



95: Practice Friendship

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 95. This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment. Well, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

Author James K.A. Smith says you can't think your way into new habits. He points out that this is the most challenging part of the Christian life. That new habits can only emerge as we practice them. Practice is the small ordinary path to transformation. Well, for a few minutes each Tuesday, our directive is to do the next right thing, not to think about doing the next right thing. Of course, thinking is part of doing but they at least have to work together to bring about any sort of meaningful change.

We practice what we want to improve. And certain things lend themselves really well to our idea of practice, like playing the piano or a team sport, learning how to paint, to draw, to dance, or to sing. In elementary school, we practiced math problems, cursive letters, and how to share our toys. As adults, we may still practice some of those things but we also practice in more nuanced ways. Things that have to do with our faith, our identity, and our relationships. Listen in.

For the last few years, I've started listening to more audiobooks that, for the record, I still sometimes accidentally refer to as books on tape because I forget, it's not 1998. Last year, I listened to Leah

Remini's memoir, *Troublemaker*. And in it, she tells the story about how she got into and eventually out of Scientology. It's all quite fascinating to me. But in the midst of her story, as she goes in and out from childhood to adulthood and sharing about her faith, she also shares about her career and a lot about her life as an actor. She talks about how she auditioned, fun fact, for the role of Monica Geller on *Friends*, if you didn't know. And she knew, she just knew that that show was going to be huge. She got close to getting the role. But when she saw Courteney Cox show up for the audition, Leah knew Courteney was going to get it. Of course, she was right and of course, the show was huge. She cried for days, missing her shot.

Well, like I said, the show was huge. It ran for 10 years on NBC. And it debuted during my senior year of high school. Then the series finale aired just a few months after the twins were born. My college small group met on Thursday nights and we would talk about Jesus and pray and laugh. But our Thursday night group meeting overlapped with *Friends*. And some weeks, we would hurry through the serious stuff and settle in to watch the show together at 8:00 PM on NBC. After all, if we missed it, we would have to wait for it to air again during reruns. There was none of this Netflix business. It was a super difficult time in our history.

A couple of years ago, some of those same women from that small group and I, we all took a trip to New York to see *Hamilton*, which was amazing by the way. And while we were there, of course, we had to go to Greenwich Village to see the *Friends* apartment building and to take our picture together in front of it. That trip was a highlight. And we have a lot of photos to document it, proof that every now and then friendship has a red-letter day. But listen, the only reason that trip meant anything at all was because of the years and years of friendship that happened before it. Years of friendship practice that looked like regular life and small connections built over coffee dates and Zumba class and the long haul work that happens in the midst of ordinary time.

John and I have never been part of groups that vacation every summer together, that take annual family camping trips, or go out as couples every other weekend. I've mentioned this before that sometimes when I think about that, I have these moments of relational panic where I see other families who seemed so tightly knit that their kids are growing up together nearly like siblings. And I've wondered, "Are we too late for that? Are we missing out? Are we doing this friendship thing wrong?"

We have dear friends, we do, and we love them but it doesn't look like the movies. It looks like long stretches of months sometimes before we see them again for dinner. It looks like grabbing coffee while the kids are in school. It looks like trading meals when you can and accepting help when you just cannot deal. It looks like sending a text even though a visit would be better but your kid has a fever and it's raining outside, so you're just going to not leave the house today.

Someone who's taught me a lot about friendship is Andrew Peterson. Now, I don't know him personally. He's an artist, a musician, a writer, and an ambassador for friendship. I gave him that name. I don't know if he would call himself that. But I heard him live for the first time in December of 2008 when he and fellow musicians came to Greensboro on the Behold The Lamb Of God Christmas tour. We sat close to the front. We could see the detail on the rugs covering the floor on the stage. During the concert, I watched the way Andrew and his friends interacted with one another. Their mutual trust and respect had its own kind of harmony up on that stage. I learned about friendship just by watching them.

Andrew's the founder of The Rabbit Room community. It's an online gathering place for artists who "believe in the power of old tales, tales as old as the Earth itself, who find hope in them and beauty in the shadows and in the light and in the source of the light." As I said before, Andrew wears many hats as a singer, songwriter, novelist, and storyteller. But the most influential part of his art for me personally is the way that he's collaborated with other people. He recognized early on that as Jonathan Rogers says, "Friendship is one of the world's great creative forces." He and his friends make art that informs the art of others and then they share it with us.

Several years ago, I attended The Rabbit Room's annual conference called Hutchmoot. And I sat in this little room during a workshop. There were about 10 other people. And we were all listening to two couples, Don and Lori Chaffer and Jill Phillips and her husband, Andy Gullahorn, all musicians. And they talked about the struggles and the gifts of creating together with your spouse. During the conversation, they began to talk about friendship in general. And Andy mentioned how every week, he and his friend Gabe, who lived about a mile and a half away from him, that well, they'd started meeting for the sole purpose of giving each other a high five. That was it. They would leave their house at the same time each week on a Tuesday morning and they would start walking toward each other. When their paths would cross, they gave a high five and then they went on with their day.

Hearing that story, I was struck by two things. First, this is kind of hilarious. And second, this is sacred. I wrote down these words that Andy said that day in 2014. He said, “In a world where everything has to compute, it’s nice to do something inefficient. On the way to meet Gabe, it feels like the stupidest thing. But on the way home I’m like, I can do anything.”

Now if you’re interested, the Box Canyon has documented that weekly high five in a three-minute short film highlighting the spiritual power of habit. I’ll link to it in the show notes. It’s simply called The High Five.

At the end of the church service, we stand for the sending song. And I stare down at my shoes remembering, “Oh, I’m wearing my son’s socks.” Reaching up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear, it hits me, oddly weirdly, that everyone else has a better idea of what my hair looks like from behind than I do. Saying it out loud now, I realize how ridiculous this sounds. But I allow myself a minute to follow this childlike or childish train of thought. Because really, everything about the way we look is more familiar to other people than it is to us. I don’t watch myself laugh in a mirror. I don’t know what I look like when I’m angry. I can’t recognize fear on my own face. And I’m still shocked when I see photos of my profile. It’s why we get all weird when we see ourselves on video or when we hear our own voice on voicemail. “I look like that? I sound like that? Ugh.”

It’s why sometimes I’m still surprised when someone comes up from behind me and says hi. I’m all, “But how did you know it was me? I wasn’t even facing you.” I know that sounds ridiculous but sometimes, kind of like a child playing peekaboo, I might secretly still believe that people won’t recognize me when I’m wearing sunglasses. As familiar as I am with myself, I’m on the inside looking out. And though my knowledge of myself is pretty thorough, it isn’t complete. I need other people to help me see myself fully. And so, we sit across small tables in coffee shops and dare to ask curious questions. We let ourselves say what we really think rather than what we’re supposed to think. We turn ourselves around and whisper expectantly. “Will you just tell me honestly, what does my hair really look like back there?” In all of this, we are practicing friendship. I practice seeing you and letting you see me.

Why does this matter? Because our friends show us what we can’t see on our own. While we are the ever experts at highlighting our own weaknesses, shortcomings, and inabilities, our friends reflect back

beauty. They remind us who we really are. They remind us we don't have to do this alone. They're the eyes outside our bodies. I'm learning to trust what they see. And just when that feels too risky and vulnerable, remember, they don't know what their hair looks like from behind either. Oh, how desperately we need each other and how often I forget.

It's true. Friends may not always provide us the security we long for. Sometimes they simply offer us a safe place to feel insecure. So while we move through our week and make the decisions, cross off the list, run the errands, present the proposals, and plan to move forward, may we continue to practice the sacred art of friendship. Let's be people who practice showing up for each other, who believe true things about ourselves and on behalf of each other, who remember where we come from and to whom we belong, who stand in the gap for each other, who say hard things when the time is right, and do hard things when times are hard.

Let's check in on each other. Take the long way home together and give more high fives. And if you're feeling lonely, unseen, overlooked, or misunderstood today, may you know how valuable you are. A community waits for you. There's a seat at the table for you. There's a person right now who needs your voice in their life. Your presence is missed. Your contribution is needed.

May we look for ways to practice friendship for one another, as we do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 95 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple habit of practicing friendship can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true that this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. It's always an honor to walk with you as you continue to do your next right thing.

If this podcast has been helpful for you, I hope you'll leave a review. Thanks to TheSummerLace who left a review recently saying simply, "A friend told me about this podcast and I eventually joined a small group that goes through Emily's book with the same title. The timing couldn't be better. It has given me peace in the changes I can't control and challenges me to take on the changes that God may

be nudging me to take.”

Well, I am so glad to hear that, especially since you found me here through the recommendation of a friend. Sharing resonant resources might be friendship practice at its finest. Well, as always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. In closing, here are a few words from author Heather King in her book, *Shirt of Flame*.

She writes, “No matter how sad, wounded, neurotic, or needy we are, that may be exactly what some other person needs us to be at that time. We don’t know the ways we comfort and save each other. Not only in spite of our wounds but also in some cases because of them.”

Thanks for listening and I’ll see you next time.