



The Sound of Fear

These quotes are taken straight from congregations engaged in the ministry of radical welcome. Choose the one that sounds most familiar to you. Reflect on when you heard or saw it expressed. You may add other fears associated with radical welcome, telling when you heard or saw them expressed.

“But I come here to feel good and safe. Is that so wrong?”	The fear of losing our comfort zone, the safe space where we know who we are and what to expect
“I hope they don’t expect us to change our liturgy.”	The fear of losing a venerable tradition
“It’s not a judgment—they’re just not like us.”	The fear of losing a community’s cultural, social identity
“But shouldn’t we study it a little more? We’ve never done this before.”	The fear of looking or being judged ignorant, unprepared or otherwise less than “together”
“What if we mess it up?”	The fear of failing and being negatively judged
“We’ve tried this before. These things never work.”	The fear of raising hopes and then being disappointed
“What will our neighbors and ministry partners think if we do this?”	The fear of incurring a backlash
“What if we lose the Rogers family and their pledge?”	The fear of scarcity—not having enough money, people or other resources
“If we do this, won’t some people leave?”	The fear of disappearing—shrinking or being made invisible in your own community
“I find their music loud and theologically simple. Let’s not dumb things down.”	The fear of foreign cultures—confronting unknown languages, cultures and expressions
“I’d like to see them in leadership, but can we really trust them to do it right? Will they try to take over our church?”	The fear of letting go of control
“Wouldn’t they be more comfortable with their own people?”	The fear of encountering with The Other and coming face-to-face with our own prejudice

Responding to Fear

Having heard the voice of fear, you have several responses at hand. The *first step* is always simply to listen, without judgment or attempting to fix the “problem.” Listen with genuine curiosity and concern. Then keep listening for the story behind the fear. “Why would I or this person believe or feel this? What experiences or assumptions suggest that this fear is appropriate and true?” Keep asking “why” to see how the fear feels and what it’s connected to, and eventually to discern what else is going on, if a legitimate concern has begun to hold undue sway, to distract from the pursuit of your vision, or to cause paralysis.

Eventually, you and your congregation may want to employ these practices to make room for fear and help people to keep moving toward transformation—fear and all.

- Make a commitment to learn to sit with your own fears, so that you can provide a truly gracious and non-judgmental space for others in your congregation
- Use and share breath and meditation practices for sitting with fear
- Use the pulpit and formation programs as intentional spaces for honest conversation, facilitated reflections and story-telling about the reality, pervasiveness and wisdom of fear
- Locate, train and deploy a diverse team of leaders who have received training in pastoral care and are recognized as listeners who can help others to reckon with their fear
- Recognize the signs of resistance and backlash; then, instead of reacting in kind, bring compassion wherever you notice the signs of fear and anxiety

Wise Words for Sitting with Fear

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” —Psalm 46:1–3

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” —John 14:26–27

“In other traditions, demons are expelled externally. But in my tradition demons are accepted with compassion.” —Machik Labdrön

(A Meditation by Elizabeth Lesser)¹: Bring your awareness to focus on something in your life that is changing or ending or dying right now. Breathe gently as you consider whatever transition is most significant right now in your life. Note any feelings that arise—trepidation, excitement, resistance, anger, annoyance, or grief. Every time your feelings get the better of you, become aware of your breathing. Meet your troubled and contracted feelings with your calm and expansive breath.

Breathe, sigh, and stretch out on the river of change. Remember times when you resisted change in the past. Regard how things turned out in the end—maybe not how you thought they would, or you wanted them to, but in the end, there you were. Wiser, stronger, still alive. Tip your hat to the poignancy of death and the promise of rebirth. Smile, relax. Allow yourself to break open. Sit tall, with dignity and patience, watching your breath rise and fall, rise and fall. Pray for the courage to welcome this new change with openness and wisdom. Then open your eyes, go back into your life, and do what you have to do, but do it with grace, with hope, and with a lighter touch.

¹ Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* (New York: Villard, 2004)