



09: Listen for Specifics - Moving forward after tragedy

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 9. If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. But this is also a place for those of you who may just need a little white space or a few minutes away from the constant stream of information or the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment. You long for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step. If that's you, you're in the right place.

A lot of the tragedy that happens in the world often feels way out there, and then every now and then we're hit with a heartbreak of the unexpected in our own lives or in the lives of those closest to us. What does it look like to move forward in the aftermath of tragedy, either the kind that hits in distant lands or the kind that turns our own lives upside down?

At the time of this recording, over 50 people have died in Las Vegas, victims in the worst mass shooting in our country's history. What do we do with that? How do we move forward in the midst of tragedy, shock and heartbreak? I admit, I don't have answers. But today I hope to attempt to help us begin to ask the best questions and take a simple next right step in love.

It started when John found a pearl in his Oysters Rockefeller, bit down right on it and pulled it out of his mouth. We thought he was joking at first, as it just looked like a small oversized pebble. But he asked our waitress to confirm it, and after close inspection, she announced it was indeed a pearl. She's worked at the Crab Shack for many years and knows what to look for evidently.

After trying in vain to use it as payment for our meal, dad jokes abound, John put his found treasure in a to go ramekin and we all gathered around to get a good look. It wasn't necessarily impressive, and if it wasn't found inside an oyster, we would have ignored it. It could maybe even fool the Tooth Fairy in dim lighting and pass for a child's baby tooth.

Around the time we were inspecting this new found treasure outside the restaurant on Hilton Head Island, a man walked into a church 100 miles North of us and sat down with a group of believers. He was welcomed into their midst, and an hour after that, he killed them because they were black. But I didn't know this at the time. Instead, I was finishing up dinner with my family, watching boats pull into the harbor as we ate ice cream and listened to a singer from the outdoor restaurant nearby belt out Sweet Caroline.

Before I went to bed that night, I saw a passing headline of a shooting in Charleston. But I didn't pay close

attention, and I don't know why but the picture that materialized in my head at that moment was that of a mad gunman in the street shooting into the air. I don't know why I didn't imagine victims or motive. I just heard shooting and thought gun pointed into the sky.

The next morning I woke up early and walked out to the coast, continued reading where I had left off the day before in *A Circle of Quiet* by Madeleine L'Engle. She wrote these words and I'll quote them for you now. "I find that I always listen carefully to the weather. This affects me. If there is some kind of strike going on in New York, there usually is, which will inconvenience me, I get highly indignant. I am apt to pay less attention when the daily figures for deaths on battlefields are given. It's too far away, I cannot cope emotionally. It has to happen close at home before I can truly feel compassion."

Later that morning, I saw along with the watching world the details of the shooting from the night before. That the gun was not shot into the air, but into the bodies of nine believers at Emmanuelle African Methodist Episcopal Church. I'm not sure anyone really knows how to process this kind of evil. What compartment do you place it in? Who can hold the weight of the sadness? The whole thing was heartbreaking, and that sounds dumb to even say it like that because of course it was more than that. It is more than that.

I carried a vague sense of sadness with me for the rest of the week, for the families of those who were killed, for the people living in Charleston, for our broken country. I saw the names and faces of the victims on the news, but it wasn't until we arrived home and I sat in my usual seat at our home church on Sunday when I heard their names read from the pulpit by my friend Wendy, in her voice and with her accent. It wasn't until then that I started to cry.

Again, words from Madeleine L'Engle. She says, "We are lost unless we can recover compassion, without which we will never understand charity. We must find once more community, a sense of family, of belonging to each other."

The gunman in Charleston was specific, and the only antidote to specific evil is a specific hope. Our Father sent his Son to a particular girl at a particular time in history. He was not frantic about it. He wasn't late or early or in a hurry.

Jesus grew inside his mother just as every baby has and will grow inside their mothers at a particular place, in a particular time. God wrote all the details of humanity into the body of Christ, his words becoming literal flesh in the secret hidden place inside Mary, tucked beneath her heart.

Something I have learned about myself in thinking about all this, I am afraid to be specific. Specificity feels vulnerable and intimate. Asking for something particular is more risky than asking for something in general. But we can't deny this, our God is specific.

I visited Israel for the first time last year, and a moment I will never forget is my first glimpse of the Sea of Galilee. I turned to my friend Annie Downs, who was sitting next to me and she said, "Jesus walked on that water," and I became undone on the inside. To say Jesus walked on water is to imagine something wonderful to be sure, but he didn't walk on a lake near my house. To see the actual water where he walked, well that's a new thing altogether. Why? Because it's specific. It's that water right there.

Longing and desire are lovely when spoken of in an overall wide-ranging way, but to start to name those longings one by one, well things can get terrifying quickly. What if I don't get a pearl in my oyster? It's too much to ask for, too detailed to hope for, too much to lose.

So prayers sound more like, please God, and there's nothing wrong with that. But what if we started to pray, please God, this. I didn't realize how my unwillingness to be specific keeps people at arms length, keeps me from having to be involved in complicated issues, and keeps my head a clean distance from my heart.

Want to hear a final word from Madeline on this issue? She says, "Compassion is not felt with the intellect alone. Compassion is particular. It is never general."

Now that I've called it out, I'm seeing it everywhere. I saw a blog post by writer, Sandra Peoples, where she wrote about being helpful in communities saying, "The more specific you are, the more helpful you are." And we know that's true in our own lives. Author Shannon Martin once said, "We cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot hate what we refuse to acknowledge."

So here we are again this week, whether it's recent earthquakes and hurricanes, or this most recent shooting in Las Vegas, we want to help specifically. But all we often feel is a general sense of helplessness. What is our next right step?

When my friend Traci tells me she's praying through some things, she says she always prays specifically, because she says, "How can I pray for people if I don't know what their needs are?" At church, a few in the prayer ministry, Kevin and Aaron, talked about cultivating an imaginative hope for the needs we see around us. And they said that prayer is simply taking up the burdens you see, and then re-releasing them into God's hands. But to take them up, we have to know what they are.

We pray because we have hope for change, so faith means imagining what that change might be. Imagination requires specificity. When evil is specific, our hope must be specific too. It's changing the world in both good and bad ways. I want to be part of the good. I want a front row seat to the miracles. So when we hear those horrific words like earthquake, tsunami, terror attack, shooting, here are three specific things we can do right now.

Number one, look for the helpers. Mr. Rogers said when he was a boy and saw scary things in the news, his mother would always say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." He offered this as advice to the grownups to help children cope with tragic situations. But every time something overwhelming and horrific happens in the world, it seems to be the grownups who quote his words, not to the children, but to one another. In times of uncertainty, it's important to look for the helpers, and it's important to be a helper too.

That doesn't mean it will be an easy step, but it should be a specific step. To be a helper, do give money, send aid, pick a name of one of the victims and commit them to prayer. Is it to march, to send a letter, to change the way you vote in the next election? It doesn't have to be all these steps, but it could be one of these steps. What is your next right step? How can you be a helper?

Number two, don't rush the healing. The world doesn't cater to healing. It all spins way too fast. Our

bodies need time while the world wants on time, and the need for healing gets lost under the assembly line conveyor belt.

When the news moves on to other headlines, and it always does, whether that's the actual news on the actual TV or just the headlines of your own life, your soul doesn't travel at the same speed. Recognize it. The soul and the schedule don't follow the same rules, and our souls, they need space to heal just like our bodies do. But the wounds aren't so apparent and they can be more painful anyway. Refuse the pull to spin at the speed of the world. Give yourself time for the healing, and hold open space for others to do the same.

Finally, number three, be faithful to your vocation. I've mentioned this quote in a previous episode, and I will probably mention it again. These powerful words from Henri Nouwen, and he says, "The more I think about the human suffering in our world and my desire to offer a healing response, the more I realize how crucial it is not to allow myself to become paralyzed by feelings of impotence and guilt. More important than ever is to be very faithful to my vocation, to do well the few things I am called to do and hold onto the joy and peace they bring me. I must resist the temptation to let forces of darkness pull me into despair and make me one more of their many victims. I have to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and on those who follow him, and trust that I will know how to live out my mission to be a sign of hope in this world."

What a beautiful call to action for those of us who know Jesus. This is what it means to be the body. And I will also say this, this may well be a time for conviction, for repentance, for change in a new direction, but tragedy ought never to lead to shame. Shame speaks in generalities and blanket statements and feelings of guilt unattached to a specific action.

Our Father never speaks that way. If you feel a sense of shame, ask Him where it's coming from, because it certainly isn't from Him. And as you wait for an answer, continue to do what you feel called to do because we need your creativity, your perspective, your wholeheartedness and your voice. This isn't a time for you to hold back. This is a time for you to move forward, to fight for hope and for justice and to do your next right thing in love.

And so join me now to pray specifically for those who might be grieving today. And if you're one of them, may you receive these words spoken over you as a banner of love and support. For those who have witnessed the kind of scenes that could haunt for a lifetime, we pray for a sanctified memory and a Holy imagination. Release them from the haunting we pray.

For those who begin to shake when the low light of evening sends shadows long across the yard, we pray for comfort. For those whose sadness feels sharp like fear, sooth the jagged edges and bring relief. For those who wait in the darkness, groping for answers and finding only more questions, we pray for peace. For those who have experienced loss, but carry an odd placed sense of responsibility, who can't shake the unexplained guilt that lingers in the air around them, we pray you might calm the chaos and awaken their heart to your love.

One day in the future, some may begin to feel like they should be over it by now. They may grow tired of going through the whole thing again, or feel pressure to heal already. For these, we pray for courage to let grief do her sacred invisible work.

We recognize the many layers of sadness present among us, both the kind that settles like a cloud over a nation after terrible loss, and the kind that bursts unwelcomed into our homes. May your presence fill up and overflow the gaping holes are left in the wake of tragedy. Live out your name among us. Remind us you haven't left us alone.

Thanks for listening to Episode 9 of The Next Right Thing. If you would like a copy of that prayer, I've created a PDF so you can download it for free at thenextrightthingpodcast.com, where you can also find a complete transcript of every episode. So if you or someone you know would prefer reading to listening, visit thenextrightthingpodcast.com to download. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman, or at emilypfreeman.com.

Now receive these words from Numbers 6, 24 through 26. "May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance on you and give you peace."