



Episode 14: Know What You Want

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to *The Next Right Thing*. You're listening to Episode 14.

It's a question you may not be used to asking yourself, one you may even think is irrelevant at best, or at worst, selfish and wrong. But when it comes to making decisions, there's one question we often overlook. *What do you want?*

For some of us, it's not easy to answer the question. Even if we manage to get past the ingrained stereotypes and early conditioning many of us have about knowing what we want, it still isn't easy to discern.

Now, 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.

If you listened to last week's episode (that's episode 13: Quit Something), you'll remember I asked another question: *what is essential?* If you had any trouble at all answering that question, it could be because you have either forgotten what it is you truly want or you've never given yourself permission to figure it out at all.

One of our favorite shows, *A Chef's Life*, follows the life and work of award winning chef Vivian Howard, a native of eastern North Carolina. With the Avett Brother's theme song and the gorgeous North Carolina scenery, it's easily one of our favorite ways to spend 30 minutes on a weeknight. We watch as Vivian blends family, food and storytelling in a way that honors people, traditions, and Southern cooking.

As *A Chef's Life* has grown in popularity, so have her opportunities as a chef. We watched each season as she had to field more and more requests for catering, traveling,

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appearances, special events, and now she can't even walk through the dining room of her own restaurant without being stopped by fans for photographs. It seems like the thing she most wanted - to be a chef - also became the thing that began to take her away from her restaurant.

As it turns out something else she always wanted to do was to be a food writer. She even has a degree in English. When she landed a book deal to write her first cookbook, she had to confront the reality that it was time to delegate a lot of her responsibility at the restaurant, because what she wanted *more* at that time was to write that book.

Knowing what she wanted helped her to take her next right step.

But her decisions don't come without mess and complication. Because, oh yeah, her husband Ben is also her business partner and together they have young twins, something she is constantly struggling to navigate and balance. She puts the struggle out there, she's honest about how hard it all is, and publicly admits this is not a glamorous life.

When her cookbook finally released last fall, it hit the New York Times bestseller list which of course, brought even more attention and opportunity her way. Now she's not only a successful chef with several successful restaurants, she's also a successful author.

Even more than the peek behind the scenes of her kitchen or the beautiful presentations of food, or the simple and compelling interviews she does with her neighbors, one of the most fascinating parts of the show for me personally is watching as Vivian is constantly forced to answer the question about what she really wants.

It's not talked about explicitly in the dialogue of the show or at least not very much, but over the course of the series, she seems genuinely torn to discern what she really wants. Her own internal struggle with priorities is almost like an invisible character on the show.

While its admirable and exciting on one level, it's also too much for one person to carry. Over time, you see her constantly confronted with the question: What do I really want?

I realize these are all amazing, privileged opportunities - should I be an award winning chef or a best selling author?! I know. I know. But it serves to me as a great public example of the importance of knowing what you want because the answer to that determines what you do.

If you don't take the time to admit what you most long for, decisions will still need to be made. But instead of stepping forward with at least a bit of confidence, you'll base your decisions on other outward things like expectations, habit, or some other kind of external pressure.

Lest you get carried away and think that's fine everyone else, but we have to be careful about all this desire business. Let me remind you of Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, the man on the Jericho Road.

He was blind, he was a beggar, and he had no other hope. And so when Jesus passed by on the noisy street as he left the city, Bartimaeus called out as loud as he could, "Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And even though the people around him tried to keep him quiet, tried to shame him for using his voice and making such a vulnerable request in public, Jesus stopped when he heard this cry and He told those same people to call Bartimaeus near to him. They quickly changed their tune, urging Bartimaeus to stand up because Jesus was calling for him.

And so he threw his cloak aside and as he stood there, Jesus didn't give him a Bible verse, a lesson, or a lecture. Instead, Jesus asked blind Bartimaeus a question: *What do you want me to do for you?*

In her book *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton says this "Jesus routinely asked people questions that helped them to get in touch with their desire and name it in his presence." She says, "He often brought focus and clarity to his interactions with those who were spiritually hungry by asking them, 'What do you want? What do you want me to do for you?'"

So when Jesus asked this blind man that question, Bartimaeus didn't wave away Jesus question as impolite. He didn't turn it around and say, "Oh no Jesus. Let's don't talk about that. What do *you* want?" He didn't point to the people in the crowd and say, "Well never mind. They have much bigger needs than I do."

Instead, he stood there in all his vulnerability, in all his neediness, with desire all over his face, and answered quite simply: I want to regain my sight.

And that is what happened.

Jesus didn't ask *what do you think?* Or *what do you believe?* No, he said *what do you want?* It was a question of desire.

And when Bartimaeus answers, Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well.

I wonder if the same is true for us? That stating our desire in the presence of Jesus is actually an act of faith?

Now, when we speak of knowing what you want, I think its important to mention the reality is we often have to make decisions based on things that seem, on the surface at least, counter to our own desire - either based on finances, family obligations, or other important responsibilities.

But if you look further in, these may also be desire based too. For example you may continue to show up at a job not because you necessarily want to be there, but because your deepest desire is to provide for your family, and that is truly what you want.

At the most basic level, this is still an issue of desire. You want to provide, and so you choose to show up even when it's hard.

Remember too, knowing what you want and getting what you want are two very separate things.

Bartamaeus didn't say, "I have to regain my sight." He simply said that's what he wanted and he left the next step to Jesus.

Desire is only toxic when we demand our desires be satisfied on our terms and in our timing. But knowing what you want isn't about making demands or being irresponsible or selfish.

Even if you don't get what you want, knowing what you want can still be a great gift.

When it comes to decision making, in my experience the best time to decide what you want is before a decision is even on the table.

The second best time is when you are confronted with a decision but you haven't made that choice yet.

And the third best time is after you make a decision and you realize you chose it based not on your deepest desire but maybe on expectation, habit, pressure, or some other reason that had nothing to do with what you wanted. Some of the most memorable things I've learned in my life have happened as a result of saying yes to things I never really wanted in the first place.

But admittedly, that is a painful way to learn.

The sad thing is many of us move through our entire lives not knowing what we want before, during, *or* after a decision. As a result, we move through our lives as a shadow of our true selves, not fully knowing who we are and, in turn, who God is in us.

So whether or not we get what we want isn't really the point. Here are three simple benefits to knowing what you want.

Number one, knowing what you want builds your confidence.

Usually this can't be discovered outside of some time alone, some quiet, some deep thinking. So the process of determining what you want is actually a gift to yourself. It means you've taken time to give your inner voice a place at the table. You have, as Elizabeth Gilbert says, acknowledged that you are allowed to be here. You are allowed to take up space in the room. Knowing what you want will help you to own that.

Secondly, Knowing what you want is a gift to the people you love.

It means in those areas where you have a choice, you won't waste your time playing a game you don't really care to win. It means you will be thoughtful about your yeses and your nos, you won't over-commit yourself or your family to things beyond your collective capacity to support. Every yes you say affects every person who lives in your

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house. Knowing what you want is an automatic filter to help you say yes to the things you've already pre-decided matter, and to let the rest fall gently away.

Finally, knowing what you want can help you let go in peace.

In other words, knowing what you want can help you more easily release the pain of not getting what you want.

I know this one feels counter-intuitive, but hang with me. What you want is what you want, whether you know it or not. If something doesn't go your way, your plans don't work out, or you experience a disappointment, the truth is you will still feel the disappointment regardless, but if you know why you're disappointed, the healing can come much more quickly.

I cannot tell you the number of times I've had to work through layers of grief, anger, frustration, and fatigue after a life experience only to realize at the end its because I had a particular desire I had not yet named. When that desire went unmet, I felt it. But I didn't know why. And so that disappointment came out in other weird ways like irritability, insecurity, lashing out, silent treatments, the works. It's remarkable the lengths my subconscious will go to in order to mask my truest desire.

On the other hand, when I honestly admit what I most long for *in the presence of Jesus*, I can more quickly accept when it doesn't work out. I can talk to him about it, admit my heartbreak, and receive what he has to give in place of it. This is what it means to walk with him in my everyday disappointment. There is no way to avoid it.

When I am honest with myself about what I most want, I must also confront the reality that what I most want I cannot have. Or at least, I *may* not have.

For today, let knowing what you want be enough. Let's release ourselves from the need to know more than that.

It reminds me of a time years ago when we walked with our daughter through a profound disappointment.

I use the word "profound" because that's how it feels when you're eleven. Basically, she longed for something that, in the end, belonged to someone else.

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As her mom, I see all the necessary parts of growing up happening in this one disappointment — the spiritual discipline of letting go, the practice of faith, the understanding that smallness is not always something to run away from.

But in her most vulnerable moments, lessons don't help her, at least not the kind I try to teach on purpose.

Still, I sensed the tension within myself. On the one hand I felt like I *should* be teaching her something in all this, helping her to see the markers. On the other hand, I just wanted to comfort her and to remind her she isn't alone.

It's true, learning is good and disappointments are an opportunity for growth. But I've grown weary of trying to squeeze a lesson out of everything, of always asking what God is trying to teach me in every circumstance, of seeing the world through lesson-colored glasses.

I am guilty of managing my experience of difficulty so my struggles don't feel wasted. In this action, I fear I've missed sacred times of healing in the darkness because I've wanted to rush ahead to the more understandable light. I have bullet-pointed my soul so that things make sense and have regarded God only as my teacher, forgetting he is also my friend.

School is good and necessary, but in my heart I long for home.

Sometimes I teach my kids stuff on purpose. Mostly, though, I just enjoy their company.

Today let's practice walking into the great mystery of God. Let's practice encountering Jesus as a person and not a character. Let's live first as daughters and allow the student in us to tag along behind.

Take a little time to figure out what we want as a way to honor the image of God within you.

This is an act of faith.

Let's agree that knowing what we want is not the same as getting what we want. We confess our desire and then release the results to his care.

We may grieve the losses but we'll also laugh at the jokes, sit in the silence, and move through our Tuesday routines.

All the while, we'll keep our eyes open for God's presence rather than trying to figure out his plan.

And as we carry each moment as it comes, let's trust that because we've gained a new heart, that our desires will lead us someplace good.

We don't have a to squeeze a lesson out of them, not now. Instead, let's just take the next right step with our friend Jesus.

Because in the end, what we want more than anything, is to belong, be seen, and to be loved without condition.

In the end, we have all of that and more in Him.

Thanks for listening to Episode 14 of The Next Right Thing.

If you would like to connect beyond the podcast, the best way to do that is to join my email list at emilypfreeman.com/join where you'll receive my monthly letter - filled with first word news, the books I'm reading now, my favorite things list of the month, and a secret post you won't find anywhere else. There's a link right there in the show notes in whatever app you're listening in. You can join us there

You can be sure that everything I write or speak about will always have one goal in mind: to help you create space for your soul to breathe so you can discern your next right thing in love.

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Some final thoughts from David Benner from his book, *The Gift of Being Yourself*:
“Genuine self-knowledge begins by looking at God and noticing how God is looking at us. Grounding our knowing of our self in God’s knowing of us anchors us in reality. It also anchors us in God.”