised as “freedom.” We cry to God, “You’re not the boss of me,” as a young child might say in my home country, but we find that our selves have led us down a road that leaves us vulnerable to broken relationships, bad choices, suffering and shame. We are in bondage and cannot free ourselves. We are captive, like the legend of the Pied Piper from the old European folk tale—captive in a parade that marches us toward death in body, mind, and spirit.

There IS another tune calling us, another parade that we are invited to, another parade where we belong and find our home. Jesus frees us from the parade of death, to be part of his parade of **life**. Not so that my SELF can be king—Jesus frees me FROM my SELF. I no longer belong to my Self, limited by my flaws, imperfections, blind spots and fears. I no longer belong to the WORLD who would have me believe that I am not enough, and that certain types of people are not enough. I belong to Christ, and YOU belong to Christ, and together, we get to march in the parade led by the Holy Spirit.

And THIS is a parade that is going places—the destination or result (or fruit if you will) being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, AND self-control. But this is not a purely inward journey, in order to become extra-holy super-men and super-women. THIS parade leads us OUT into the world, out to our neighbors, where the fruits of our freedom in Christ are given away to others, not hoarded or stored up for our own benefit. Just like we can’t grow this fruit by ourselves without being connected to the “Jesus Parade,” we don’t get to keep the fruit that we grow in the Spirit.

We have come to the end of our time together, uplifted and encouraged by our community and friendship. But we will soon be coming down from the mountaintop, leaving this place and going back

out in the world. The glow of these exciting and inspirational days will fade, and we will go back to our regular daily realities, to face living in our divided and hurting world.

It still be hard to hear the marching tune of the “Jesus parade,” even after an experience such as this. There will be times where these uplifting hours will seem like a dream. Was I really there, with all these amazing Lutherans gathered from all corners of the globe, and I got to sing with them, talk with them, pray with them, and receive the body and blood of Christ with them? It seems too good to have been real. I must have spent those few days in what feels like heaven!

A great memory, will-power of steel, and excellent self-control aren’t going to get this parade where it needs to go. During one of the weekly Bible studies I attended with other Lutheran pastors, one of us joked that the response “I will and I asked God to help me,” we say when we install pastors and lay leaders should be instead “I won’t, and I ask God to help me.” As Paul says, the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. But thank God WE are not steering the parade on our own. Guided by the Spirit, we are marching exactly where we are needed, straight into a world that is suffering and in pain. We are marching toward into a future we can’t clearly see yet but includes the healing of the nations, the reconciling of differences, the inclusion of the excluded, and the freedom of those who have so long been in bondage, including ourselves. As we separate, we will march back to our home countries and hometowns, but together we will all be marching in the light of God.

To quote the man who began the reformation 500 years ago, “This is most certainly true.” Thanks be to God. AMEN.