



May 13, 2020 | Not a spirit of fear—but of power and love and self-control

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings to you in the name of the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ!

As we all plan for the eventual reopening of our ministries and the many measures to safeguard the wellness of those we serve, please consider this pastoral letter for your encouragement and edification. Given how much has been happening so rapidly, along with all the corresponding fear and anxiety, I thought it good to delve deeply into the life of faith we share. So read it all at once, in bits and pieces, or slowly over time. My hope is to provide a strong word of comfort and reassurance for all the pastors and church workers, ministries, and congregations of our beloved MN South District even as we begin to consider the logistics of ministry in a new era.

God gives not a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-control

⁴As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. ⁶For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. . . . ¹³Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

(2 Timothy 1:4-7, 13-14, ESV)

Paul has a word of encouragement for young Pastor Timothy. He begins with Timothy's tears. There's comfort here for pastors and parishioners alike. All of us are equally prone to shed tears, particularly while bearing up under the strain and stress of our pandemic context. That's why these words of Scripture are good to consider as we look to the near future and what it means to reopen our congregations, schools, and ministries. These verses serve as a wonderful frame of reference, particularly verse seven: **“for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”**

What does it mean that the Lord gives us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control? To be sure, this pandemic has brought much fear. Facing death has a way of evoking tremendous fear. Likewise, the cultural chaos and rising governmental control have also awakened fear—aggravated by the social media vitriol, a declining economy, a mob mentality, all the endless negative news cycles, and perceived government overreach.

When we allow the temptations of the world, the devil, and our own sinful nature to perpetually fill our hearts and minds, it's very easy to give in to fear and let it control us. Soon irrationality, false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice accompany our fear. As a result, those who disagree with us become our enemy. Somebody without a mask is considered a reprobate trying to infect us. Oppressive restrictions mean the government is out to get us. And our perilous situation means God doesn't love us anymore.

Fear is an ugly and menacing force that often misleads us and deceives us.

The power of God's Word and Spirit

However, fear is not what our Lord gives. He gives us a spirit of “power” and “love” and “self-control.” These are tremendous gifts to relish and nurture during our pandemic context, especially amid all the alarmism provoked by it. The spirit of power of which Paul speaks is rooted solidly in the Word of God—those “sound words” of verse 14. That spirit of power accompanies the baptismal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to guard the deposit of faith and truth bestowed by that very same Word of God.

Take heart, then, as the Word of God baptismally wraps you and me in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, securing us as His very own, and assuring us that we live in His everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. This verse is a wonderful summary of what it means to live a life of faith, even during a pandemic: **“God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”**

Faith-filled self-control

Self-control means the ability to turn away from things that feed our fear and receive the power of God's Word. Self-control means turning away from viewing someone of a different opinion as an enemy to be hated and instead seeing them as someone for whom Christ died. Even more, self-control means the willingness to look fear in the face, address it in the confidence and love of Christ the crucified, and realize that come what may, our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the victory through His death and resurrection.

Faith, in other words, is the antidote to fear.

The devil, however, wants to wrap us in fear, have us spread that fear, and then have us act in that fear. When we respond to something in an irrational and emotionally charged way, it's often a prime indicator that fear is controlling us. Left unchecked, fear becomes a dangerous idol. Of course, the First Commandment commands us to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (*Luther's Small Catechism*). Yet when fear itself takes over, it strangles faith and immobilizes our willingness to trust in God above all else.

When fear takes priority over God, we trust only what we can control. Therefore, we attempt to control all the variables that bring us fear, falsely believing that if we can just control them, we can build ourselves a perpetual fortress of security and safety. Faith calls us to self-control, but fear calls us to control everything ourselves. This is a dangerous path.

Certainly, we should use reason and all our God-given senses for the care of our neighbor and the godly preservation of this body and life. This is only good, right, and salutary as we deal with uncertainty and react to our frightening context. (See the First Article of the Apostles' Creed and Small Catechism explanation.)

In contrast, fear tempts us to think we are the ultimate masters of our destiny. However, if we sense that fear taking over, we need repentant hearts to acknowledge we're scared, confess our idols, and then rest in the immeasurable love of our Lord Jesus Christ. His shed blood brings reprieve for our idolatry and calm to our troubled consciences, just as His resurrection brings confidence to live life despite our fears. This is the path of faith.

Walking by faith as we reopen with patience and love

This path of faith is what I encourage us to walk as we consider how to reopen our ministries in the weeks and months ahead. Through Christ's Word and Sacrament, we are given **“a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”** Therefore, we will walk with faith, even as we plan and act using wisdom, reason, and all our God-given senses. Let's begin by patiently and lovingly engaging the fears of our people as we reengage in our public life together.

Some people will be afraid of simply gathering together for worship. Troubled consciences must be treated with patience and the love of Christ. Others will have a fear of taking Communion, perhaps especially from the common cup. This, too, will need to be lovingly and pastorally addressed. (Perhaps, among other things, by utilizing the previously shared [studies by the CDC](#) that note no evidence has been found of transmitting disease by use of the common cup.) Likewise, parents will be concerned for the safety of their children in our Lutheran schools and our early childhood centers.

Our people will have fears just as we all have fears. Therefore, it's important for pastors, teachers, and lay leaders alike to act charitably and compassionately toward one another, even as our Lord does with each of us.

Specific hygiene protocols are being set forth for our congregations to utilize, even as our schools and early childhood centers are receiving guidance from the education department and state. Whatever fears our people may have, it's important to meet them with love and patience, yet in the extraordinary confidence and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. After all, He is the one in control, and He has called us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.

The guarantees of Christ

When we follow someone else, we give up control of being in charge. That's a frightening prospect for people in crisis. Our frailty and fear prefer assurances and guarantees against contracting the disease or succumbing to death. Irrationally, we begin to think those assurances and guarantees are within our control.

Yet Jesus calls us to follow Him. And ironically, one of the assurances that Jesus gives us involves death:

24“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’”

(Matthew 16:24-25)

The reality is that death is coming to every single one of us. That's the guarantee and curse of sin (Romans 5:12).

Death is a reality we just cannot escape.

Yet when we follow Jesus into His death, it means we die to self but live with Christ. Spiritually, this means we baptismally crucify our idolatrous desires in daily contrition and repentance, putting to death the old sinful self with all its sinful passions, and then we arise to new life in Christ.

Physically, this means when death comes (whatever the cause), we don't die alone. We die with Christ Jesus, whose death has sanctified our suffering and death and whose resurrection guarantees our dead bodies will be raised to life eternal. Thus, whenever fear demands assurances and guarantees, we bring the assurances of the crucified Christ and His Easter guarantee of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Faith and statistics

Of course, I realize this is easier said than done. We are a fickle and frail people. In a crisis, we desire human assurances to mitigate the risks we think we're taking. Many will desire assurances that they won't catch the virus in a public worship gathering. Others will want a guarantee they won't catch it from the Lord's Supper. My encouragement is always to point to the guarantees of Christ to His bride the Church: He promises to be found and tangibly received through Word and Sacrament.

Nonetheless, troubled souls often have a restless imagination. When we desire assurances and guarantees, we often turn to statistics to calculate our risks and analyze our guarantees to provide a false

sense of security that things are within our control. Though the media is constantly barraging us with COVID-19 statistics, the reality is we have always faced statistical dangers every day of our lives.

Consider the number of car accidents in Minnesota each year. [The Pioneer Press](#) reported that over the last 10 years, there was an average of approximately 79,000 car crashes each year. Out of these crashes, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety reports an average of roughly 27,000 people who were seriously injured and 389 people who died each year. That equates to a 0.5 percent mortality rate. Likewise, for further perspective, we could consider the number of Minnesotans who contract cancer each year and calculate the corresponding mortality rate and see our risk of contracting cancer. In short, there are statistical risks confronting us all around.

By God's grace, no one in my immediate or extended family has yet contracted the coronavirus. However, three of my family members have been killed in car accidents—all far too young. (Fifteen years ago, my brother and his unborn son were killed, while his wife and one-year-old daughter survived. Ten months ago, my brother-in-law was killed, while his wife and three girls survived.) Likewise, though my family currently all remain COVID-19-free, four family members have contracted cancer, two of whom have died. (My father survived prostate cancer and my mother-in-law survived breast cancer, while my six-year-old sister died of a Wilms tumor and my 38-year-old uncle—an LCMS pastor—died of a malignant brain tumor.)

We all continue grieving in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Yet despite the danger vehicles bring, we still risk driving nearly every day. In fact, my oldest child is just now getting her driver's license. We admit there is fear in this, just as there is the fear of getting cancer, and the fear of contracting the disease surrounding us. So we all do the best we can to walk forward in faith, not with a spirit of fear, but of power and love and self-control.

The point of these examples is not to exhibit my poor math skills or to prove a political or even statistically preferred point but to remind you that death comes to us all in a myriad of ways, sometimes at a greater rate than others. So it is by faith that we press on with life despite those realities constantly staring us in the face.

Statistical risk assessment may have a good and salutary place in our lives, but ultimately, our trust is not in statistics but in Christ Jesus.

In reality, the mortality rate is 100 percent—100 out of 100 die. That's the guarantee of sin. But the guarantee of Jesus is victory over sin and death by His own death and resurrection! He thereby gives us the power to face the uncertainties of life in the assurance of His love and the self-control to turn away from our fears and to trust in Him day by day.

Rest secure, dear friends, for God has given **“us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”**

The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Your Pastor and Brother in Christ,



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