BREAK OPEN THE SKY

SAVING OUR FAITH
FROM A CULTURE OF FEAR

STEPHAN BAUMAN

Praise for
Break Open the Sky

"Rarely do I read something with such deep spiritual analysis, profound insight, and poetic storytelling as Stephan Bauman's new book *Break Open the Sky.* For those who think they already know the good news of Christ but still long for more, this short, honest, and beautifully written book is what you have been waiting for. *Break Open the Sky* is a timeless contribution to Christian and human spirituality."

—Ken Wytsma, president of Kilns College, founder of The Justice Conference, and the author of *The Grand Paradox: The Messiness of Life, the Mystery of God and the Necessity of Faith*

"We live in a brave new world where terrorism, racism, and bigotry drive an engine of fear in our society and within our churches. Bauman tackles these topics head-on, compelling us by God's love and exciting us by his grace to reject fear, embrace risk, and rediscover faith to care for people in the shadows. *Break Open the Sky* is a much-needed and valuable work that speaks to our current landscape in a fresh, new way."

—Ed Stetzer, Billy Graham Distinguished Endowed Chair for Church, Mission, and Evangelism, Wheaton College

"A journey not for the faint of heart, *Break Open the Sky* is an invitation to live out an authentic faith in the midst of fear . . . , an invitation to hope!"

—Tom Lin, president and CEO of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

"Humanitarian Stephan Bauman has witnessed love conquering fears, but he has also seen fear stymie faith's best intentions. His lessons from his life of global service can help us shed our fears and reawaken our commitments to that 'sociological impossibility,' the global Christian community."

—David Neff, former editor in chief of *Christianity Today* (retired)

"In uncertain and anxious times, *Break Open the Sky* is a critically important book for those who want not just to survive but to thrive. It is for those who want to find joy and power and impact in any season, especially the challenging ones. This is must reading for anyone who wants to go deeper into God and deeper into the real world we live in. This book couldn't be more timely."

—Rev. Bill Haley, executive director of Coracle

"In the tumultuous days we are living in, when fear seems to be overtaking the hearts of so many, Stephan Bauman's *Break Open the Sky* comes like a torch in the darkness. This book amplifies the very good news of an upside-down kingdom and is a clarion call to live out a faith that is honest, gritty, and beautiful."

—Rob Morris, president and cofounder of Love146

"Stephan has been an eyewitness to real fear factors that have disrupted lives and derailed nations. With this book Stephan delivers a rich treasure trove of personalities and stories accumulated in his journey through this globe's minefield of violence, disaster, and disregard. This

book is an entertaining and thought-provoking travel guide offering a way to joy in the midst of insecurity."

—Steve Haas, catalyst, World Vision

"Stephan Bauman's artistry with words puts a new lens on old truths and a new way to view the events of our day that leave me feeling encouraged and courageous. This book is a must read for individuals, small groups, and university classes who truly want to live as God's peculiar people—fearless when the world says to be fearful, seeing abundance when the world cleaves to its storehouses of wealth, seeing 'the other' as the ones who Jesus calls us to reach out to, especially now."

—Dr. Beth Birmingham, senior director of Leadership and Staff Development, Compassion International; Associate Faculty, Eastern University

"Stephan Bauman is a unique mix of visionary, poet, strategist, and pastoral leader. *Break Open the Sky* is a book of hope in a world gripped by a culture of fear. Hope is out there. It may be messy and raw, but it's glorious. Life isn't about living with an absence of fear; it's about taking the risk to love anyway. Stephan points to a deeper understanding of the nature of God, one that he's witnessed firsthand in countless stories from around the world."

—Mark and Vickie Reddy, The Justice Conference

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MULTNOMAH

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Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's added emphasis.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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To all those who awaken and
astonish from the edge.
You are my teachers.

We are not trapped or locked up
in these bones.
No, no. We are free to change.
And love changes us.
And if we can love one another,
we can break open the sky.

—Walter Mosley

There is no fear in love.

—John, the disciple of Jesus

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Introduction

Disillusioned

You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.

—William Faulkner

A few days before Christmas in 2015, the sound of bullets striking steel forced a passenger bus in northeastern Kenya to screech to a halt. A group of ten militants from al-Shabaab, a Somali terrorist group, stormed the bus. With guns pointed they asked the passengers to identify their religious affiliation—Muslim or Christian. Their intention was to kill the Christians. Only a year before, terrorists had boarded a similar bus and executed twenty-eight non-Muslim passengers.[1]

But the passengers refused to comply. Instead, Muslims gave their fellow Christian travelers religious attire so they wouldn't be identified. Then they told the terrorists "to kill them together or leave them alone."[2] "We stuck together tightly," said one Muslim passenger. "The militants

threatened to shoot us, but we still refused and protected our brothers and sisters" until the attackers "gave up and left."[3]

Somehow this story slipped by us mostly unnoticed. Maybe it was the holiday rush or the excitement over the release of the latest Star Wars film. Or maybe we couldn't take another story about terrorism after the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino. Or maybe we just didn't like the story. Amid the growing animosity toward refugees, it seemed inconceivable that a group of Muslims would protect their Christian "brothers and sisters" from certain death.

Last year while I was visiting a seminary in New England, a first-year student asked me why she "experienced more love outside the church than within." Christian discourse seemed to mirror the vitriol of the national debate, where perspectives are polarized and racism and xenophobia are thinly veiled. Within her own community a growing undercurrent of fear troubled her. Hesitant in tone and demeanor and careful not to blame or judge anyone, she wondered what had become of the faith community she loved so much. How could so many people denounce immigrants, refugees, or Muslims yet still profess to follow the One who asks us to love not only the "least of these" but our enemies as well?[4]

Data seems to support our friend's angst. When it comes to what happens in our country today, more than 40 percent of Americans "believe that people of faith (42%) and religion (46%) are part of the problem."[5]

Faith, it seems, has a branding problem.

Meanwhile, anxiety in the United States has reached epidemic levels.[6] "We are living in the most fearmongering time in human history," said Barry Glassner, a leading sociologist and author of *The Culture of*

Fear. "There's a lot of power and money available to individuals and organizations who can perpetuate these fears."[7] And when it comes to racial tension, 84 percent of adults agree "there is a lot of anger and hostility between different ethnic and racial groups in America."[8]

But maybe our fears are justified. After all, we live in precarious times. The magnitude of suffering we witness on the global stage—whether from acute acts of terrorism, chronic violence, or sudden injustice—invites a torrent of fear and raises a thousand questions. An avalanche of opinions proffered daily by news outlets, radio talk shows, and social media leaves us feeling threadbare, disillusioned, and even nauseous at times. We are perplexed, torn between principle and what seems practical, between love and safety, and between faith and fear. We are ready to support needed policy but not at the expense of character. We grieve the loss of life in Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan. We want to honor the heritage of our country by welcoming the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"[9] yet our actions as a nation seem to undermine the very virtues we so passionately profess.

How do we honestly grapple with legitimate questions about faith in the face of such tangible fear? Can we muster enough courage to calm our trepidatious souls long enough to clearly consider what is at stake, not only for us, but also for our children, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren as well?

When Muslims identify with Christians, offering their lives to protect them—whether motivated by their faith, sense of humanity, or social context—we encounter a profound phenomenon, a beautiful collision so stark, so rare, so astonishing that it forces us to ask why our faith, on the whole, is not producing a similar or better version of such sacrificial love? Is the God of the universe reckless enough to showcase

an extraordinary deed by a people considered by many to be our enemies in order to challenge, awaken, or maybe even shock us? Could this same God require in us a love so breathtaking, so intrusive, so astonishing that our initial reaction might be to scurry away, taking theological cover from such a formidable mandate?

What does it really mean to follow Jesus in the face of so much fear?

By now you might be thinking this is a book about how to become better people. We should fear less, love more, give sacrificially, and so on. Or it may sound as if I am giving instructions for pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps so we can become postmodern good Samaritans who welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked.[10] While such actions can be helpful, I am not interested in outlining an ethic or defending a ready-made position. We don't need a new rising to justice that ultimately loses its steam or a deeper leaning into the better angels of our nature. The issues we face—the fear of terrorism, the fracturing of society, the superficiality of faith—point to something much deeper. Our disillusionment is symptomatic of something fundamental to our identity as people of faith. There are ruptures in the core beliefs that may have sheltered us for too long. Our faith is not simply adrift. We may actually be shipwrecked and in need of rescue.

If you are disillusioned or feel done with it all, if you feel angry, exhausted, bored, grieved, or apathetic, I humbly suggest that now might be the time to take a risk. Be warned (or maybe reassured): the answers we seek will not be found on the left or right of the political spectrum. I am convinced Jesus was neither a conservative nor a liberal. While he cared deeply about people, culture, justice, and, yes, even

politics, he was, and still is, something altogether different. It's this different way—a less-traveled path, paved with a surprising ethic and powered by an astonishing love—that I am after.

You might be searching for the same. It's dangerous to settle for something less than what we hoped for.

We must hold out for the real thing.

A Fellowship of Fear

The hallmark of our times—in our politics, our social discourse, and increasingly, our faith—is fear. Often subtle but also brazen at times, fear is becoming so commonplace we assume it's normal. We are more afraid than we realize.

There is certainly no shortage of things to fear today. According to one survey, government corruption, cyberterrorism, tracking of personal information, terrorist attacks, biowarfare, identity theft, and economic collapse top the list of things we fear most.[11] Incredibly, a recent poll found that more Americans were afraid in 2014 than just after the September 11 attacks in 2001.[12] Three out of four Americans believe "occasional terrorism" is now part and parcel of our way of life,[13] even as a majority of Americans have favored banning Muslims from entering the United States.[14]

Yet by almost any standard we are better off today than ever before in history. When Franklin Roosevelt spoke his famous words "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," the nation's banks were collapsing, one in four workers was unemployed, and Adolf Hitler had just become chancellor of Germany.[15] Global life expectancy was about forty-five

years then.[16] Today it's about seventy.[17] In 1900, in some American cities, as many as 30 percent of children died before they were a year old. Today it's less than 1 percent in the United States and less than 5 percent globally.[18] The majority of the world's population then lived in extreme poverty. Today? Less than 15 percent.[19]

We live longer, hurt less, and earn more. Yet somehow we are more afraid than we used to be.

Fear is popular today because it's profitable. Producers of media in all its forms have become merchants of fear, stoking fires of controversy, threat, or angst in search of larger audiences. Politicians, both conservative and progressive, traffic in fear to secure support and shore up votes. Corporations employ fear to make us buy more of their products. Friends warn us of the latest health scare, food allergy, or crime epidemic. Even religion, as an enterprise, makes use of fear.

Fear often masquerades as frustration, anger, anxiety, or apathy. So much of what we experience—from rage on the highway to the buried frustration in our hearts, from the drive to achieve greatness to the drudgery of daily life, from flare-ups in the office to put-downs—is rooted in fear. When we ask ourselves what's wrong—what's *really* wrong—if we are honest, we admit we are afraid of failure or success or love or rejection or hurt.

Fear slips surreptitiously into our souls, producing anger, an unexpected edginess, or just a vague anxiety. Sometimes we don't even know why we feel the way we do. We may even wonder if we are becoming what we fear most. All this leaves us feeling vulnerable, even distraught at times.

We live in a culture of fear.

I Am Disillusioned Too

My wife, Belinda, and I are no strangers to faith. For more than two decades, we immersed ourselves in a broad spectrum of church and parachurch life. Our lives were indelibly marked during these years. Our passion for the world was birthed and then matured. We discovered lifelong friends. Our children were born. We wouldn't trade these experiences for anything. We have no regrets, only gratitude.

But we, too, are increasingly disillusioned. Why is everyone so afraid? Not long ago on an otherwise normal day, after a barrage of unfounded angst about the global refugee crisis, I said to Belinda, "If this is what it means to follow Jesus, I want out." Like the young woman we met on that seminary visit, we grieved the political and fear-laden discourse coming from various faith communities.

Belinda and I began to see the degree to which the church we had fallen in love with seemed bent on serving itself as its members clamored to join an "inner ring,"[20] distinguished by being affiliated with certain people and brands, by wielding influence and power, or by espousing certain theological perspectives, all the while ignoring "the least of these." The idea we had given our lives for—that the church "exists for the benefit of those who are not its members"[21]—began to seem increasingly questionable, if not altogether implausible. Faith felt more like an exclusive club than a covenant community.[22]

Today, along with the many authentic expressions of worship and the genuine hearts we encounter so often in the greater community of faith, we still experience the dark underbelly of Christian culture. Self-promotion, judgment, and gossip are too common, usually subtle,

and often camouflaged with mentions of Scripture, theology, or well-intentioned promises to pray. Dissension within the body of Christ seems epidemic. Friendships too often come to an abrupt end. People leave churches and organizations wounded, many surprised by their painful journey.

I recognize that offering critique is fraught with peril. Generalizations are dangerous, delicate, and prone to be misunderstood. I grieve my own participation in these subtle sins and have asked colleagues, friends, and family members for forgiveness on many occasions. I pray my words will be received not as a gavel of judgment but as a scalpel of healing. My intention isn't simply to expose our common problems but to offer a helping hand so we may lift ourselves to a better place. Yet doing so requires us to name and accept the current state of affairs.

I am convinced that much of what we call faith is really not faith at all; instead it's a culture that has developed around faith. More broadly, I am concerned our version of Christianity has become, in part, only an echo of the real thing, an industry feeding off a caricature of religion. Economic drivers—sales, financial growth, or funding, for example—rather than inspired vision tend to set the priorities. Social media "Likes" determine prestige and popularity. Talent and pedigree are preferred over character. Success is measured by numbers, followers, or donations rather than impact.

All these elements can work together to foster values and practices that undermine the very things we believe in and long for. Humility is exchanged for popularity. Power is wielded in unhelpful ways, often unknowingly. Compassion becomes a badge of honor rather than a form of altruism. Put simply, when we are afraid, we are more likely to compromise what's most important to us—our convictions about faith,

character, or even the nature of truth. We are especially susceptible when we are offered some form of real or perceived security in exchange for compromising our faith.

Too often leaders, politicians, public officials, and even preachers and pastors exploit fear to their advantage. We don't have to reach too far back in history for examples that prove this is true. Consider the rise of Fascism in the 1930s, the Red Scare in the early 1950s, or even "radical Islamic terrorism" today. "It is far safer to be feared than loved," said Niccolo Machiavelli[23] in referring to the benefits of manipulating with fear.

I believe these subtle—and not so subtle—mistakes are symptoms of a deeper problem. Our problems are not necessarily rooted in faulty theology, cults of personality, external threats, media manipulation, or even capitulation to secular culture. Our problems are rooted in fear itself—our *own* fear actually. Sometimes we don't see it. Symptoms of fear—our tendency to compare ourselves to others, our feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, or our penchant for popularity, to name a few—are usually camouflaged and often subconscious. Our fears can even drive us to do the very things we despise.

It would be shortsighted to dismiss our problems as merely broken humanity, spiritual warfare, or simply the Fall.[24] The core of our faith, the essence of the gospel, is being compromised by our culture of fear and the industry that has emerged around it. Our deep-seated fear about the world, others, and ourselves is forging a version of church that is only a shadow of the real thing. As a result, an increasing number of Jesus followers and God seekers find themselves in a quandary about their faith. Many are disillusioned. Some are holding out for a better version to emerge. Others are giving up on faith altogether.

I am concerned that if we don't recover the essence of authentic church, if we don't repair the foundation of our faith that is being ravaged by fear, the prevailing culture could take our faith down and our lives along with it. A friend once told me that the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. If my friend is right, then your faith and mine are only as strong as we are unafraid.

The Paradox of One Percent

Our proclivity for fear says something about the quality of our faith. The people who should be most afraid often are not, and those who should be carefree are most afraid. Because I work globally, I learn from unlikely people in far-off places. Belinda and I lived in West Africa for six years and later returned to East Africa with our sons, then three and five years old. During those years and since, we've traveled fairly extensively, often to places with pressing needs because of disaster, disease, or war. Today I spend a fair bit of time moving between two populations: the world's most vulnerable, who are considered the bottom 1 percent by Western economic standards, and the very wealthy, or top 1 percent.[25] I spend my days connecting the top with the bottom, and vice versa, for this reason: they need each other. Both have something to give.

Some time ago while traveling through the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country devastated by years of war, a friend and I met a woman who described her experiences. She told us how her husband was killed in a cross fire between warring militias, how she was violently assaulted by soldiers who were supposed to protect her, and how she fled her village with her eight children under the cover of night. She

forgave her perpetrators—"again and again," in her words—until she was healed. She started a small business and taught "her sisters" how to do the same. She also taught them how to forgive. Today she sings, she laughs, she keynotes at ceremonies in her community. When she walks into a room, she is honored with applause.

To the rest of the world, she is poor. By economic standards that may be so. Yet she is anything but poor. Our faith paled in comparison to hers; she towered in strength. We were afraid to cross the border into her country, yet she lives there, helping others flourish in one of the most difficult places in the world. We came to give, to pray, yet we found ourselves on our knees, asking her to pray for us.

I have often been surprised by the resilience, perseverance, and courage in places where I expected people to be riddled, even paralyzed, by fear. I have been equally surprised by the fear I find in people who are living comfortably, who have access to first-rate health care, top-tier education, and unbridled opportunity. Many are surprisingly afraid; some are even embarrassed by their chronic anxieties.[26] Research confirms this observation. In his essay "The Epidemic of Worry," David Brooks wrote, "According to World Health Organization, 18.2 percent of Americans report chronic anxiety while only 3.3 percent of Nigerians do."[27] People living near the bottom seem to fear less, while those living at the top fear more.

I find the same paradox revealed in different demographic groups in the United States. Ethnic faith communities—Hispanic, Congolese, Burmese, Arabic, to name only a few—as well as African American faith communities, often exhibit astounding faith in the face of immense challenges. Many on the margins economically, socially, or culturally overcome unjust treatment every day. They are excluded,

scoffed at or jeered, overlooked, or simply forgotten, yet they bravely carry on. Still, years, even generations, of such treatment have left whole populations in our country feeling oppressed. Within these contexts uncommon faith is often forged, the kind of faith that is no longer afraid.

But isn't there an intuitive link between injustice, faith, and the absence of fear? Hard times forge strong faith. Strong faith, in turn, enables people to become less fearful. In short, suffering becomes the crucible in which resilient, genuine faith can be formed. Makes sense, right?

Maybe not. At least, not entirely.

Most people I know are experiencing suffering from one source or another—a wounded relationship, a physical malady, an impossible situation, an estranged child. But for many this formula simply doesn't work. They emerge from a season of suffering even more afraid than before. Anxiety is pervasive in our culture; the incidence of fear is on the rise.[28] Suffering doesn't automatically produce the kind of faith that overcomes fear.

On the whole the problems experienced by those who enjoy economic and social power do not seem to create the same depth of faith as do the kinds of suffering encountered in parts of Africa and Asia or on the refugee trail in the Middle East. The paradox of the 1 percent is an invitation to consider a hidden message that few have dared to explore. When we encounter the people whom Jesus called "the least of these," we generally shift into a charitable mode. Our response, we assume, is to offer help. Whether we choose to help or not, our posture is the same: giver to receiver, patron to client, or philanthropist to beneficiary. Such a posture isn't always bad. After all, God does call us to be

generous. But when we shift into this mode of charity, we miss an important message that was central to the life and teaching of Jesus, a message that has the potential to rescue us from fear, overhaul our faith, and change our lives. Discovering that message and its implications—which is a major theme of this book—requires us first to make "the least of these" our teachers.

And surprising teachers they are.

What This Book Is About

Break Open the Sky is about reclaiming our faith from a culture of fear so we can become emissaries of hope during portentous times. This book seeks to strip our faith to its most basic form, taking down its facade and dismantling its superstructure to gaze upon its pristine foundation, the piers of truth buried deep within the bedrock of God himself. *Break Open the Sky* is an invitation to dig beneath the superficial faith that has left us feeling adrift, anxious, or afraid so we can discover, or rediscover, the real thing. We owe it to God, and ourselves, to examine these essentials so we can turn our hopes into reality.

Break Open the Sky confronts simplistic, misleading notions that we've too easily believed. This book's central idea is that we have settled for a saccharine version of faith—a version of faith we must find the courage to question, confront, and dismantle in order to reconstruct our faith with an unwavering resolution to live it out. *Break Open the Sky* is an expedition into living a life of authentic faith, free from the fear that so often plagues our faith communities.

We can either turn away or choose to be brave.

This journey is not for the faint of heart.

Throughout these pages I search for a set of principles that form the bedrock of faith. My journey so far has surprised me, in part because what I've learned has come from unlikely places. I expected to learn from the eloquent, educated, or famous but instead have found wisdom among the least of these. In many cases my tutors have been the most vulnerable themselves, those who have suffered greatly while maintaining a holy, distinguishable, set-apart trust in God. In the process I've come to realize that much of what I had grown to depend upon was not essential to the Christian faith at all.

If you take this journey, I am convinced you will be surprised too.

While faith can, and should, shape culture, its essentials transcend it. God is absolute and relevant to all people for all time. If we believe a rediscovery of faith can correct the trajectory of disillusionment so many are experiencing, then the essence of faith will apply to all people regardless of geography, circumstances, or education. An entrepreneur from the Congo, a skater in Portland, and an aspiring attorney from Chicago will all have something in common if, in fact, they have tapped into these essentials.

We will explore three major themes. The first is *Truth.* We'll examine the central ideas in the life and teachings of Jesus, which are more relevant than ever for the post-truth culture in which we live, ideas that are usually tamed or diluted but which form the heart of faith and have the power to move us beyond fear. Second, we'll explore the power of *Love,* its revolutionizing character and liberating promise, why we so easily misunderstand its true nature and source, why faith is meaningless without it, and how it can become the foundation for a different way of living in a world increasingly bereft of love. Finally, we'll explore the notion of *Risk,* specifically how authentic faith and genuine love

catapult us toward a life we've dreamed about but often don't have the guts to live. Along the way we will consider what it means to have a conversational relationship with God, a relationship free from the duty, drudgery, and fear that so often accompany the journey of faith.

Maybe you are disillusioned with faith or are struggling to close the gap between the promises of faith and what you experience day to day. Maybe you feel anxious or find yourself caving in to the fear around you. Perhaps you feel as if following Jesus has become so complicated and difficult that you are ready to give up. Or it's possible you've become so used to making decisions from a posture of fear that you are no longer aware of it. Sadly, fear can become a lens through which we see everything.

If so, I pray this book blows like a fresh wind through your soul.

One more thing before we set off on our journey together. For many years sociologists have predicted the decline of religion. Some have expected religion to die out altogether.[29] Instead, "a massive religious awakening is taking place around the world."[30] While church attendance is declining in the United States,[31] religion is not. Even the majority of those who self-identify as having no religious affiliation—"nones" as some people call them—"pray and believe in angels."[32] In short, those who predicted the end of religion were dead wrong.

So when the eminent philosopher Charles Taylor called our times a "Secular Age," some wondered if he had missed the mark. But for Taylor, secularization neither denied "the existence of God" nor affirmed "the triumph of science over religion." Instead it lowered ethical expectations, deemphasizing the essential goals of faith, goals that are impossible to fulfill apart from God. We must recognize that while religion is on the rise, it may not be the kind of religion that brings life.

To be sure, faith and religion can be two very different things. In recent years, said Matthew Rose commenting on Taylor, "life without God became imaginable," even as we claimed to be more religious than ever. Some even began to wonder "if Christian faith might be an obstacle to human well-being."[33] The humanist movement, for example, is gaining steam under the proviso that good is possible, maybe even better, without God.[34]

Admirably, Taylor was looking for a faith that would produce more than merely good Christian ethics or better "human flourishing."[35] Dallas Willard anticipated a similar crisis, calling for "men and women to be heroic in their faith and in spiritual character and power [because] the greatest danger to the Christian church today is that of pitching its message *too low*."[36]

When the majority of Americans say they fear the wrath of God,[37] we can understand why church leaders want to make Christianity more palpable. But by presenting a more approachable God, have we pulled ourselves down rather than lifted others up? Have we reduced faith to mere self-help therapy and activism rather than faithfully representing the radical nature of the gospel with its promise and power to thoroughly overhaul human life and society so that onlookers cannot help but be drawn to God with wonder? By lowering the bar, have we lost our courage, our passion, our zeal for something greater, which in the end may be nothing more than the real thing—mere Christianity, as C. S. Lewis would say?

These questions haunt me; maybe they haunt you too. But my main interest is not to prove our faith is in jeopardy—the indicators are compelling enough for others to prove that. Instead I want to explore

and pursue a different version of faith, one that is faithful to the person and nature of Jesus, one that transcends culture but is still deeply engaged with it, and one that is attractive to a dying world, not off-putting, proud, or smug.

In a very real sense, this book is nothing more than a quest for authentic faith in an age when authenticity is desperately needed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "We can only achieve perfect liberty and enjoy fellowship with Jesus when . . . his call to absolute discipleship, is appreciated in its entirety." But appreciating the fullness of this call "is not a sort of spiritual shock treatment," Bonhoeffer explained. "Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it. His commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it."[38]

But we must pursue this call together, not alone, within the community of faith, as broken and disillusioned as we may be.

Someone recently asked me how I am able to remain hopeful in the face of so much fear and suffering. Our faith is indeed in crisis; the symptoms are daunting. But our God is greater than the problems we face. Like you, I grieve at the onset of another war or the latest coup d'état that drags another nation toward ruin. I get sick to my stomach when I hear stories of boys forced to fight in wars or girls sold into slavery. I weep at the infighting across much of our political, social, and religious landscape. Yet I also encounter extraordinary stories of hope—of churches living out versions of faith that truly distinguish them as lights on a hill,[39] of ordinary people fighting overwhelming odds to push back the effects of fear, racism, violence, oppression, or poverty. I meet people who choose to love despite having overwhelming reasons to become bitter.

Genuine change is hard work but within reach and entirely possible. Authentic faith is tangible. Love is near. Hope is real. We *can* break through to a new realm; our times demand an urgent response. Novelist Walter Mosley wrote:

> We are not trapped or locked up in these bones. No, no. We are free to change. And love changes us. And if we can love one another, we can break open the sky.[40]

Take this journey with me. Your risk now promises real change, not just for you, but for others as well. Our world, our culture, and our faith have reached a crisis point. We are living in a moment when we can choose to let our convictions slip away or we can double down on what is most important. Our faith is at stake. Our lives too.

Together, with God's help, we can break open the sky.

Part 1

Truth

The Spirit of God is the great unmasker of illusions, the great destroyer of icons and idols. God's love for us is so great that He does not permit us to harbor false images, no matter how attached we are to them. God strips those falsehoods from us no matter how naked it may make us, because it is better to live naked in truth than closed in fantasy.

—Brennan Manning

One

Truth Furiously Knocking

Better a cruel truth than a comfortable delusion.

—Edward Abbey

Former Maryland poet laureate Lucille Clifton wrote a poem some years ago about the nature of truth. She finished her poem with a captivating line: "You might as well answer the door, my child, / the truth is furiously knocking."[1]

Last year the *Oxford Dictionary* chose *post-truth* as the word of the year, not because it was new—it's been around for more than a decade—but because Oxford recorded a significant spike in the word's usage. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *post-truth* as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[2] Both *post-truth* and *fake news,* a term used specifically to refer to "people who purposely fabricate stories for clicks and revenue,"[3] have become hotly debated topics.

Across all age groups in the United States, confidence in mass

media has sunk to an all-time low. Only 32 percent of Americans say they trust the media is telling the truth, down 8 percentage points from last year.[4] When John Adams called facts "stubborn" in 1770, saying that "whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence,"[5] he may not have anticipated a day when facts would become mere decorations of opinion rather than germane to truth.

Truth is not what it used to be.

In the New Testament the Greek word for faith (*pistis*) essentially means "trust, confidence, assurance, and belief."[6] One of the capstone verses in all the Bible defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."[7] Faith is belief, rooted in a commitment—a commitment anchored in substance, tangible evidence, in truth itself. And truth is anchored in fact. Jesus, who lived in time and space, actually referred to himself as "the way and *the truth* and the life."[8]

Faith without truth starts to crumble really fast. It's like having the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath or leaning against a paper wall. Faith without truth is scary.

And so it should be.

What if our growing unease about truth and the symptoms we feel, whether mere anxiety or full-on fear, is actually an invitation to take a hard look at our faith? What if our fear, whether corporate or personal, is really an opportunity to reason together, to consider the state of our faith, to reflect on its nature, to sift through its presuppositions and explore its implications? What if truth has been knocking for some time—maybe for years—but ever more furiously now in these urgent times?

If we are brave enough to take an honest look, we will find truth is insistent, not because it wants to harm or condemn. No, the nature of truth is to set free, to break open, to liberate.[9]

Several years ago the world was dramatically awakened to the deadly war in Syria when an image of the lifeless body of a three-year-old boy, Aylan Kurdi, surfaced in mainstream media. Still wearing his tiny shoes, blue shorts, and red T-shirt, Aylan washed up on a Turkish beach after a failed attempt to reach safety in Europe. Our hearts broke when we heard about Aylan's father, who tried to save his son.[10]

The image of Aylan became a tipping point in public opinion, drawing attention to a five-year-old war that had already claimed more than four hundred thousand civilian lives and forced more than eleven million Syrians to flee their homes. Regarding the image of Aylan, filmmaker Ken Burns observed that the "single image . . . [still] has that power to shock and arrest us."[11]

But within a few months, as the migration of hundreds of thousands of Syrian families pouring into Europe dominated news headlines, the possibility of refugees like Aylan and his family coming to the United States had stirred controversy and contention and even hostility.[12] The horrific terrorist attack in Paris on November 13, 2015, followed by the attack in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015, led many to speculate that opening the door to refugees would lead to more terrorism, a fear further stoked by politicians and several candidates for the presidency in 2016.

The compassion sparked by Aylan's death was swept away by the prevailing winds of fear.

A day after the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, I addressed a group of people in nearby Santa Monica about the plight of Syrian

refugees. Following a brief presentation, a gentleman who had visited Kenya and valued the role of faith in serving others asked me if I thought Islam was to blame for terrorism. I explained that, while I didn't agree with the tenets of Islam, I knew many Muslims who categorically rejected terrorism. He pressed me further. "But doesn't the Koran condone violence?" Carefully I said the same argument could be made about the Bible, especially the Old Testament. He pressed again, this time more stridently. His questions turned into comments, and he began to dominate the gathering. I realized he was more interested in making a point than in finding common ground.

As he continued to present his perspective, a woman near the back of the room with golden-gray hair and a smile like the midday sun raised her hand. "I meet Muslims all the time. We have great conversations. We talk about Jesus, and I often pray with them," she said. "I suppose I should be worried about getting my throat slit in the back of a taxi or something, but I am not. I am not afraid to die; I know where I am going. I choose to love."

All my theological explanations and data couldn't accomplish what this woman did by sharing her personal experience. With a few simple words, she shifted the tone of the room. Her story made me think of the apostle John's words: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."[13]

But how could two people, similar in many ways, arrive at such different conclusions? Both grieved the loss of life in San Bernardino the night before, and both cared passionately about the issues we were discussing. Both had a commitment to the Christian faith, even similar versions of that faith. Yet their perspectives couldn't have been more

divergent. She chose to trust, while her counterpart chose to fear. She expressed love; he offered anger.

He sidestepped, dismissed, or shelved salient facts about refugees, Syria, and Islam, as well as certain essential truths about his faith, and allowed his inclinations and emotions to prevail. She allowed the substance of her faith, anchored in the historical life and message of Jesus, to help her overcome her fear, even as she recognized the brutal possibility of personal death.

His truth left him afraid while her truth helped her triumph over fear.

What Mr. Rogers and Jesus Had in Common

Fred Rogers, affectionately known as Mr. Rogers or even "Saint Fred" as of late,[14] hosted one of the longest-running shows in network television. He was awarded an honorary doctorate—his twenty-fifth—by Boston University some years ago. At the commencement ceremony Rogers was met with exuberant cheers from the student body as he invited them to sing along to the theme from his television program: "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood. A beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine?" All across the stadium people swayed to the rhythm of the well-known tune.[15] After the singing died down, the crowd now calm and attentive, Mr. Rogers said, "It's not the honors and the prizes and the fancy outsides of life which ultimately nourish our souls." Then he quoted *The Little Prince,* saying, "*L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux:* what is essential is invisible to the eye."[16]

A man who dedicated his life to crafting visible stories at a time when image was becoming paramount, Mr. Rogers chose to point to unseen

things as being essential. For Mr. Rogers the most important truth was hidden from sight. Or maybe he would say hidden in plain sight.

Jesus wasn't caught up in the fancy outside of life either. When he presented a series of eight principles or values, called the Beatitudes, at the outset of his Sermon on the Mount, he would have drawn a collective gasp from his audience. In just a few succinct statements, Jesus ran roughshod over the religious norms of his day by assigning virtue to a group of unlikely people: the poor, sad, meek, merciful, hungry, thirsty, peaceful, and persecuted.[17] Jesus conferred divine favor, or blessing, not on the revered moralists of his day, but on the ragtag outsiders. The respectable folk within earshot likely squirmed while the outcasts dropped their jaws and Jesus's disciples sat dumbfounded.

Jesus went on to make his case for fulfilling, not abolishing, the contemporary rules of faith, known in his day as "the Law," by putting into place something far better. He praised the doers, not the talkers, of the Law as "great in the kingdom of heaven" and punctuated his argument by saying anyone interested in this new version of faith must exceed the righteousness required by the Law.[18]

In these eight rather poetic statements, Jesus confronted what it meant to be blessed by God by redefining who is invited to live the good life. He sidestepped conventional wisdom, upending the notion that carefully minding a set of rules was God's intended path to virtue. Instead, Jesus spoke about a set of values so important and powerful they would not only fulfill the Law but exceed it altogether.

In the first century the rules of religious life were objective, taught regularly, and applied in minute detail. The Law was well known, and it permeated Jewish life. On the other hand, the values Jesus talked

about would have been counterintuitive to the first-century mind, if not hidden altogether. At best, they would have seemed paradoxical and, at worst, completely foreign to the contemporary concept of the righteous life. In the first century a person's predicament—such as blindness, illness, or poverty—was a sign of disfavor by God, sometimes even thought to indicate a curse. How could poverty, grief, hunger, or thirst be associated with blessing or divine acceptance? How could the poor, meek, mournful, and merciful be happy or blessed?

Jesus no doubt offended, confused, and sparked disbelief in many. But he pointed to something important, something essential and life changing. With these provocative words Jesus unveiled a powerful truth: what we often consider most important in life is, in fact, not, and conversely, what we sometimes laugh at, look down upon, or outright dismiss might be, in fact, essential. For Jesus, like Mr. Rogers, the most important things in life are invisible. Only those willing to shut their eyes would see.

The idea that truth is hidden is a recurrent theme in the Bible. When Nicodemus, a prestigious religious leader, sought out Jesus one night to offer some modest flattery and ask a few questions, Jesus told Nicodemus he couldn't "see his kingdom" unless he was "born again." Nicodemus was offended:

> "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.
>
> "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? . . . I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"[19]

In contrast to "seeing the kingdom," seeing through the world's eyes, said George Weigel, "is to see things in a distorted way. Original sin, we may say, was the original astigmatism . . . [distorting] our perception of the human person and the human condition." The incarnation, where God enters our human story in the form of a vulnerable baby, begins a sort of "vision correction through inversion," according to Weigel, "a pattern that continues through the gospels":

> Jesus doesn't evangelize the principalities and powers (although they, too, are welcome to listen and learn); he goes to the outcasts, including the lepers and prostitutes, to announce and embody a kingdom in which Israel's king is not just [king] of the people of Israel but the whole world.[20]

Earlier in the gospel of John, the apostle says regarding Jesus that even "though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."[21] Important truth, indispensable truth, truth that matters comes by *revelation,* "the divine or supernatural disclosure to humans."[22] Without revelation, it seems, we are prone to rejecting truth. More often than not, we simply cannot see it, and what we do see is distorted. What may be apparent to us, what is seemingly intuitive, may actually be false. While what we may dismiss because we consider it foolish or irrelevant may actually be the essential truth we are missing.

It seems Fred Rogers was echoing Jesus when quoting *The Little Prince.* Truth is hard to find, even when it is staring us in the face. "The blind will see and those who see will become blind," said Jesus.[23]

We need God's help to know what is true and what isn't. Our faith depends on it.

Why It's Called the Gospel

Many would consider the Beatitudes to be basic to the life and teaching of Jesus. Yet they remain controversial today. Dallas Willard, for example, insists they are merely announcements about who is invited to participate in the good life.[24] The poor, the hungry, the sad, the left-out are invited to experience God's favor, perhaps for the first time in history. Certainly Jesus did champion the marginalized and introduced what he called a kingdom, a way of life that was very different from the conventional thinking of his day. But Willard cautions against reading the Beatitudes as a new set of virtues, or ethics, to live by. "The poor in spirit are blessed as a result of the kingdom of God being available to them," wrote Willard, not because spiritual poverty is a virtuous or "praiseworthy condition."[25] Willard quoted Alfred Edersheim to drive home his point:

> Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit because they are poor in spirit." He did not think, "What a fine thing it is to be destitute of every spiritual attainment or quality. It makes people worthy of the kingdom." And we steal away the much more profound meaning of his teaching about the availability of the kingdom by replacing the state of spiritual impoverishment—in no way good in itself—with some supposedly praiseworthy state of mind or attitude that "qualifies" us for the kingdom.[26]

Poverty, whether physical or spiritual, does not qualify anyone for divine favor. Jesus is announcing something powerful, something

altogether different, something much better than the rules of his day. His listeners would have been shocked.

But Willard's logic breaks down with the latter Beatitudes. Jesus may very well be announcing the availability of divine favor to the poor, powerless, sad, hungry, and thirsty in the first four statements, but when he shifts to the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, he is doing more than announcing an invitation. He is commending those who are living out a set of "kingdom" values. Willard's interpretation of the Beatitudes is important, but it's incomplete.

Eugene Peterson and other well-respected theologians[27] present the Beatitudes as a distilled set of principles or, better, values that summarize what Jesus referred to as God's "kingdom," meaning what it looks like when God's "will [is] done, on earth as it is in heaven."[28] These values were, and are, so radically different from what we assume to be God's will that they seem impossible to live out. Within this impossibility lies a mystery, however—a surprise so radical that it became known as the gospel, or "good news." In these Beatitudes, Jesus both announced this breakthrough news and conferred it upon the least likely recipients.

There is a logic inherent in his invitation. If God is making his favor available for even the least of these, then everyone else is included too. This radical grace was—and is—available for all people bold enough to pursue his outrageous offer.

Bringing together Willard's and Peterson's views of the Beatitudes results in a more complete picture. While we recognize that only God can empower such a radical way of life, the Beatitudes represent both an announcement of the purpose of God to bless all people and a description of that blessed life through a set of kingdom values. Jesus was in effect inviting us into a new way to live, akin to Weigel's "inversion,"

through an upside-down set of priorities. It's a way of life that only God can make possible for us and establish in the world. These kingdom values cannot be earned or awarded based on merit, as those who have tried this radical lifestyle on their own have discovered. But for *anyone* willing to take up the invitation, there are profound lessons to be learned from the people who have been left out of God's favor for so long. By showcasing the least of these, God invites all of us to encounter, experience, and live out his divine favor.

The implications of the Sermon on the Mount were far-reaching. The sermon showed that those who thought they were living the good life, a life blessed by God, were, in fact, not. And those who were on the outside looking in — the outcasts, the down-and-out, the ragamuffins — were closer to God than they ever dreamed.

Two thousand years later we find ourselves in exactly the same place. Many people are living anxious lives. The demands of career, school, and family are taxing, if not overwhelming. The psychological stress occasioned by vagaries in the economy, the vitriol of our political discourse, or the threat of global terrorism leaves us feeling edgy and ragged. We feel anxiety but may not even know what makes us afraid.

And then there are the conversations we have with ourselves. Most people measure themselves against someone or something and then fight their inner doubts to believe they, too, have what it takes to do something meaningful with their lives. This inner tension creates a longing for some shard of shalom, some personal peace, some measure of rest. So we scurry to our faith communities in search of well-being, only to find the same pecking order, the same penchant for success, the same proclivity for performance from which we sought shelter.

Into this milieu Jesus introduces eight poster children: the poor, the

mourners, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Interestingly, they were featured prominently throughout the Old Testament and would have been referred to as *anawim,* literally "bowed down," in Jesus's day.[29] Mary, Jesus's mother, would have been described as anawim and maybe also Jesus himself. Anawim were known as the pious poor—humble, meek, hungry, and thirsty but also God-fearing. Several years ago I worshipped in a church in DC that, according to the pastor, serves both "the members of Congress and those that clean their offices." The pastor prayed powerfully for the anawim in the city, that we might see them, love them, and include them in our midst. It is these anawim who are the blessed, even happy, poster children in the Great Sermon. According to Jesus, the very people we may be tempted to pity, look down on, or dismiss are actually the choice subjects for introducing, explaining, and exhibiting the kingdom of God.

The idea seems as preposterous now as it must have seemed in Jesus's day.

Incidentally, to the poster children this news was good, outrageously good. No wonder they called it the gospel. But to the rest of the crowd, including perhaps some of Jesus's disciples, this news was blasphemous, ridiculous, and personally threatening. Jesus was dismantling all they knew about faith, the way in which they viewed God, and their idea of what it was to have divine favor. Jesus's disciples and anyone else listening would have seriously questioned his mental well-being.

Why did Jesus create the controversy? Was he bent on offending? Was he prone to inflammatory words? Or did he offend his listeners so they would consider taking up his invitation to what Willard called the "with-God life"[30]?

Two Roads Diverged

Jesus had his reasons for offering the provocative truths of the Beatitudes, and they are surprising. For Jesus, "cruel truth," the idea that truth must sometimes offend in order to awaken, was preferable to "comfortable delusion."

Yet before tackling the question of why Jesus made these statements, let's first consider their implications. Imagine two groups of people traveling on different roads. Both roads diverged from a fork, so far in the distance that the people can no longer see it in the rearview mirror. For the moment let's set aside the questions of how the people ended up on one road or the other or how many other groups were also traveling. On one road are people who are trying hard to be good, meaning that they work hard at being kind, going to church, doing well in school and work or raising children. Though they don't like office gossip, they can't help but get caught up in it once in a while. They keep in touch with friends on social media, give to charity, donate a few hours here and there to a local food bank, and work hard to stay in shape. And they stand ready to help any of the people on the second road who might be in need.

The second road is filled with people who, for the most part, appear to be unlucky. Many of them are unemployed. Some are grieving the death of a loved one. Others are fleeing a country torn by war or that offers little freedom or opportunity. Though they try, some simply cannot seem to make their mortgage payments. A few on this road seem oddly out of touch with reality. They are inordinately concerned with the needs of those around them, pray more than normal—albeit in an unrefined manner—and focus undue attention on obscure parts of the

world where injustice seems to be the norm. Occasionally they are the butt of jokes made by the people on the other road.

As you observe passersby on both roads, you notice the people on the second road seem to be more carefree than those on the first. Those in the first group are consumed with their goal: they want to finish their journey. They are focused, driven, even obsessive, insisting that nothing will prevent them from completing their mission. They are doing good in the world, to the best of their ability, and they know they will be rewarded for it.

Those in the second group seem to laugh more often despite their unlucky predicaments. Some even help each other along the way and are not afraid to slow down so others can catch up. Their ideas seem idealistic and impracticable, and their passion for their cause can be off-putting. They always seem a bit surprised when good things happen to them and consider themselves lucky.

If you recognize yourself on one of these roads and are starting to feel bad about your life, hang in there. I've spent most of my life on the first road and still drift into its lanes more often than I'd like to admit. When I do, I experience anxiety, boredom, frustration, and, indeed, fear. For me, these emotions serve as warning lights. They tell me I am in the wrong lane or on the wrong road and remind me to change course. God's mercy often comes disguised.

Now a question: Remember the man and woman from Santa Monica? One inclined to fear and one committed to love? On which road does each travel?

And another more salient question: On which road do you travel?

Could it be that the message of Jesus has been so muted through the ages that it has left many of us bereft of the joy, peace, and blessing

we set out to find? When we look around—whether across the church pew, to the adjacent cubicle, or at the neighbor down the street—we see family, friends, and acquaintances with whom we are prone to compare ourselves and compete without realizing what we are doing. Sometimes we experience a fear so pervasive that it saturates our thoughts and emotions without our recognizing it. We may talk about bravery or risk, but we are more likely to capitulate to the fear around us than to confront it.

Thankfully the two roads are not far apart. It's never too late to veer toward the other. Jesus constantly offers an invitation to change, always waits, and even provides the means to do it. God likes hard left (or right) turns, and he loves on- and off-ramps.

Cruel truth, in the end, is merciful. But it requires courage to take a hard, honest look at ourselves.

Case in Point

Let's meet one of the anawim Jesus was talking about in his Sermon on the Mount.

A handful of years ago in a certain country in Africa, a friend of mine whom we'll call Vincent was suddenly and unjustly thrown in prison. One of his colleagues had falsely accused him of rolling his eyes when a war survivor was telling her story on the local radio station. Vincent was imprisoned because someone said he was thinking derogatory thoughts about members of another tribe, even though there was no evidence to support the claim.

A few days later my colleague and I visited Vincent's wife—whom we'll call Chantel—and their four children. They lived in a simple

house consisting of three small rooms with marred concrete floors, a table made from unfinished planks, two benches, and a propane cooking stove. Most days Chantel farmed a small plot of land near their house, growing bananas to help make ends meet. It was evening when we met, and she was finished with her work. We talked about Chantel's husband—the rhythms of prison life, who was planning to take food to him, and how often she could visit. She understood the gravity of the situation. She knew others who had been imprisoned without charges for months, even years. Some never returned home.

After we talked awhile, Chantel gathered her children, all under the age of seven, and asked if we could pray. A lone candle lit the room as we stood together holding hands, all seven of us. We prayed and then sang "Amazing Grace" in two languages. We told her we would do everything possible to get her husband released. She told us she would keep praying. We promised to pray too.

As we walked away from her house under the moonlit sky, I couldn't help but reflect on the sharp difference between Chantel's disposition and mine. I was angered by the injustice and frustrated that my request to government officials was met with silence, despite my having some cachet due to my position. My perceived influence was inadequate to bring about a resolution. I felt helpless.

Chantel felt helpless too, but she was unshaken—her faith tangible, her disposition peaceful.

I asked myself if I would trade all the things I'd learned for a faith that doesn't buckle during a crisis, that endures under strain, that isn't fundamentally fearful. In the thick of her trial, she exuded strength, so much so that her four kids looked to her for assurance, for hope. She could not guarantee that their father would come home; she knew too

much about her country to make such a promise. She also knew that there was no fallback plan. She had no college degree, no savings account to lean on. Still, she rose to pray, vulnerable yet dignified, stricken but unmoved, her voice strong, her countenance resolute, her faith unwavering.

I am convinced genuine faith is more accessible than we imagine. If we were to shed our goals, programs, plans, products, and all the bells and whistles that have become ubiquitous in the Western church, what would remain? What if we were to pursue a simpler faith, a faith with more spiritual substance and less dependency on external markers, a faith with more freedom, more deference, and more trust but not as easy to objectively measure. Perhaps that would be a faith capable of inspiring confidence in what we hope for and evidence of what we cannot see,[31] a faith strong enough to enable a woman who just lost her husband and the father of her children to sing songs of courage to weary souls.

I wonder if that version of faith is what Jesus spoke of in his famous sermon.

Sometimes we have to close our eyes so we can see. Fred Rogers lived that way; some people dismissed him. Now he's "Saint Fred." Why? Because he lived like the people Jesus called blessed. Fred Rogers didn't have to live that way; he chose to. He could have lived as though he deserved something for his achievement, but he didn't.

Jesus inaugurated something revolutionary back then and still offers it today. He presents a radically new and disconcerting version of faith, not to offend, but to jolt us sufficiently so that we will reconsider—radically reconsider—what is most important in life and how to live that out. Jesus's version of faith doesn't come naturally. It is hard won,

but not by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, self-help style. It is a gift, but accepting it requires courage. It is available to those brave enough to accept God's invitation to take and eat with the confidence that he will neither slap their hands nor send them the bill.

Truth often stings before it liberates and brings healing. We typically don't associate truth with overcoming anxieties or fear, yet truth is often the place to begin. We must take an honest look in the mirror with the full confidence that God will not condemn us but rather will invite us into a whole new way to live, free from fear and with the capacity to genuinely love. After all, Jesus didn't come "into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."[32]

To understand how radically different Jesus's teaching on faith was—and still is—we must reconsider an essential truth in the life of faith, a truth so central that all others hang upon it. Too often our faith is laden with myriad strength-sapping bolt-ons, leaving us to ask if that is all there is. When we recover the essence of the gospel, free from the dos and don'ts that so often accompany religion, we cannot help but feel emancipated. In its raw, original form, the truth we encounter in the next chapter is indispensable, a bedrock idea upon which our faith is built.