

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Do you remember the Charlie Brown Christmas special? It's a true classic that gets aired every year between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It never gets old. Almost everyone of a certain age remembers the scene where Linus recites the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus from Luke chapter 2. But do you remember the scene early in the movie when Charlie Brown approaches Lucy in her psychiatry booth with the "Doctor is in" sign? He pays the nickel and tells her that he's in sad shape.

Lucy is happy to help. She says, "Well, as they say on TV... ..the mere fact that you realize you need help... ..indicates that you are not too far gone." I always liked that line.

Then she says, "I think we'd better pinpoint your fears. If we can find out what you're afraid of, we can label it. Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia. . . . How about cats? If you're afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia. . . .

Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacophobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is fear of the ocean. Or gephyrophobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges. (That one that takes you to Newport is nothing to laugh at.) Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia? -What's pantophobia? -The fear of everything. That's it! Charlie Brown shouts, so loudly that Lucy tumbles backward out of her booth.

Fear of everything . . . that's how some people are living these days. Chronic fear. Chronic anxiety. Perceptions that everything is a threat and the world is falling apart. Studies are showing that anxiety is climbing at an unprecedented rate.

The American Psychiatric Association and the National Alliance on Mental Illness have published studies that speak volumes. Nineteen percent, or nearly one in five adults in the U.S. has a diagnosed anxiety disorder.

And whether it's a diagnosed medical concern or not, 70% of adults surveyed were anxious about keeping themselves or their families safe. 68% were anxious about keeping their identity safe. 66% were anxious about their health. 65% were anxious about paying bills or expenses. 59% were anxious about the impact of climate change on the planet. 50% were anxious about the opioid epidemic. 45% were anxious about the impact of emerging technology on day-to-day life.

Fears are a part of our everyday lives. When I was a little girl, I had all the normal childhood phobias. Needles, roller coasters, heights, even public speaking.

But as we get older, we grow out of those fears. My dad taught me to ride roller coasters, and I climbed trees beyond the branches that my mom wanted me to, and I became pretty confident at speaking in public. But then I remember when America's Most Wanted came out. After I watched that show, I couldn't relax in my own, unfenced backyard. We lived in a corner lot, with undeveloped land on two sides, and I was sure one of the top ten baddies was hiding out in the overgrown brush twenty feet beyond my swing set.

But I grew out of that fear and learned to hike alone in the woods, but then in my twenties I feared I would live alone forever.

But I fell in love and became a mom. That fear was gone, but then I feared someone would discriminate against my family and I'd lose my job, my health insurance, and be stripped of my ordination to ministry.

Then the Presbyterian Church amended the constitution, and that fear was gone.

But do you think I'm fear free? Nah. Just a few months ago, I feared that the nine amazing people on the Dunn's Corners Community Church Search Committee would find someone else to take this amazing job, or that the congregation they represented wouldn't agree with their decision. And after the vote, I was afraid that my family wouldn't be happy, (but they are!)

It's like being out in the ocean in a storm. You survive one wave but another is just about to break over the bow. You can't catch your breath or get comfortable for long.

Am I the only one who puts one fear aside only to find a new one waiting when I wake up in the morning? Does anyone else live with worry after worry after worry?

I don't think I'm that far off by supposing that most of us in this room, those of you worshipping at home, too, are living with some degree of fear.

If you're one of the lucky ones who doesn't experience much fear. I'm genuinely happy for you. But I hope, at least, that you have empathy for those who do and realize your privilege in this world today that keeps fears at bay.

The Bible is full of fear. From floods to wars and famines and fires, we hear the people cry out constantly. Some of you may know the passage in Isaiah 41 in which God says, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you." Those are wonderful words of encouragements, but we sometimes forget that God says these words to a people who have been starved in a devastating siege,

carried into exile across the known world, and are living in a foreign land with a foreign king and foreign gods. There's plenty for them to be fearful of.

And it's not just the Old Testament that contains passages about fear. I think we often forget that the early church lived a time of persecution, chaos, and fear. Christians were in the minority everywhere. Emperors were fickle. Conflicts arose between Jews and Gentiles. Paul, James, Peter, and others were imprisoned and martyred. Nero tortured Christians. Life was scary for first century believers. They had fears that we cannot fathom.

That's why writers of epistles like 1 John and 2 Timothy had to say things like, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice," and "whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

But I'll tell you something. I sometimes feel judged by these verses, because as encouraging and hopeful as they are on the surface, there's an undertone that I don't like. The reverse message that I hear in my head is, "If you have fear, your love is imperfect."

Our lives are never black and white. We don't just have perfect love all the time or total fear all the time. We are human beings who live in the messy in-between of love and fear. We live in this world and are working toward the kingdom of God. Sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back. But we should not give up the journey just because the footsteps aren't steady – just because we haven't made it yet.

That's why I really like what Melissa Camara Wilkins writes about fear and love. She talks about them as directions on a journey. "If you're stuck [in fear]," she says, "you know you're not heading toward love. You know you're going the wrong direction. You'll be happier if you stop moving and check your map again."

She says, "[If you] live in the past, with old wounds and regrets, that's where fear is born."

She says, "[If you] live in the future, with anxieties and what-ifs, that's where fear grows."

“[If you sit here, in the present, you can breathe. You can rest here.

You don’t have to figure out how to turn off the part of your brain that notices scary things, either.

You just notice that fear as it comes up, and then you choose to say: *This is not where I will set up camp. I only get to point my compass in one direction, and even if I’m in Fear right now, I’m going to turn toward Love. I’m going to grow in that direction.*

In the meantime, I’m suggesting you name your fears, preferably to someone who will hear you and help you look around for the signpost marked Love.

I’m suggesting you find someone or something to love today. Your pet. Your child.

I’m suggesting you get a sandwich, or get some sleep.

I’m suggesting you turn off your screens and get some fresh air. Feel the earth under your feet.”

I do believe that the closer we are to the heart of God, the more we talk to God and listen for the voice of God, the less we will fear, but I don’t believe that we’re expected to be fear free in this day and age. I believe that if we spend more time listening to children than news pundits, that we will fear less. I believe in good mental health practices and in book groups and volunteering and chocolate.

But we must make decisions on a daily, hourly, sometimes constant basis, to choose between fear and love. When we feel fearful to the point that it’s debilitating, we should communicate with our trusted medical experts and loved ones. When it creeps up we must surround ourselves with love and joy. I think it’s really helpful to worship together and claim what we hold to be true and hear our voices among the many as we pray and sing and confess and proclaim and laugh at the pastor’s jokes. I believe that one of the best ways to face fear and anxiety is to volunteer for a cause you believe in. But we must not expect perfection from one another. The church must be a safe space to be real. We will vacillate between fear and love. We will face times in our lives when a diagnosis or a

financial struggle or some other frightening news will cause us to shudder. And that's ok, that's normal. It's not a sign of spiritual weakness. It's a sign of spiritual strength to share that with fellow believers.

My colleagues and friends send a lot of encouraging messages, prayers, and memes to one another and we name our fears. One message that I have loved recently says the following. "Rest here beside the living water, while I go ahead to scout the trail, the one that will take us up to higher ground, to a place where we can see tomorrow more clearly. Give your mind and spirit time to recover. Feel the embrace of those you love. Let the peace in your heart grow stronger." I'll be right back, and then we'll walk together.

That's what Christian community is to me. A group of people, on a journey toward the kingdom of God, a place without fear, the perfection of love. People who support each other and know that the journey toward the kingdom is a marathon, not a sprint. A community where we can be honest and vulnerable and, together, we can overcome fear and move forward to that place where faith, hope, and love abide and really do cast out fear.

Remember, in the meantime, that you're not as alone as the fear wants you to think. Look around. This place is a safe place for you to be yourself, be accepted for who you are and for what you're afraid of, even if it's something as silly as a fear of clowns which is called coulrophobia. If you tell us that's what you fear, we will stand between you and the clowns until you're brave enough to walk up, look them in the eyes, and honk their big, red noses. You are not alone in this journey. We will face the fears together because casting out fears is a team sport. Amen.