



91: Be a Placemaker

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 91. 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 even if you're great at making decisions, but in your current season of life you could use a little reminder to simply do the next right thing, well, you're in the right place.

Doing the next right thing isn't a phrase I came up with. It's been used by Mother Theresa, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, Elizabeth Elliott, and Anne Lamott to name only a few. It's a guideline for living in Alcoholics Anonymous. It's become a common catch phrase for coaches and athletes in board rooms and corporate motivational speeches.

Sometimes it's the simplest phrases that have the power to change our lives, and this one is no different. It's no wonder since they say adults make over 35,000 decisions every single day, every choice we make determines our life in big and small ways. My audacious goal in these few minutes we have together, well, it's to make one simple suggestion for you that could help ease the load of your own daily decision making. Sound good? Listen in.

It's 2013 and I sit in the back seat of an airport shuttle on my way to speak at a writer's conference in Austin, Texas. In the ride with me is my friend and, at the time, assistant Melissa, and author and pastor, Mark Batterson. This is the first time I've met Mark in person, though I've read at least one of his books by this time, *The Circle Maker*, and he endorsed one of mine, *A Million Little Ways*.

We are essentially strangers, but we fall into easy conversation around common ground, writing and

ministry. As we ride from the airport to the hotel, I end up sharing with Mark about the transition John and I are in at this stage of our life. I tell him about John leaving youth ministry after 12 years, just a few months earlier. I tell him about how John has for now chosen a stay-at-home life, the changing sheets and doing laundry and planning meals kind of life, and how he's good for now, but he's open and listening for what kind of work might be next.

I tell him about how I love writing books and I even love to sometimes speak, but I'm not sure what that means 5 or 10 years from now. And really, I could do that kind of work from anywhere. So what does that mean about where we call home?

And even though from what I've just said, it might sound like I'm telling him everything. If you can believe it, I still have questions I'm not asking out loud. He seems to know this. He seems to hear the silent questions that I'm not asking. And he smiles before he says this line that I never forget. "You're in the ellipsis."

Immediately two things happen. Number one, I know he's right. And number two, I don't want to be here, in the ellipsis. I want to be in the middle of the paragraph, in the middle of the book where I know the title and the subtitle and the back cover copy. In that moment I realize how desperately I want my life to be written in ink, filled out, formed, and finished. What in the world is next?

P.S. If you want to know more about that season of our life in 2013, when we had way more vocational questions than we had answers, check out chapter five of my book, *The Next Right Thing*, or listen to episode 24 of this podcast.

Back in the shuttle. I listen as Mark begins to tell his story and he says how he's been at the same church for 17 years and he hopes to stay there till he retires. This is a foreign language to me. Up to this point, we have never felt this way about a church, about a home, or a job. Here in the seat of an airport shuttle next to Melissa and our new friend Mark Batterson, I realize maybe for the first time that I want to feel about our life and our work and our home, the way Mark feels about his life and work and church in D.C.

I want to be so committed to a local church and a job and a home that I could say with confidence, "I

could stay here forever.” That ride from the airport to the hotel with Mark and Melissa, that was six years ago. And while I still have questions, here are a few things I know for sure.

I know that being confident about what you want does not guarantee you’ll get it any more than being unsure guarantees you won’t. I know that it’s possible to be rooted, even if we’re in motion, just as it’s possible to be scattered, even if we’re staying in one place. I know that having doubts and questions about what you want to do and where you want to live does not mean you don’t have a home. I know that finding where we belong is not a one-time decision and uncovering your calling is a slow, important work.

Last week I sat on the porch of our cul-de-sac home where we’ve lived for over 10 years, reading a book called *Placemaker* by Christie Purifoy, the book that inspired the title of this episode. In her book, Christie writes these words I’ve underlined. She says, “Home is never a threshold you cross. It’s a place you make and a place that might make or unmake you.”

What I longed for in that airport shuttle was surety, rootedness, and a promise that I had found my place. What I’ve discovered and am still discovering in the six years since is that even though it goes against everything we’ve learned about plants, roots are something we can take with us wherever we go. Home isn’t something we have to wait for. Home is a place we can make.

I’ve been paying attention to how this can look in my actual life. It might sound unimportant, but when I’m feeling small, scattered, or disconnected, I’ve found placemaking to be a grounding practice.

I’m paying attention to my everyday spaces, like the place where I type on my computer at my house, like the closet where I record this podcast, like the second drawer in the bathroom where I keep my makeup. For 10 years our back bedroom has been a guest room and half of that time it’s doubled as my office. But guests don’t stay with us very often. And I realized I was squeezing into the corner of the room with a too small desk that I used every single day in order to make space for a guest room bed that was used twice a year.

So we took out that bed and we made a place for my work in that guest room. I turned it into an office because I decided to take a second look and be honest about what was really going on here and what

was the place I really needed to make. For two years I've recorded this podcast in a tiny closet and it's worked just fine. And honestly the acoustics are pretty good. And some of you have seen it even. But I took a second look and I realized that the bookshelves in there that were crammed into the corner, well, we weren't really using them and the walls in there could handle some soundproofing.

After a few orders on Amazon and a few days of work, John and I made a place for the recording of this podcast. It's in the same place it was in before, but now it has more of a purpose. It's not fancy and it's certainly not expensive, but making that space in the guest room and in the podcast closet felt like a declaration, "This work is important. You're in this for the long haul." That's not to say we'll be here forever. It is to say we're here for now, so let's make a place for the work we're called to do.

I've been paying attention to more than just workspaces. I've made a place in my bathroom drawer for the things I use every day. I know that might sound crazy to those of you who are super organized naturally, but for me, this was kind of a big deal. We created space in a corner of our kitchen for coffee, tea, and our black and white mugs because we use this space every day and it deserves to be organized and accessible.

We've made space in our sunroom for real plants to grow in pots. Every Saturday I carry these plants outside, including other plants from around the house. I gather them all together and water them all at once. When my daughter saw them all together the other day, she said, "Wow, it looks like a greenhouse." Spread out all over the house they aren't as impressive as they are gathered all together, but each one has a job to do in helping to make a place for us.

Again, I know it might seem small to move a bed out of a room, to clean out a bathroom drawer, to gather up the plants to water on a Saturday morning, but each of these small actions have been for me, a way of making a place for peace, for belonging, for home.

I was grateful for the planter I found on sale and the fern that lived inside. I was thankful for the bright yellow flowers still sitting in its generic plastic pot. I was thankful for the \$10 Goodwill chair I found and adorned with the late summer sale cushion.

As I sat there, the gift of placemaking rose up to meet me, because long ago in the backseat of an

Austin airport shuttle, I longed for the rootedness I heard in Mark's voice, the surety, the face set like a flint in the direction of home of a people and of a place. And now I see how the answer to that longing from six years ago is all around me now. It didn't come swiftly and it didn't come all at once. It's true. There are some things I'm still waiting for. But, it's important to notice and to name what's here, what has come, and how grateful I am.

At one point in her book, Christie describes in detail about the work she and her husband Jonathan put into their Chicago apartment years ago. She writes in a lot of detail about the subway tile and the porcelain sink in the bathroom. She writes about the edge glass mirror and the shiny chrome faucet, and she writes about her friend Laura, who was often a guest in that Chicago apartment.

Years later, after they moved away, she asked Laura what she remembered about the apartment and surprisingly her friend Laura didn't mention anything about tile or tubs or shiny chrome faucets. Instead, Laura remembers how Christie would light a candle when the sun went down, how she always had cloth napkins clean and ready for use, how she poured maple syrup into a glass jar before putting it on the table. All of these things surprised Christie. You mean you don't remember the fish pattern bathroom tiles, the porcelain sink with the porcelain legs, the pretty color painted on the walls? Yeah, that's not what Laura remembered. She remembered the spirit of the place. The piece embodied in the simple liturgy of laundry napkins and lighting candles and pouring maple syrup into glass jars.

Christie and Jonathan were placemaking when they remodeled the bathroom, but the little things counted too, and that's what their friend remembered. When we have 35,000 decisions to make every single day, I wonder if being a placemaker would lighten the load a little bit because there's nothing like the in-betweens of life to bring decision fatigue on fast and furious. When you feel like you're waiting for something beyond your ability to manage or control, decisions can feel both overly important and profoundly unimportant at the same time. What does it matter what I decide? It won't make a difference anyway.

Might I introduce a new narrative? While we may not be able change the whole story, perhaps we can still impact the plot point. That means in hardship joy is still possible, in disappointment hope is still available, in uncertainty faith is still a lifeline. Instead of thinking things have to be a certain way before we can enjoy them, what if we dare to enjoy them even in their imperfection? What would it

look like to make a place right where you are? Does it look like a candle, a cloth napkin, or a jar of maple syrup? Does it look like a cup of coffee, a long walk, or an arm around her shoulder? Does it look like delivering a bag of groceries to your neighbor, a load of laundry for your daughter, a plant on the corner of your office desk?

If you're in the ellipsis in your own life right now, it's true, you might have more questions than you have answers. You might have more furrowed brows and nodding heads. But there are some things you can still choose, like making a place where your roots are lacking, like believing for sure that God is with you, like doing your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 91 of The Next Right Thing. Well, if it wasn't obvious from the title of this episode, the stories I told, and the multiple quotes I pulled, I will point out now one more time, how much I enjoyed reading Placemaker by Christie Purifoy. If you don't yet have a copy, I encourage you to get one. Listen, no one asked me to say this or refer to this book on the podcast. I simply just love it that much and it's made a difference in my perspective, so I couldn't help but talk about it. That's kind of how it goes around here.

I feel like I spent the whole summer with Christie through reading her book and she has no idea. So Christie, it's been a great summer reading your book on my front porch. I'm grateful that you took the time to share your story and teach us about the sacred beauty of being a placemaker, because in the midst of so many things we can't control, in the midst of 35,000 decisions we're trying to make every day, it helps to remember there's always small things we can do to remember we belong and to help others remember that too.

If you want to learn more about Christie and the places she's made over the years, you can visit her and find her book at christiepurifoy.com. If you're looking for me, of course you can always find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. I'll end with one last quote from Christie because why not?

“Who are the placemakers? They're the ones who gaze out over emptiness, and sometimes through tears, see shimmering possibility.”

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