



154: Remember Who You Are

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 154.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step. If you're like me, maybe you've been feeling a bit foggy or sad lately, looking around for something familiar to grab onto and somewhere soft to land. Today, my next right thing is to reflect on the love of God, on our place in God's presence and how confronting and gently questioning some of the language I grew up using about my relationship with God. Well, how that's helping me move through a most difficult year.

But first, a word from this episode's sponsor, KiwiCo. We've all adapted to a lot of change this year and with a little creative problem solving you and your family have found ways to tackle working and learning from home. Spending a lot more time together and keeping in touch while staying apart. Now with the holidays coming up, KiwiCo wants to help you continue to celebrate moments of wonder and discovery, even if things look a little different than they did last year.

With KiwiCo's eight different crate lines, there's a hands-on science and art project that's sure to spark curiosity and learning in your loved one all year long. My teenagers and I were delighted to receive a maker crate for building terrazzo clay organizers. Our crate came with everything we needed to complete the project from start to finish. It was so nice to spend time together working with our hands and using critical thinking skills to make each organizer our own. KiwiCo is redefining learning with hands-on projects that build confidence, creativity and critical thinking skills. There's something for every kid or every kid at heart. And right now you can get 50% off your first month plus free shipping on any crate line using the code `nextrightthing`, all one word at kiwicode.com. That's 50% off your first month `k-i-w-i-c-o.com` with the code `nextrightthing`. Now onto today's episode listen in.

Today I want to talk about Jesus. I can't talk about the importance of remembering who you are without talking about who I am. And to talk about who I am, I have to talk about Jesus. It's funny when you do the kind of work I do. Some people think I don't talk about Jesus enough and other people think I do it too much. I'm not trying to strike any kind of balance here y'all, I'm just trying to be a person. I mention our friend Jesus every now and then. You might be used to that by now. I want you to know, you're welcome in this space, no matter what you believe about Jesus. And I hope you'll stick around for the conversation.

I'll start with a story.

When I was in the first grade, growing up in Southern Indiana, my elementary school was situated in a hybrid subdivision cornfield situation. There were neighborhood houses in the front of the school where the buses parked and then there were cornfields in the back where the playground was. I have a distinct memory of sitting under the monkey bars with my best friend Tara and telling her about Jesus. But I was seven and I didn't know a whole lot yet. I didn't tell her about his friendship, about his love, his compassion or his invitation to belonging, because I didn't understand most of that yet. Instead, what I told her was that she really needed to get saved. It's all I thought about, this getting saved business. I was taught from as early as I can remember that the gospel is the plan of salvation. That Jesus wants to live inside my heart.

It's not that this narrative is necessarily wrong, but it is incomplete. The gospel is not a step-by-step process of how people can get saved, but it's the announcement that the Kingdom of God is real and Jesus is the King of that Kingdom. So what does that have to do with remembering who I am? Well it's because if the gospel is a formula, then who I am as simply a formula keeper, a rule follower and a box checker. But if the gospel is an announcement that the Kingdom of God is here now, and not only here within me, then that changes everything. I'm not a formula keeper, I'm an image bearer. That first grade conversation with Tara stands out among others like it in my life. Illustrating how, when it comes to life and work, narrative plays a vital role in our formation and our deformation. Shaping our understanding of our identity in Christ and determining how we live in his Kingdom.

The stories we believe about God, ourselves and the world will always determine how we live, whether we're aware of those stories or not. We've all seen those highway billboards that ask in white letters on a stark black background, if we know where we'd go if we died tonight. It's a question they used to ask in youth group often while a guitar strummed in the background or a keyboard played the same chords over and over again. I once heard James Brian Smith ask a fundamental question in reaction to that billboard. He asked "Yeah, but what if you don't die tonight? What if you live? What then?" This question exposes a primary narrative that many people believe and that is that your life with God is about what happens when you die. But Jim's counter question confronts that false narrative, asserting instead that your life with God starts now. This takes a conversion concept and turns it into a formational one.

The gospel is not just a plan of salvation, pushing us to convert through a narrative of fear. No it's the story of Jesus and his Kingdom inviting us to be led by a narrative of love. A. W. Tozer says that what we believe about God is the most important thing about us. If that's true, then a true view of God will form our lives in him and a false view of God will deform us away from him. Knowing who I am in light of who God is, might be the most important work I'll ever do. As a parent, a friend, a wife, a writer, a teacher, and a leader. This is easy to say, difficult to practice. Even after all the inner work I've done over the years, after writing and speaking and leading others in their own walk with Jesus, it's still surprising how powerful a pull those false narratives still have in my own life.

The most profound gift I can give the people I'm called to serve is to honestly, humbly and regularly practice exposing the false stories I carry and replacing them with a narrative of the God Jesus knows. Scripture says that if we see Jesus, then we've seen the father. And if we want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. The power by which we can know the father and the son is through the Holy spirit living within us. That's our try, you and God who continues to point around the inner circle of this three in one

self. Always exalting the other members, illustrating the utmost humility and unity. When Jesus came, he showed us what the father is like. The incarnation of Jesus is as my friend, Keith Keesler says “The still point in a turning world.” And from Jesus flows a narrative of love for us.

When he ascended, he left his spirit to empower us to live into the truth of who we are, made to be like him. So who am I? How was I made to be? Maybe Jan Johnson says it best. “I was made to run on the love of God.” No matter who we are, where we come from or where we live now, human beings are always asking the same questions. Who am I? Do I have value? Am I going to be okay? We have a good and beautiful God, who is filled with love for us. God is not, as Brennan Manning says “A benign old spectator in the bleachers who cheers when I show up for my morning quiet time.” No, discipleship is much more than a quiet time. And the gospel is more than conversion. The gospel that Jesus preached was that the Kingdom of God is all around us. And Jesus is the King.

This is more radical and sunning than simply doing right things. It’s available life in the Kingdom of God. And this is the narrative that defines how we should then live as people in the Kingdom. What does that mean for our daily lives? For our relationships, our morning routines, that annoying person at work? I want to continue to learn the delicate art of walking with my friend Jesus, into the lives of other people. To help gently untangle false narratives of God and to affirm a true identity in Christ. This is where true discipleship begins and continues. But this is not simple work. As the roots of the false narratives are deep and pervasive within all of us. Now that King Jesus has come, now that his Kingdom is here, we have a new choice, a new hope and a new power alive within us.

Now we have been empowered to mediate God to the world. Does this make a difference in how you live? In Christ you are fully accepted and a completely loved image bearer and co-creator with him. Working toward the renewal of all things. Peter van Breemen says “You have been loved into existence.” That means you have the capacity to be a mediator of God’s love to the world by encouraging others toward their giftedness. And this is an important part of discipleship that’s often seen as either selfish or as a luxury. But as people created in the image of God to rule and mediate God’s presence in the world, how else are we to move toward others than as the people we most fully are?

And what will that look like except the life of Christ coming out through our own unique gifting and personality? We are invited to move toward others as our full selves, not as try-hard versions of our false selves. Embracing your giftedness is key in this endeavor. You have the capacity to be a leader who helps to cast a hopeful vision for people as we live together in the Kingdom of God. That’s what God did for people from Genesis all the way through revelation. God always sees beyond what is to what could be, because of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our vision of the future is always filled with hope. In the past, back when I used to speak in person to people, I often would open up with a short prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr.

It simply says “Help us to believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how beautiful it is.” And every single time I would open with that prayer, there’s often an audible response. It isn’t loud, it isn’t jarring, but it is as if the room takes a gentle inhale of surprise relief at the introduction of this new narrative. Because sadly what they expected me to say, what they’re ready for is a prayer for God to help us to believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how terrible it is. The narrative that we are bad sinners in need of forgiveness is as familiar to us as our own face. And yes, we are in need of forgiveness. But if that is our primary narrative and if it stops there, then when do we get to start living in freedom? Isn’t a time to

embrace the new life. Oh God, help us to believe the truth about ourselves. No matter how beautiful it is, as we continue to do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 154 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of remembering who you are can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true this is a podcast about making decisions, but the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always you can find me on Instagram at emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find the show notes of this episode and a transcript of every episode. In closing, a word from one of my favorite pastors, Mr. Fred Rogers, "Discovering the truth about ourselves is a lifetime's work, but it's worth the effort." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.