

FEARING BRAVELY

RISKING LOVE
FOR OUR NEIGHBORS,
STRANGERS + ENEMIES

CATHERINE MCNIEL

Can Christians be genuine peacemakers in our fragmented, polarized world? I hope so, and when I read books like Catherine McNiel's *Fearing Bravely*, I am encouraged. McNiel is a wonderful storyteller, and her wisdom, honesty, and commitment to Jesus and Scripture shepherd us toward becoming better human beings. This practical and engaging book draws us to love God and love our neighbors more deeply, despite the forces that drive wedges between us. I encourage you to read this book with others so you can discern together how you might take risks to love more authentically.

REV. DR. DENNIS R. EDWARDS, associate professor of New Testament, North Park Theological Seminary; author of *Might from the Margins*

At a time when many Christians feel threatened and afraid, Catherine McNiel calls us to courage, inviting us to love our neighbors, strangers, and even enemies in countercultural ways rooted in the example of Jesus. I hope Christians everywhere will read—and heed—this wise, insightful, and challenging book, for the sake of vulnerable neighbors and, even more urgently, to reclaim the public witness of the church.

MATTHEW SOERENS, US director of church mobilization and advocacy, World Relief; coauthor of *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*

Fear, or fear of God? Whom or what do we fear, and what does that imply for our lives in a world that is not safe? How does our fear of God or fear of someone or something else influence our love for neighbors? This book is powerful, calling us to live the life Jesus intended for us, not a bland and ineffective faith

or a vicious nationalistic faith mistaken for Christianity. In reading *Fearing Bravely*, I could not help but exclaim, “Amen!” because it is so spot-on. And I could not help but reel with conviction because of the weighty truth contained within these pages. We Americans need this book. Catherine’s thought and writing are profound and eminently applicable to our current situation. It is worthy of attentive reading and contemplation, which should naturally lead to prayerful action.

MARLENA GRAVES, author of *The Way Up Is Down* and *Forty Days on Being a Nine: Enneagram Daily Reflections*

The repeated biblical admonition “Fear not!” strikes many of us as naive and unrealistic. With the many threats we face today, how can God possibly exhort us not to be afraid? The Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are for long-dead saints living in easier, simpler times in ages past, right? Not so, says Catherine McNiel. In *Fearing Bravely*, she capably demonstrates why we can, in fact, let go of fear and choose instead the risky, cruciform way of love. She does so with the winsomeness of a storyteller, the gentleness of a pastor, and the chutzpah of a prophet. In *Fearing Bravely*, McNiel has given us an invaluable gift: The opportunity to confront and repent of our fear-full malformation as Christians so that we can pursue Jesus’ better way of neighbor-, stranger-, and enemy-love. I pray many will take, read, and heed the powerful message of this timely book.

REV. DR. EMILY HUNTER MCGOWIN, assistant professor of theology, Wheaton College

Powerful. Convicting. Encouraging. In our broken world today, Catherine McNeil's call to live a life of active love that resists fear rings true and bold. *Fearing Bravely* guides us to confront the things we hate and our greatest fears, from neighbors and strangers to political realities, with the love of Jesus.

MICHELLE AMI REYES, vice president, Asian American Christian Collaborative; author of *Becoming All Things: How Small Changes Lead to Lasting Connections Across Cultures*

This is the book author Catherine McNeil was born to write. Her words are compassionate, prophetic, and for such a time as this. For anyone who wants to love as Jesus loved, especially in the midst of our increasingly divided world, this book is a gentle guide and a tough coach all at once. With theological acumen and a sharp wit, McNeil reminds the church who we are meant to be—a people who love Jesus through the act of loving our neighbors, strangers, and enemies.

AUBREY SAMPSON, church planter and pastor at Renewal Church; speaker; author of *Known*, *The Louder Song*, and *Overcomer*

McNeil has written a biblically sharp and practically wise book that points the way forward for how disciples of Jesus can overcome their fears in order to live lives of hospitality, friendship, and love for neighbors, friends, and family. This book is a perfect text for individuals and church groups hoping to embody the teachings and life of Jesus.

JOSHUA W. JIPP, associate professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; author of *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*

Catherine gently shepherds us out of the tunnels of fear and into the meadows of love. Her words are elegant and incisive, but—more importantly—they are generous and kind. I long to offer this book to family and community members who have for too long been guided by suspicion of the Other. It is an invitation to emerge from the trenches and break bread at God’s table together.

LIUAN HUSKA, author of *Hurting Yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness*

Catherine has lifted the rug off the elephant in the room of cultural engagement and our changing world. People are afraid—period. They try to dress it up with political, theological, or sociological arguments, but in the end, the core issue is that people are afraid of change and are struggling to hold on to the past. The solution that Catherine offers is not for us to deny the fear but to trust that God is at work, stay on mission, and then let love and justice roll. Be the change!

DR. ALEJANDRO MANDES, executive director of EFCA’s All People Initiative; author of *Embracing the New Samaria*

If there’s one thing we know our world needs, it is a fresh call for Christians to actively show and share what Jesus is like by the way we love one another and the way we love our neighbors. But as Catherine McNeil shows us in *Fearing Bravely*, we cannot step into neighbor love and great works of justice if we do not address our deep-seated fears. With the gentle voice of a pastor and profoundly insightful engagement with Scripture, McNeil shines lights on how our culture has

taught us to be overly fearful of things and people, ignorant about what it is we're truly afraid of, and not nearly fearful (in the sense of reverence) enough. Chapter by chapter, Scripture by Scripture, and story by story, *Fearing Bravely* invites us to look at God, the world, and ourselves with fresh eyes, so we may both be healed by and become ambassadors of God's perfect love, which casts out fear.

BRONWYN LEA, author of *Beyond Awkward Side Hugs*

Catherine is a devoted follower of Jesus who seeks to see heaven on earth. Her commitment to the mission of God is not just theory—it is her lifestyle. *Fearing Bravely: Risking Love for Our Neighbors, Strangers, and Enemies* will encourage you to think and invite you to respond. You will be challenged. You will be inspired. You will be confronted. And it will be worth it. If you want to contribute to what God is already doing in this creation, I recommend you read this book.

HANIBAL RODRIGUEZ, senior pastor of Wheaton Bible Church

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For Matthew, my orthopraxy.

And for my neighbors:

May you flourish.

Fear is not a Christian habit of mind.

MARILYNNE ROBINSON



God is love.

*Whoever lives in love lives in God,
and God in them. . . .*

There is no fear in love.

But perfect love drives out fear . . .

The one who fears is not made perfect in love. . . .

And he has given us this command:

*Anyone who loves God
must also love their brother and sister.*

I JOHN 4:16, 18, 21



Let all that you do be done in love.

ST. PAUL

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FOREWORD

I HAVE SPENT MY WRITING LIFE inviting followers of Jesus to see their immigrant neighbors as God sees them, and to love them with a fierce and holy love that won't settle for anything less than justice and flourishing for all. This has been God's call to me, and it's one that I've embraced wholeheartedly. But it has been a difficult call because, though we originate in a God who is love, our default isn't to love our neighbors. That is why I'm so grateful that Catherine wrote *Fearing Bravely: Risking Love for our Neighbors, Strangers, and Enemies*. It's a topic that is always timely, always needed. Always.

I met Catherine through the pages of another book she wrote, *Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline*. I'm not a mother, so imagine my surprise at how captivated I was by this book. I was so encouraged and inspired by her insights and perspectives. She gave me a theological framework for my daily life. I only read it because I wanted to give it to a good friend who was struggling through the early days of motherhood, and I *did* give it to her. But I also kept a copy for

myself because I learned so much about how to walk with Jesus day by day in the ordinary tasks of my days and how to love the women in my life who are mothers. It strikes me now that even then Catherine was helping me love my neighbors as myself.

Much later, I had the privilege of meeting Catherine and talking with her about my own writing. I learned that she is one who walks closely with God, and she writes out of the overflow of the Spirit in her own life. You will sense it too when you encounter the vulnerability of her writing and the freshness of her ideas on neighbor love. She understands that neighbor love isn't romantic or sentimental—it's a call to love in action, which can be messy and complicated. And just like Jesus' love, it's sacrificial and costly. But it is also worth it because Jesus' command to love our neighbors is freeing—it's a blessing to us to obey him and walk in his ways.

Growing up in the faith, I was often taught that the trajectory of the Scriptures is from being lost to being found, from being enslaved to being free, from being a stranger to being a member of the family of God. I see that trajectory in the Scriptures, but overall, I see what Catherine sees: the trajectory of moving from fear to love. C. S. Lewis once said, "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses."¹ I believe him. I really do. I know my neighbors are image-bearers of God. But in my experience, the hardest teaching of Jesus by far is the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's much easier to hate my neighbor, envy my neighbor, slander my neighbor, and fear my neighbor. It seems that no matter how long we have been following Jesus, we need this teaching, this command to love. We need it daily.

FOREWORD

There's no doubt that Jesus commands us to love our neighbors—it is not an option for those who follow him. And yet Catherine writes about neighbor love with so much grace and truth that it feels like an invitation. That's why this book is so important. We live in times that are so polarized—we seem to be moving further and further away from each other. As I write these words, we continue to social distance in the midst of a pandemic, a metaphor for the reality we live day by day. Our fears of one another consume us, but Catherine's gentle invitation is to see our neighbors not through the lens of our fears but through the love of our God. She asks us to consider: *Will I continue to be disciplined by fear, or can Jesus' love lead me to another way?*

Truth be told, I wasn't even aware of how much fear informed my interactions with those Jesus has called me to love until Catherine's words asked me to pay attention to my fears and begin to move toward Jesus' love. She will inspire you, too. Find a comfortable, cozy spot; bring your highlighter and a cup of tea; and prepare to be challenged to love extravagantly as you dive into *Fearing Bravely*.

Karen González

*author of The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible,
and the Journey to Belong*

A NOTE TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

I wrote this book so that together we can learn about, wrestle with, and overcome the fears that get in the way of love. I wrote out of my longing for us to choose to be brave with our fear and courageous with each other.

But conversations about love, fear, neighbors, strangers, and enemies always come from a particular place and perspective. I am a white American citizen, a practicing Christian, and I know that my words and thoughts and stories reflect that particular place and perspective. People from different backgrounds experience the dynamics of power, fear, love, and courage differently. I cannot fully understand or express the dynamics you may face, but I hope that what I've written here will help you arrive at language for your own journey. I come to you with open hands, praying that we can help each other along the way.

Together, may we find the love that overcomes all our fear.

Catherine

SECTION ONE

DON'T BE AFRAID

*Fear is your best friend or your worst enemy. It's like fire.
If you can control it, it can cook for you; it can heat your house.
If you can't control it, it will burn everything
around you and destroy you.*

MIKE TYSON,
PARAPHRASING CUS D'AMATO

SUNDAY MORNING, EARLY. The air is cool and moist. It is not yet dawn, but the Sabbath is over and the women have been busy for hours, determined to finish the work left over from Friday night.

That horrible night.

Some tasks must be done, no matter how overpowering the grief. Sometimes the only way to stop from drowning is to keep working.

This is the third day. On Friday, Joseph brought the broken body to the tomb, quickly wrapping it in linen before sundown. The women—who had watched everything—followed to see where he was laid. Now that the Sabbath has ended, they will complete the rites for a dead body. This will be an arduous task, emotionally and physically. They brace themselves as they walk into the tomb.

But the grave is empty. There is nothing there.

The women glance at each other, confused and afraid. When your teacher has been executed, you are never safe. Not anywhere, but especially not here. *Who has taken the body? Is this a trap?*

Then, two men suddenly appear before them. Shocking enough in this dark, secluded place, but worse, these men shine like lightning. The women can hardly look at the brightness. Trembling, they grip each other, shielding their eyes, trying not to collapse in fear.

The men begin to speak, words the women cannot absorb, words that cannot be true. Words that will change everything. The lightning men look these women in the eyes and say:

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you?¹

And then they do remember.

The women sink against the cave stones in shock, hearts pounding, minds spinning. Could it be true? Then they stand, they run. They run to tell their friends, the hiding, terrified, devastated followers of Jesus. These women have been entrusted with the most unbelievable message, and they will tell it. The world will know.

Sunday night, late. A group of friends huddle, terrified, inside the upper room of a house, the doors locked. Can you blame them? Days ago, their friend and teacher was brutally and publicly executed. No wonder they hide.

They live in an oppressed nation under the thumb of a violent empire. They could have laid low, but no—they stepped out to follow a man who ended up provoking the authorities with the treasonous, blasphemous claim that he was both King and God. He was crucified for that claim. Just days ago they were celebrating Passover together, remembering God's salvation, their ancestors' liberation from another violent empire. Today, they shelter in place. The doors are locked. The world is too dangerous for them now.

But then, in that shut-up room, Jesus appears.

Jesus is right there. He doesn't knock on the door, doesn't

jiggle the handle. The door was locked, the disciples were inside, and Jesus was dead—but then he is there, standing before them. He is in the room with them, saying, “Peace be with you. Don’t be afraid.”

As they stand with their hearts pounding, he asks them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”²

A snack. He asks for a snack.

These stunned and terrified friends are overjoyed.

The empire is still violent. Their teacher is still an enemy of the state. Powerful people remain hell-bent on silencing those who teach that God’s Kingdom rests on mercy and justice, not greed and oppression. The dangers do not evaporate with Jesus’ resurrection—they multiply. This community will huddle in this room many times in the months to come, sheltering, praying. They will never be safe or successful by any normal definition. Life will never be “normal” again, not ever, not at all.

Only one thing has changed, and somehow, that one thing is enough to change everything:

Jesus is in the room.

CHAPTER I

WHOM SHALL I FEAR?

I SAT IN THE BACK OF THE CHURCH SANCTUARY on a muggy summer evening, head in my hands. Worship music filled the room, and flies buzzed around noisy ceiling fans, but I could hear God's gentle voice as clearly as if Jesus were sitting beside me in the pew:

It's time. Time to put aside your fear. It's time to learn how to forgive, how to risk, how to love.

But I couldn't. Or rather, I wouldn't. I didn't want to. Old wounds become part of who you are. Old fears die hard.

Back up a step, then, and I'll help you move from there, God prompted. *This is what you need to do. Life is better on the other side.*

Silence from me.

The music played on. Flies landed on my shoulders. Pews groaned in the heat.

Then: *Do you want to want to forgive?*

No. No. I didn't even want to want to forgive.

The trauma I experienced was a decade old by then, but the pain stayed fresh. The people who harmed me had not asked for my forgiveness, and I did not offer it. Over time, wounds reshaped themselves into fear—a protective reflex against future pain. Mistrust became the lens through which I viewed everyone.

I spent years wrestling against being known. Healing requires healthy relationships and caring community, but fear had such a solid head start. I hadn't consciously put walls up to protect myself, but the barriers were there all the same, tall and strong. I'd grown skilled at keeping would-be friends from getting close enough to hurt me—or love me—lest they tear open old wounds. But the walls I'd built to protect myself merely trapped me alone with fear.

In a vicious cycle, fear kept me from the love I needed to escape fear.

I'd reached a crisis point, a fork in the road. God asked me to move forward, toward a love that casts out fear. Fear fought to retain control, keeping me from love. Which would I choose? I could not try to serve them both.

God sat beside me in that humid room for a long, long time, gently backing me up step-by-step until we arrived at a starting place so miniscule I agreed to try.

Most of us reach that fork in the road at some point. We've been harmed by others, and our pain and distrust informs how we proceed through life, how we view those around us. But rather

than leading us to safety, fear holds us in chains. Only in risking love will we find freedom.

But to do that, we must be honest with ourselves and name the things we fear, the things that hold us back.

What are some of these things for you?

I'm not talking about feeling anxious or insecure, like finding a spider on your jeans, or feeling nervous at parties. I'm talking about fears that are deeper, more fundamental, fears that shape our relationships and communities and cultures. Like the dread of life becoming unstable, the devastating aftermath of trauma, or the precariousness of loving in a world that offers no guarantees.

These deeper fears don't just live in our heads and hearts; they have direct repercussions on other human beings. They nudge us to view people as inherently worthy of our distrust or contempt, rather than fellow humans we are called to love. I hear these messages expressed out loud almost every day. They take up so much bandwidth in our collective consciousness that we may not realize the words and implications are rooted in fear. After all, fear sounds like weakness, and these warnings seem so right and wise.

But sometimes what sounds like wisdom is in tension with God's good news.

Jesus commands us to love our neighbors. But we often hold our neighbors at arm's length.

God instructs us to welcome strangers, never withholding hospitality or help from anyone in need. But we have a tendency to fear strangers, especially those needing hospitality, afraid that their presence and neediness may threaten what we have.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who actively harm us. But this goes against every instinct we have. Sometimes we even create enemies, for it's so easy to see anyone who thinks, believes, looks, or lives differently from us as dangerous, a threat to our way of life.

God calls us to set aside our rights in order to seek justice for the most vulnerable. But our culture—through the news, television, social media, and even pulpits—suggests it would be safer to limit the rights of others lest our own rights be threatened.

The Bible warns us not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Yet how often do we allow our fear of evil to overcome the goodness in ourselves and others?

The resurrected Son of God told his friends to be at peace during times of trouble, because his love would remain with them always. But if my own heart is any gauge, we often suspect there is not nearly enough love to go around.

In countless little ways, fear wins us over every day.

FEAR, OUR FRENEMY

But let's back up for a second and consider how we got here. After all, fear isn't always an enemy.

This world is full of dangers, and fear is a necessary part of our basic survival package. Without fear, life would be a nightmare, and a short one. My toddlers leapt into deep swimming pools, chased squirrels onto busy streets, and tried to hurl themselves (and anything they could lift) out of our third-story apartment window. After a few exhausting years keeping them alive and intact, I praised God for their ability to feel afraid.

Eventually the hot stove, the terrifying moment searching for mom and dad in the crowd, and the shock at the electric outlet compelled my children to accumulate survival skills and common sense. Their pain receptors triggered a fear response in the amygdala and altered their permanent record. They make better choices now.

The amygdala is a tiny organ sitting just above the brain stem, that precious area of our bodies regulating heartbeat and breath. The amygdala's job is to accumulate data from our senses and provide rapid chemical reactions, responding swiftly and decisively to threats before our conscious minds even register what's happening. The amygdala prepares us for fight or flight, whether we want to or not. I'm grateful; without the amygdala, few of us would see adulthood.¹

So actually, fear is a friend. Fear allows us to learn and grow, motivates us to create and innovate. Fear opens the doors to life and love, safety and survival.

But our friend fear can become a frenemy, as they say, because we are never unbiased observers of reality. Our brains don't merely read the world; they interpret the world, creating a feedback loop.² Our assumptions influence what we see—and, as the old proverb says, when your only tool is a hammer, everything you see looks like a nail. With our brain wired and ready for fear, we start seeing a world full of threats, including many that do not exist. This false perception shapes how we live and behave and approach others, until it returns us full circle: Through self-fulfilling prophecy, we create the dangers we most fear.

And fear is contagious. Society is structured to manipulate

and multiply our fears to feed its own lusts. Ancient kings and priests exploited fears and vulnerabilities to keep their people passive and obedient. Today's influencers—more corporate than kingly—are just as eager for wealth and power. They, too, have perfected fear as a tool to exploit our triggers, sending us more and more terrifying data, training us to return to their broadcast, website, political party, or product again and again. We're far more likely to keep the television on if we've been warned that severe weather (or bad news of any sort) is on the way.

Unfortunately, we're not wired for moderation in the fear department. We binge on fear long after the necessity has passed, trapping ourselves in an imaginary world—or a genuinely dangerous world our fears helped create. A steady diet of fear warps its intended purpose. No longer a prompt toward safety and security, fear becomes our destination, an addiction, a pandemic.

Then, when fear goes haywire, it leads to hate. Hate and fear grow deep roots, as generations produce and reproduce conflict and war, vendettas, more hate, more violence, and more fear. This toxic form of fear is invasive. Once it takes root, it takes over. It isolates and divides. We grow comfortable hating our enemies and view strangers suspiciously (after all, they might be enemies). Our own neighbors become strangers to us. We grow obsessed with seeing danger in each other—whether the “other” lives across the street, across the border, or across the globe.

Fear runs rampant in our society; it's become more a habit than a gauge of safety. People in far more dangerous communities around the world live less entrenched in fear than we do. When a recent international survey asked people about their

fears, Americans scored significantly higher than the global average. We even outperformed ourselves, presenting more worry, stress, and anger than in years past, our fears increasing even as our economy and health improved.³ Large majorities of Americans reported an ongoing experience of being “very afraid” and produced a long list of reasons why: government, pollution, finances, illness, death, terrorists, violence, extremists.⁴

These fears are not necessarily unsubstantiated. A glimpse at history (or the newspaper, or Facebook) is enough to demonstrate the countless ways we humans hurt and abuse each other. But how many of those threats were created by people who were afraid? The evil we fear and the evil we create *because of* our fear run together like watercolors until we can't tell them apart.

The next step *should* be our fears energizing us to make changes, build relationships, make the world safer for everyone. But we already know what happens instead. Our families, neighborhoods, churches, and countries build walls, buy weapons, check locks, batten the hatches—and splinter. We've all seen loved ones turn on each other over issues related to politics, the COVID pandemic, social-justice issues. Everyone knows who and what we stand against, who is in and who is out. Paralyzed by worry and dread, we lose our ability to understand each other, to connect, to heal, to build. As our fear turns to hate we resort to violence or neglect; we don't go out of our way to offer compassion to the people we're afraid might destroy our way of life. Since we view ourselves as fighting on the right side, we view this destructive behavior as moral, even altruistic, rather than the evil it is.

As I look into my heart, my neighborhood, my social-media

feeds, and my relationships, I see the abundant harvest decades of living in fear has produced in our society. A self-fulfilling prophecy of fear-that-becomes-hate is at work in our lives and communities. Just five minutes of listening to cable news or reading internet comments should prove my point. The cycle goes on and on, and each one of us is caught up in it to some degree.

Every person on earth, every day, is being molded into a certain shape, taught a particular way of being in the world. Christians call this discipleship, and we have made an intentional choice to be discipled and formed by Jesus and the Spirit. Our lives are meant to center around loving God and our neighbors, worshiping in the presence of God, and producing the fruit of the Spirit together in community.

And yet, so many of the influences we allow to form us are at cross-purposes with this goal. We are committed to choosing love, but we've given fear such a solid head start.

When I type “Christians are” into my search engine, the top hits are not about our love and care for our communities. Rather, many American Christians are known for *fearfulness*—a fear quickly disintegrating into hatred. For instance, poll after poll suggests that white American evangelicals like myself are twice as likely to believe our safety is threatened by those around us; far more likely to claim long-debunked hoaxes as truth; and out of all Americans, most likely to be viewed by our neighbors as hateful.⁵

Friend, these perceptions weigh on me. Whatever contrasting evidence we might produce, we Christians are not primarily associated with loving others but with being afraid of others.

The *most* afraid, most easily swayed by conspiracy theories, most quickly driven to hatred.

This is a major blow. The Christian community exists to declare and demonstrate God's love, even in difficult, dangerous circumstances. But instead, it seems many of us have been nurtured through fear into hatred, and from hatred to neglect. If God's true people are known by their love as Jesus claimed,⁶ we must ask ourselves if God's true people are standing somewhere other than under the sign marked "Christian."

I think back to that night I wrestled my habit of fear against the healing I could find in love. It wasn't that the trauma done to me wasn't real—it was terrible, with lasting impact. The question God put to me was this: Would I continue to be disciplined by fear, or could Jesus' love lead me to another way?

THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

Thousands of years ago, in a culture of factions and oppression and very real reasons to be afraid, Jesus climbed a mountain, sat down, and began to teach the gathered crowd that different path, that narrow road. He taught his followers to love without fear or constraint. Love God with your entire being. Love and care for your neighbor. Love and provide for the stranger. Love and pray for your enemies. Jesus did not merely give lip service to this teaching: he lived it with his body, even when it led to his death.

Years later, the apostle John wrote, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. . . . The one who fears is not made perfect in love."⁷ This was not a new idea. We've known for millennia that love is the force strong enough to uproot

both fear and its offspring, hate. Connecting to other humans physically, emotionally, and relationally allows our fears to subside on a spiritual as well as chemical and neurological level, a fact that has been confirmed by both ancient wisdom and modern science.⁸ This active love is not an easy, breezy feeling, but a lifestyle we must choose daily. Practiced in community, love overturns all these social, generational, neurobiological cycles.

In love, Jesus led the way to unsafe places and situations, confronting injustice and powerful empires, healing people with diseases, eating with sinners, hanging with the marginalized. Jesus wasn't safe—he was publicly executed. Living a life of active love that resists fear and hate is subversive and dangerous. Earthly powers—whether kings, corporations, or cable television—prefer not to be threatened. Yet the night before his detention and crucifixion, Jesus declared that love and unity would mark his followers. Love, even in the face of unsafety and death, is the path of life.

Let me put it bluntly: Fear is not a Christian practice. A society oriented around politicians, the economy, or the media may choose to live in fear, but Christians have already died to themselves and been raised in Christ. What do we have left to lose? Christians are committed to practicing an active love that pours itself out, following Jesus by laying down our rights and even our lives for our friends and neighbors. Even for strangers. Even our enemies. That doesn't leave many people on the planet we are free to abandon. And this practice is not an optional element of faith, either; active love is the center, the thing itself.

This is why practicing faith in community matters so greatly. We cannot tackle this mission on our own.

A few years after Jesus' resurrection, as the early church explored their new identity and the practices of living in community, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to encourage the new Christians in the way of Jesus.⁹ *And now I will show you the most excellent way:*

Love is patient, love is kind. We are all broken; how can we rebuild together?

Love does not envy. We are invited to live out of gratitude and contentment, trusting God to provide, sharing openly, not grasping what we have or want, not fearing those who might limit our material comfort.

Love does not boast, it is not proud. We find strength in our weakness, practicing humility. We do not point fingers at "those sinful people" or repel others with our self-righteousness. We lean in, loving, with nothing to prove and nothing to lose.

Love does not dishonor others. We honor every person, even those we were previously trained to fear, even those we were taught held little value: refugees at the border, immigrants in our neighborhoods, people from other backgrounds or ethnicities, those with special needs, the elderly, the infant.

Love is not self-seeking. Holding on to what is ours is not a primary concern. We pour ourselves out.

Love is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs. The enemy cycle is broken, for we seek redemption and restoration, not revenge.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. We turn away from news that paints those who are different from

us in a negative or suspicious light. We listen for truth, even if truth makes us uncomfortable and challenges our sense of self-righteousness.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. We let go of our lives to find abundant life. We move forward together, with God's Spirit to strengthen and console us.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. We do not listen to teachers who preach right doctrine if they do not live out active love. We amplify voices that embody both truth and dignity.

If I speak with the tongue of men and of angels but have not love, I am nothing. Even if I know all the right doctrines, if I have not love, *I am nothing.*

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

I want to ask you to pause for a moment and take a breath. Reach out your hands and heart to God. This is not a small thing we are stepping into, not an easy thing to face. Our fears and concerns are legitimate and heavy; our lives and loved ones are precious.

But there's another layer too: When we hear that God wants us to do something, another set of fears are triggered. What if we fall short? These words of Jesus', well—they do not sound like an invitation, an opportunity to build something beautiful. They sound like a pass/fail exam with the deck stacked against us.

I want to assure you right off the bat that the road we're taking is not paved with legalism, demands so high we can't help but fail. God is not peering over our shoulders, waiting for us to fall. There is grace all the way down.

God's message to us—and the message of this book—is *do not fear*. God invites us to a perfect love. We have no reason to be afraid of failure or rejection. We are empowered by love—unearned, eternal, unfailing love. God's *kindness*, not his hostility, brings us to repentance. This is God's joyful idea, God's jubilant project. This is God's love from beginning to end.

And now, God sets a question before us. We have been made alive and set free by the love of God. *Will we follow Jesus?* Jesus himself warned us to count the cost, for the road is narrow and hard.¹⁰ Few will choose to pick up their cross. But I am writing this, and you are reading it, for we are doing just that: considering this path, counting this cost. After all, no one begins an enormous project without first calculating what it requires.

Part of this calculation is deciding to confront our fears and step out in love, even when it feels terrifying to do so. It means we fear *bravely*, changing our posture toward God's beloved children, whether they be neighbors, strangers, or enemies. This is hard, especially if we aren't accustomed to being asked to follow Jesus with our bodies and lives in addition to believing with our minds. Plus, we cannot complete this mission by ourselves. So, God calls us together into a team, a body, each doing our own small part. We are not saviors. We will destroy ourselves—and each other—if we act like we are. We are hands and feet, working together to make this small change that changes everything.

There is an ancient book called *The Didache*, which means *The Teaching*, considered to be a handbook of the earliest Christians. It ends pages of instructions and commands with these words:

See that you do not neglect the commandments of the Lord, but keep them just as you received them . . .

Take care that nobody tempts you away from the path of this Teaching . . . If you can shoulder the Lord's yoke in its entirety, then you will be perfect; but if that is too much for you, do as much as you can.¹¹

Do as much as you can. Don't allow fear to tell you the choices are *be perfect* or *never begin*. *Do as much as you can*.

Take a deep breath, friend. You are loved with an everlasting love. When you're ready, come along with me, and centuries of Christ followers before us. Let us go and find the Lord.