



## Episode 26: Choose Connection

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to *The Next Right Thing*. You're listening to episode 26.

If this is your first time joining me, I'm especially glad you're here. I often say this is a podcast for the second-guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue.

But even if you aren't one to second-guess yourself or if you never have trouble making a decision, it could be that you may just need a little white space in your day, a speed bump in your week, or a few minutes break from the constant stream of information and entertainment.

In the few minutes we'll have together today I want to talk about how to walk into a room. Maybe that seems weird but when it comes to relating with people, whether it's family or strangers, how we enter a room can mean the difference between connecting with them or comparing ourselves to them.

Fair warning, today's episode is brought to you by some healthy self-reflection and a dash of narcissism. It's for a good cause. I hope you'll hang with me.

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Growing up, I was a kid who made friends easily. We moved around a lot so that was actually something I had to learn if I didn't want to be the lone new girl everywhere I went. My sister remembers a teacher telling my parents how after we moved from Iowa to South Carolina that I make friends quickly with other girls because I was always complimenting them. (insert eye-roll) Could I be any more annoying with my "I like your shirt!" and "Your hair is *so pretty!*" Golly Day.

In my defense, I don't exactly remember doing that, but it totally sounds like something I would do so I believe it. Having friends was important to me. But that was back when the word 'friend' meant someone you're comfortable sitting with at lunch or someone who will walk with you to the bathroom so you don't have to go alone.

All that counts when you're in seventh grade. But now that I'm grown, friend means something more than that. When we consider the spiritual transformation of our lives, it often means being stretched beyond what comes natural and leaning hard into what is supernatural, those things that come from God. Learning to move toward community is often one of those unnatural-turned-supernatural things for me.

Nothing causes me to face my own humanity, frailty, and weakness than when I am in communion with others. Nothing causes me to see myself as I really am, to admit I'm not as great as I think, or to face my perceived entitlements than when I am in the midst of other people. I am easy to live with in a room all by myself. But I don't want to live in a room all by myself. Except for when I do want to.

When I walk into a room filled with people, I recognize in myself a tendency to ignore what God thinks of them and obsess over what they are thinking of me.

I once heard Shauna Niequist say, "With people, you can connect or you can compare but you can't do both."

That statement always takes me back to the first chapter of Luke with Jesus' mother, Mary, and John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth.

These two women could have compared and competed with one another in all the ugliest kinds of ways.

Elizabeth could have complained about Mary being too young. *You were chosen to carry the Messiah?! Why not me? I actually have some experience in the world.*

Or Mary could have complained about Elizabeth being a friend to her at the most important time of her life - *You're too old! Why couldn't God have given me someone my own age to relate with?*

They didn't do any of that. Instead of competing or comparing, these women connected. If you read Luke 1:39-56, you'll see that instead of trading fear, they traded praise.

Comparison didn't seem to be part of their vocabulary. These women chose connection over and over again.

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In 2015 I traveled to Portland, Oregon to speak at a writing conference. This is not a story about that conference, but a rather self-absorbed story about me. This was a job I almost said no to not because of scheduling or money or calling or anything like that.

Instead, it was because I didn't think I would be the kind of person that they would like.

Cute, right? Super grown up and spiritual of me.

I had never been to Portland before, never met many of the people I knew who would be there. I thought maybe they would be young, cool, hipsters and I would be . . . not any of those things. Maybe I'm the Kenneth Parcell to their Jack Donaghy, the Jessica Day to their Nick's-girlfriend-Julia.

Maybe I would be the Hallmark Channel and they would be HBO.

Maybe they write brilliantly about social justice and politics and other important issues. And I write from my home office in my quiet cul-de-sac about creating space for your soul to breathe.

On a good day, I know what I write matters. But not all days are good days.

So when I was invited to speak at this conference, I hesitated.

Would I have a place among these writers? Would I have anything to offer them at all?

What if I'm actually just fooling everyone, including myself?

Sidenote: This is no way to live.

For better or worse (mostly worse) this is one of my life-long struggles. If you can't relate with it, congratulations.

But if you can, I see your head nodding up and down there.

I know you laughed extra hard on that episode of *The Office* when Pam Beesly said she hated the idea that someone out there hates her and that if Al-Qaeda got to know her she's sure they wouldn't hate her.

This need to be liked doesn't define me but it does tempt me and it's not as simple as just wanting to fit in.

It's more like wanting to know where I fit which is if you can believe it, is super different from wanting to fit in. I'm an Enneagram 4 in case that isn't comically obvious to you by now.

I don't want to be like you, I want to be like *me*. The trouble comes when I'm not sure if being like me is good enough, acceptable, or approved of by you.

So anyway, what I always come back around to eventually is the discovery that my job is to listen to Jesus and then to be myself no matter who else is in the room.

When it comes to me I'm gentle by nature, I like funny TV, I think deeply about Jesus, faith, culture, grace, and people.

I write to know what I think about things, but I don't write down everything I think about.

I share my life on the internet and I am deeply private.

I like to be with people and I like to be alone.

I often wish I was more naturally lighthearted. Instead, I kind of have to work at it.

As it turns out, I don't have to define myself. I simply have to *be* myself.

And so I said yes to speaking at this writers conference in Portland. I settled within myself that I belong even though I'm not a cool hipster or a rabble-rouser or a policy maker but because I am in Christ. And the gracious people there, they proved those words were true.

When I am comparing I cannot connect. It's just not possible. To some degree, we all question where we fit and how we're perceived.

Don't we all work hard to protect the lingering child and long for security, worth, and love?

Don't we all hope for connection but often choose protection instead?

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And so when we bring it back to discerning our next right thing today, especially if you have a decision to make, you may have a tendency to base that decision on a comparison scale rather than a relational connection.

You may want to say no to something because you are afraid you won't measure up.

Or you may be glad to say yes to something because you feel pretty confident you'll come out on top.

I wonder how your posture toward your decisions might change if comparison didn't play a role at all?

What if, instead of running decisions through the comparison grid, we chose to ask ourselves instead about connectedness?

Author and spiritual director Jan Johnson talks a lot about how our spiritual formation simply happens within the next 10 minutes.

I'm enrolled in a Master's Degree program and grateful to have Jan as one of my teachers, and during our residency week together last fall, she often said things like, "What would it look like to trust Jesus or to be patient or to be content for the next 10 minutes?"

When it comes to choosing connection over comparison or competition with people in your life, that could be a good question to ask - *What would it look like to choose connection for the next 10 minutes?*

In what way - today, after this episode is over - can you connect with God in the next 10 minutes?

As soon as the closing music ends, how can you choose connection with the very next person you see?

Maybe it will mean listening before speaking.

Maybe you will offer a smile, a nod, or a hand.

Maybe you will simply be present with someone without an agenda.

May this change how you walk into a room.

Finally, how might your own self-image shift if you chose to identify with and connect to your *true* self rather than your *false* self?

Could it be possible that the person you're competing with most is some idealized version of you that you can never live up to? Would you be willing to set her free? How about just for the next 10 minutes?

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Sometimes self-reflection can get in the way.

Not the kind we do in the presence of Christ – no that's the important kind.

But the kind practiced while looking the mirror or in their eyes or at her reactions?

That kind gets in the way of the gospel in me.

If I spend too much time trying to define myself, it's easy to forget that I'm free.

We are free to holler with the world changers.

We are free to ponder with the contemplatives.

We are free to campaign with the activists and be still with the liturgists.

We are free to be quiet and free to be loud.

We are free to live in the center, on the side, or in the back.

We are free to go.

We are free to stay home.

We are free to linger and to leave early.

We are free to dream big and free to dream small.

We are free to draw boundaries and free to change our minds.

There's room at the table for Jack Donaghy and Kenneth Parcell.

We are free. We are free. We are free.

A short, closing prayer from Ted Loder in his book *Guerrillas of Grace*.

“Oh Lord, deliver me from the arrogance of assuming I know enough to judge others; deliver me from the timidity of presuming I don't know enough to help others; deliver me from the illusion of claiming I have changed enough when I have only risked little, that, so liberated, I will make some of the days to come different.”

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Thanks for listening to episode 26 of *The Next Right Thing*.

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There's a link right there in the show notes to [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter) - this month's letter goes out this week so today is the perfect time to sign up.

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 that you can discern your next right thing in love.

Hopefully, you know by now that we provide a transcript for each episode, so if you know someone who either can't hear or prefers reading to listening, you can download those transcripts at [thenextrightthingpodcast.com](http://thenextrightthingpodcast.com). Just click the episode number you are looking for and then scroll down to the black button and download the transcript.

Some closing words to remember as we move into our day.

“The people I know who are the most concerned about their individuality, who probe constantly into motives, who are always turned inwards toward their own reactions, usually become less and less individual, less and less spontaneous, more and more afraid of the consequences of giving themselves away.”

That's a good word from author Madeleine L'Engle in her beautiful book *A Circle of Quiet*.

And so I hope you'll join me in refusing to get lost in your own thoughts of comparison or competition today and instead choose connection during the next 10 minutes and the 10 minutes after that.