

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
15 February 2026

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Savoring Self-Control: The Fruit that Frees Us to Find God”***

Fourth Sermon in *Cultivating the Fruit of Self-Control*  
Part of *Abide & Grow: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

*Isaiah 55:8-9; Philippians 4:11-13; Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 4:8-9*

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

It’s compelling to watch athletes at the top of their game funnel their years of training into one moment when it matters most. Olympic athletes feel like a special breed of people, don’t they? While the rest of us are just trying to add a few more steps to our step count each day or drink more sips of water than soda or eat two bites of dessert instead of twenty, Olympic athletes are focused, disciplined and show singular commitment to their sport—what some might call self-control. Everything is measured, calculated, accounted for.

Olympic athletes control their diet, every ounce of protein and carb that goes into their body pre-game and post-game. They control their training schedules, their rest and recovery. They control their pre-game music and meditation rituals. Someone controls the fabric on their uniforms, designing it for peak

performance. The people who run the Olympic games work hard to control the environment in which the athletes compete. Smoothing over the ice rink after every skater. Regulating the width, length, style of bobsleds. Calculating turns on downhill runs to the precise inch balancing challenge with safety.

*Everything* is controlled; optimized; trained for; prepared for.

But. Much like life, there is so much an Olympic athlete *cannot* control. The weather. The wind speed. The sounds in the audience or arena. The judges subjectivity. They cannot control how well their competitors do. Winning gold requires an athlete to have *their* best day, and while their competitors have their less-than-best day. And athletes in team sports can’t control how well their team members do.

In other words, as much as discipline and self-control can give the illusion of a clear, pre-ordained or expected winner, every Olympic athlete knows, it's *anybody's* game. And—*anything* can happen. One perfect landing and boom the medal is theirs. One misstep or miscalculation, and their dreams come crashing down.

Sometimes even when an athlete knows what they need to control, like the trajectory of a turn on a downhill ski race, they can still lose control. The skier is off on the turn by five inches, their arm gets caught in the gate, they cannot recover in the air. They suffer a catastrophic fall.

This is, of course, exactly what happened to Lindsey Vonn last week, one of the most decorated alpine skiers of all time. Though she was competing with a torn ACL, her knee was strong; she had completed two training runs without issue, including posting the third-fastest time in the second training run. And yet still, despite all the times before, this time, she was off by five

inches. And five inches at 70-80 miles an hour, is everything. Commenting on the turn and gate of Vonn's crash, Norwegian skier Kaja Vickhoff Lie said: "*That's how it is with the Olympics, you really want to be on the [edge of the] limit and she was a little bit over the [edge].*"<sup>1</sup> At that point, you no longer have control.

This is a lesson for us all, right?

If an *Olympic athlete*—who is hyper-obsessed with control and preparation—can control so much in their sport and their training and yet still fall short in the moment because of a factor beyond their control or within it, then what in the world are *we* doing trying to control everything about our spiritual lives or the world around us? What makes us think we can control other people's behaviors or decisions? We are certainly not going to 'win our way into heaven' or 'achieve our way into world peace' right?

Faith is not an Olympic sport we train for; it is a way of being in the world we relax into; it is a gift we receive and accept, not a disposition we earn.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Dampf, "Lindsey Vonn's fall explained: A reverse banked section and an unfortunate bump," *ABC News Sports* (8 Feb. 2026), accessed on Feb. 15, 2026 at

<https://abcnews.com/Sports/wireStory/lindsey-vonns-fall-explained-reverse-banked-section-unfortunate-129985009>.

Spiritually speaking, as a Fruit of the Spirit, Self-Control is not something we get better at by becoming more controlled or more disciplined, or by working harder, or squeezing our eyes a bit tighter as we pray as if we are trying to pray our way into better belief or deeper devotion.

It just doesn't work that way. In fact, the harder we try to control how well we are "doing faith right," the further we are from the freedom that God so desires for us, and designed us for.

It may be counterintuitive, but self-control as gift from the living Spirit of God is actually not about more focus on the "self," nor is it about having more "control." It is about "losing ourselves" on purpose, and loosening our grip on what we try to control so that we can enjoy the process of living life itself, even with the suffering and the pain and the risks.

Posting on Instagram from the hospital this week, Lindsey Vonn said: *"Similar to ski racing, we take risks in life. We dream. We love. We jump. And sometimes we fall. Sometimes our hearts are broken.*

*Sometimes we don't achieve the dreams we know we could have. But that is also the beauty of life...I tried, I dreamt. I jumped. I hope if you take away anything from my journey it's that you all have the courage to dare greatly. Life is too short not to take chances on yourself..."<sup>2</sup>*

For all the discipline and commitment it takes to be an Olympic athlete, Vonn is speaking here about 'letting go.' About not holding so tightly that we just focus on self-preservation or perfection. She is talking about truly living. And in a world where fear and anxiety and trauma and trouble want to steal our lives and suffocate our souls, sometimes the best control we can exercise is loosening our grip on the "illusion" of control itself.

Our egos and our human need to somehow feel like we are 'in control' of our lives, drives so much of our behavior and our anxiety, and it enhances so much of our suffering. Life is already hard enough as it is, that we don't need to add more to the mix by thinking we have more control than we do.

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Armour, "Lindsey Vonn reveals devastating injury update after Olympics crash," *USA Today* (9 Feb. 2026), accessed on Feb.15, 2026 at

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2026/02/09/lindsey-vonn-injury-update-complex-tibia-fracture-surgery-2026-winter-olympics/88596970007/>.

This is not to say that our actions do not matter, far from it. Our actions matter greatly. But what the Fruit of the Spirit teach us is that our actions so often begin with our mindset and the orientation of our heart. Not always, but many times. So working on our minds, matters. Reframing our perspective makes a difference. Re-orienting our vision is everything.

If you have lost a child or had cancer or been fired from your job or experienced a betrayal or any other kind of “crisis moment,” you know that life will teach us, again and again, that there is SO MUCH we do not have control over. And when things spiral out of control, so often we cope by trying to control something else. We humans have a real need to focus on self and ego and try to be in control of something when everything else is out of control. Trust me, I get it.

Last year I embarked on what would end up being a year-long project of decluttering every single area of our house, from the silverware drawer to the shoe rack, to our winter gloves and coats, to my bookshelves, to our linen closet. Little by little, I de-cluttered, downsized, and cleaned.

And while it felt awesome as one who often puts off projects like that to achieve such a big accomplishment—and our house is all the better for it—I have no illusions about why I was decluttering and cleaning. As the world and our nation’s leadership felt more and more out of control to me, decluttering and cleaning out the sock drawer felt good as something I could control and see the outcome of. It was a distraction, a coping mechanism like any other. Some addictive behaviors can look good on the outside and maybe look ‘healthier’ than others, but they are all driven by the same thing: our need to feel like we are in control of something, *anything*.

But the truth is, control will always reveal itself to be an illusion. All the great philosophies, religions, and psychologies reveal this. And they reveal that, in the end, we cannot control our circumstances, only our response to them, and our perspectives about them.

Viktor Emil Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, philosopher, and Holocaust

survivor,<sup>3</sup> wrote in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

*“The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.”*

*“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”*

*[Because] “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>*

This is a man who knew extreme physical suffering and existential crisis, and survived that by focusing on his mindset which was the only agency he had...and the only true spiritual freedom any of us has.

Our Christian tradition is full of spiritual metaphors and symbols about letting go of our ego and need to control—especially in the midst of suffering—and giving ourselves to God.

When we are baptized, we “**die to self and are raised to walk in newness of life.**” We die to the ways of the world and are raised to walk in newness of life, to be Salt that melts the ICE of the world; to be Light that shines into the shadows of corruption.

When Jesus is facing his own death, terrified, anxious, afraid, he recenters himself in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, “**Not my will, but thy will be done,**” decentering his attachment to his own desires, re-centering on God.

When Jesus is crucified by state sanctioned violence on the cross, he does not fight back physically. He does not hold on tighter to his life at the moment he is losing it. “He lets go and lets God,” in the truest sense of that statement. He lets go not as resignation, but as resistance to the powers of his day that would think they had ‘won.’ The last thing he says on the cross as he dies is, “**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.**” My spirit is not captive to the hands of Rome, my spirit belongs to you, O God. In that moment, Jesus gives himself fully to God; he lets go.

<sup>3</sup> Information accessed on February 15, 2026 at [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2782.Viktor\\_E\\_Frankl](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2782.Viktor_E_Frankl).

<sup>4</sup> Quotes accessed on February 15, 2026 at [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2782.Viktor\\_E\\_Frankl](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2782.Viktor_E_Frankl).

This practice of ‘letting go’ of our obsession with control and giving ourselves over to God is summed up in the serenity prayer attributed to twentieth century theologian Reinhold Neibuhr, which has become a cornerstone of AA programs:

*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot  
change;  
courage to change the things I  
can;  
and wisdom to know the  
difference.*<sup>5</sup>

Why is it so hard for us to “know the difference”? Why is something that should be easy or freeing like “letting go” so difficult?

It’s hard because we tend to live from our own human experience and limited perspectives. We can only see what we can see. And with limited vision our anxiety rises because we aren’t working with all the information we need to not be anxious. But what if there was a bigger vision?

Hear this good news: **Just because we are not *in* control,**

**that doesn’t mean we have to feel *out* of control.** The opposite of gripping so tightly to what we think we can control is not just letting go so that we can be spun and whipped around in the vortex of the world’s tornado and trauma. The opposite of freeing our grip on controlling our lives, is finding God in all lives, all circumstances, all situations.

Remember, self-control is not about more control of anything, including self. Self-control, spiritually speaking, is about *letting God* be in control. That’s it. **Letting go and letting God.** Is it cliché? Yes. Is it Truth? Yes.

The less we focus on self-preservation and ego-protection, the less control we seek to exercise over our lives and our world, the freer we are to find God and be found by God.

This is a lifelong spiritual journey: to more and more each day, learn to *let go*. Not so that we are a door mat and just let “anything go” in terms of the suffering in our world...but we *let go* so that we can actually hang on to what matters—to

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<sup>5</sup> Accessed on February 15, 2026 at <https://www.beliefnet.com/prayers/protestant/addiction/serenity-prayer.aspx>.

God, to neighbor, to community, to love, and to make room for the Fruit of the Spirit that are already living inside of us!

I certainly don't understand every aspect of this "letting go" but I know enough to know that it has to do with the Truth that somehow, in some way, God is holding all of this. All of it. The world. The pain. The trauma. The tragedy. The wonder. The majesty. The mundane. You. Me. Our families. Our enemies. Our questions, our doubts, our anxieties. Our greatest goods and successes. Our biggest failings and fears. **All of it.**

Can we trust that? Can we believe it to be true?

It's asking a lot, I realize. It's okay if you can't. I'm not sure I can most days. But I know that my own spiritual freedom will come when we can trust our Creator and our spiritual tradition which shows us a long trajectory of journeying on the road to liberation, healing, and wholeness.

The theological foundation for this kind of utter dependence on God as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—God as our Everything—is all over our

Scripture, but we have four examples of it today. Our four, brief texts offer us a helpful framework to think about how self-control begins with a mindset that orients us to our truest identity which is connected to the very nature of God and the mind of Christ.

This framework is cyclical, not linear—providing many, and oft-repeated, entry points for us on our journey of growth and transformation.

Starting with Isaiah 55, we begin with an acknowledgement of our differentiation from God. *"My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways not your ways."*

God is speaking to a discouraged people in captivity whose future was uncertain and whose life was hard. These verses unfold God's path for moving God's people from their thirst and longings to fulfillment, peace, and joy.

God is reminding the people who are in captivity suffering that as they ruminate on their pain and predicament, they need to remember that how they are seeing their situation is not the full picture. It's just one piece of

the puzzle. There is a bigger sight to see. A bigger vision.

This reminder never gets old to me. Just to remember that there are some things I cannot explain or understand and that's okay. Maybe the point of my suffering or the world's suffering is not for me to understand why it's happening or even how to get rid of it, but rather to learn from it. To soften into it. To let it teach me. To, trust, even in the hardest moments, that I can say to God, "*Loving Creator, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" **It's not a giving up; it's a giving over.** An acknowledgement that I can't control this or do it myself; a cry or a plea for our dependence on God. God is God and we are not. And I think that will always be somewhat painful, for us. I mean, it sounds like good news: God is God and we are not. But our behavior and thoughts in our everyday lives reveals how painful this reality is. Think about it. Most of us kind of want to be God. We want to determine who gets love and who doesn't, who suffers and who doesn't, we want to say *I want my life to look THIS way, not THAT way.* And on and on it goes.

We want to be in control or to understand how the world works or to know the big reason behind all that the world is enduring or what we're going through. But there is a holy mystery, a holy otherness, that we must release ourselves too when we *say the reverse of Isaiah 55: "My ways are not God's ways; my thoughts are not God's thoughts."*

And that is good news for those of us who are anxious or who worry or who are grieved or pained. And it's even good news for those who are just sort of numb to the trauma of the world right now or ignoring it or apathetic. We certainly hope God's ways are beyond all of our haphazard coping mechanisms.

With this foundation of realizing our difference from God, we turn to Philippians 4:11-13, which is full of encouragement. It's a familiar verse, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" In terms of self-control, it's a recognition, yet again, that how we live and move and have our being in the world is not totally of our own agency, it is because of the Spirit of Christ living in us and moving in us.

And it's that spirit that allows the Apostle Paul say that he can be content in life with whatever he has. Whether he has plenty to eat or is hungry, he knows ultimately, he is okay. Now, this is not Paul saying, *"food doesn't matter, or it's okay if I'm hungry."* No, it's Paul saying that *"whether I have food to eat or not, that is not indicative of God's love for me or my love for God. My faith doesn't vacillate based on good or bad my life is in the moment... My ability to experience the peace of Christ comes not from external situations or circumstances, but from within..."*

The Apostle Paul is offering us deep encouragement in saying that Christ gives us the ability to be content, or as the Buddhists would say, to be detached from our external circumstances. Not in a "going hungry is okay" kind of way. But in a, "being hungry will not take away God's presence from me kind of way and God's presence is my contentment in the present moment."

Usually, it is people who know what having "plenty" is that struggle with this the most. We don't like it when our stomachs growl because we missed lunch. But the spiritual truth of this

text, as one Palestinian activist said, is that when a child in Gaza is starving and can still do artwork in the street and smile in the rubble of his crumbling home, he has found something of the preciousness of being alive in THIS moment, that the rest of us have yet to understand or experience.

Our contentment comes not from circumstances but from an understanding that we are held by a love that will never let us go, a love that knows suffering and death and has not been overcome by them! The love of Christ.

The gift of this text is that Paul shows us how our life experiences—whether great or not-so-great—can teach us lessons that build our confidence and awareness of how the strength of Christ within us really can give us all that we need. We can reframe; we can contextualize; we can find hope in hard times. It doesn't mean it's easy, but it is possible. People do it every day. And it leads us to our third text.

This text is the hardest of them all because Romans 12 gives us a challenge. To not be conformed to how the world is working before us, but to be

transformed by the renewing of our mind. Because it's only through this transformation that we'll be able to discern the will of God, aka or that which is good, acceptable, perfect. And 'perfect' by the way is not a 'perfectionist' kind of perfect. The Greek word is *teleios*, which means complete, or brought to completion or the end, something that has experienced the fullness of its life or lifecycle.

In other words, we discern God's will so that we can be fully ourselves, living our lives to fullness or completion. And we discern God's will by renewing our minds. This word 'renewing' in the Greek is *anakainōsis*, which means *renovation*, or a complete change for the better.

Think of it as renovating a part of your house. Renovations are not starting from scratch. They take what is there and build upon it; yes knocking some things down but often keeping what is working and just replacing what needs to be fixed, or what is broken.

This is how the renewing of our minds works. Keeping what's

working, and re-wiring or re-messaging what's not.

It's like the word repent, which is *metanoia* in the Greek which means a changing of one's mind, or, turning from one way of thinking to a completely new way of thinking. It reminds me of Trina Paulus' brilliant book, *Hope for the Flowers*:

One caterpillar is talking to another caterpillar trying to understand what's going to happen in the cocoon process.

"How does one become a butterfly?" she asked pensively.

"You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar.

"You mean to *die*?" [she] asked..

"Yes and No," he answered.

"What **looks like you** will die, but **what's really you** will still live. Life is changed not taken away."<sup>6</sup>

Father Richard Rohr says, "The word *change* normally refers to new beginnings. But transformation more

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<sup>6</sup> Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers*, (Paulist Press, New York, NY, 1972) pgs 70-75.

often *happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart—chaos—invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites, and sometimes forces, the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. Most of us would never go to new places in any other way...transformation is always a process of letting go, living in the confusing, shadowy space for a while..."<sup>7</sup> before new insight and new life and new perspective comes.

Rohr and the Apostle Paul challenge us to transform and renew our minds because this kind of mental transformation and mindset shift is an essential step in discernment and in **closing the gap between *our* way and *God's* way.**

We will never begin to understand or think like God or view the world through God's eyes or perspective until we have that mindset shift. Until we let go of our constant need to protect our ego and achieve more and our need to cling to the illusion of control.

This mindset shift helps us reach our *telos*—or our end, or completion; the will of God is for us to simply understand that our End is the same as our Beginning, or as Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "*God is both our origin and our destination.*"

When we can be self-controlled enough to "check our ego at the door," we can relax into God's thoughts and God's ways—the ways of love, and mystery, grace and hope—and we really do reach closer to that sense of completion in our own lives, and certainly in taking one step closer to the kin-dom of God.

And this leads us finally to Philippians 4:8-9—a verse with concrete action steps on how to go about this transformation of mind AND why it matters. How do we go about it renewing and repenting? It's not rocket science: we think about the things that are true, honorable and just, pure pleasing and commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. In other words, **we dwell on the Fruit of the Spirit:** Love, Peace, Goodness, Self-control, Faithfulness, Patience, Joy, Kindness, Gentleness. We give

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<sup>7</sup> Father Richard Rohr, "Richard Rohr on the Hard Work of Transformation," *Franciscan Spirit* (27 Aug. 2026), accessed on February 15, 2026 at

<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/richard-rohr-on-the-hard-work-of-transformation/>.

more thought to these things than to the traumas, troubles, anxieties, and fears flooding our hearts and world.

This is what we are doing this year: learning to use these Fruit of the Spirit as a way to renew our minds and see the world through the ‘mind of Christ.’

The Fruit of the Spirit are the closest we will come, I think, to merging our minds with God’s mind, our ways with God’s ways. And that’s because they are gifts that are already from the Spirit and are flowing within us and are available to us. We just have to loosen our grip on everything else to have room to receive them...create space in our crowded lives so they can breathe. The gifts of the Spirit that are already in us, ready to awaken, fly and be free...but are they are asleep or hidden by all the other ‘stuff’ in our lives, shoved to the side by our worries.

Our main work in ‘self-control’ is just to get out of our own way so that the Spirit can be free within us. To de-clutter our soul to reveal the gifts of God that are already there. The Fruit of the Spirit are not things for us to do, as much as gifts for us to

notice, accept, embrace, receive, and not obstruct.

When we do this kind of mindset shift and soul re-ordering...when we think differently in a way that centers our lives in God’s love and peace, and helps us trust and believe that God is God and we are not, then, what does Paul say? Paul says the God of peace will be WITH you. Just like Emmanuel, God with us, in the form of Jesus, the Spirit will be *with* us.

This idea of God’s peace living within us fully, as an indwelling presence brings us back full circle to the Isaiah text that God’s ways are not our ways, God’s minds not our mind. But that doesn’t mean God’s mind and God’s ways cannot merge and live inside of us! That’s the whole point of a transformed life. Of Christ living in me.

The Buddhist monks returned home yesterday on Valentine’s Day. Have you been following their journey?

Four months ago, on October 26, 2025, 19 Buddhist monks trekked quietly out of their temple in Texas with one goal in mind: to walk for peace.

Over 110 days, and 2,300 miles, they walked from Ft. Worth to Washington, D.C. on foot to promote national healing. Their journey captivated millions.

They faced peril along the way. One monk's leg was amputated after a car collision. Their dog, Aloka, had to have surgery following an injury. And over the last few weeks of their walk, they endured unprecedented below-freezing temperatures.<sup>8</sup>

The most frequently asked question they received was: Why are you walking? This is what they wrote:

*“Some people may doubt that our walk can bring peace to the world — and we understand that doubt completely. But everything that has ever mattered began with something impossibly small. A single seed. A first mindful breath. A quiet decision to take one step, then another.*

*Our walking itself cannot create peace. But when someone encounters us—whether by the roadside, online, or through a friend—when our message touches something deep within*

*them, when it awakens the peace that has always lived quietly in their own heart—something sacred begins to unfold.*

*That person carries something forward they didn't have before, or perhaps something they had forgotten was there. They become more mindful in their daily life—more present with each breath, more aware of each moment. They speak a little more gently to their child. They listen more patiently to their partner. They extend kindness to a stranger who needed it desperately.*

*And that stranger, touched by unexpected compassion, carries it forward to someone else. And it continues—ripple by ripple, heart by heart, moment by moment—spreading outward in ways none of us will ever fully witness, creating more peace in the world than we could possibly measure.*

*This is our contribution—not to force peace upon the world, but to help nurture it, one awakened heart at a time. Not the Walk for Peace alone can do this, but all of us together—everyone who has been walking with us in*

<sup>8</sup> Marissa Greene, Maria Crane, Christine Vo, Cecilia Lenzen and David Moreno, “Walk for Peace Buddhist monks arrive in Fort Worth for homecoming celebration,” *Fort Worth Report* (14 February 2026),

accessed on February 15, 2026 at <https://fortworthreport.org/2026/02/14/walk-for-peace-buddhist-monks-returning-to-fort-worth-for-homecoming-celebration/>.

*spirit, everyone who feels something stir within them when they encounter this journey, everyone who decides that cultivating peace within themselves matters.*

*One step becomes two. Two become a thousand. A thousand become countless. And slowly, gently, persistently—not through grand gestures but through ten thousand small acts of love—we can help make the world more peaceful. This is our hope. This is our offering. This is why we walk.”<sup>9</sup>*

The monks’ journey embodies the Fruit of the Spirit of Self-Control. Focusing less on their own comfort and egos or desires for the sake of awakening more compassion and awareness in their own hearts and the world. Step by step by step.

It’s not an Olympic sport. There are no gold medals to win. There are also no medals to lose, or competitors to beat. There is only the journey, step by step by step—together—to savor our lives and live fully into the love and heart of God. To let go...and live.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Dhammacetiya, “Walk for Peace—Why We Walk,” *Dhammacetiya* (4 January 2026), accessed on February