



104: Make Soup (And Eat It, Too)

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 104. This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life. If you're in the middle of a major life transition or simply need a few minutes away from the low grade hum of anxiety that daily life can sometimes bring, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. For those of us in the U.S., this is Thanksgiving week, which for many, may mean a shorter work week, a few days off of school, lots of travel and/or preparation for the arrival of friends and family.

Author Shauna Niequist in her book *Bread and Wine* says, "What's becoming clearer and clearer to me is that the most sacred moments, the ones in which I feel God's presence most profoundly, when I feel the goodness of the world most arrestingly, take place at the table."

Whether this holiday comes as a welcome pause or an unwelcome interruption, or if you're listening during a regular week with regular routines, I hope these few minutes we have together, can be for you like a deep breath and a kind friend.

This week I'm carrying a question with me. In what ways has my experience at the table ministered the gospel to me? How can I participate in sacred table moments in the midst of everyday life? Can our time around the table really change the way we see ourselves, our families, our decisions, and the world around us? Listen in

Whenever people talk about finding God in food and finding healing around the table, I always imagine they mean fancy food and long dinners and the gift of hospitality. But when I look at my actual life at the moments when people and food have mingled in a way that have ministered hope to me, it's never been fancy, but it's always been healing. In the midst of mostly bad news in the world, today I'm reflecting on five times when food ministered the gospel to me. I'll share them with you in five simple snapshots.

1. Before a Big Event

I stop by Kendra's house on the way to the local venue. My notes are packed in my bag. My nerves are high in my heart. I peck on the window of her backdoor as is the ritual, but by the time she sees me, I'm already inside. I'm nervous and grateful for the privilege I have of speaking to thousands of women in just a few hours. Also, I look forward to it being over. Kendra welcomes me in, asks how I'm feeling and motions to the jar of chocolate chip cookies she made that day. Offers me one as big as my face. I don't know if it's the fatigue of preparing for a big event, or the small kindness of her friendship in the form of sugar and butter and chocolate, but holding that cookie I feel the sting of tears. If it weren't for the mascara and the thousands of women I was about to stand in front of, I would have curled up in a ball on her sofa and wept.

2. Pregnant with Twins

It's 2003 and I'm a few months pregnant with two babies at one time. I believe down in my bones that food will never ever taste good again. John's out of town on a trip and I'm lonely and pregnant anxious, and so I drive over to my sister's house for company, and she and her husband offer to sleep in their boys' rooms so I can have their big bed in their bedroom for the night.

Settling beneath her heavy blankets in that warm familiar room, I halfheartedly watch *Entertainment Tonight* as one does. Does anyone ever wholeheartedly watch *Entertainment Tonight*? My life exists these days in the pregnant *Twilight Zone* of simultaneous starvation and food aversion. At some point, I can't remember, my sister comes quietly into the room and places a small plate on the bed beside me. On that plate is a simple grilled cheese sandwich, white bread cut diagonal down the center, an offering of love and support, silent understanding and solidarity. It was a magical and delicious combination. I've never forgotten.

3. A Busy Work Season

It's months after John quit his job, and we've decided to see what it's like for me to work and for him to stay home. A series of yeses to six weeks of speaking engagements has me traveling from Tampa to Houston to Indianapolis and a few places in between. Though the trips all fit in my schedule, I'm surprised by the pressure rising up in my soul. And so one Sunday when I'm home, I make soup. I put on music, chop carrots and celery and garlic. I warm bread and add heavy dollops of butter on top. Through the open window, I hear the kids play in the driveway while I work. The sound of their laughter mingles with the wind blowing through the colored leaves in the yard, and I'm surprised by the moment that feels both sacred and ordinary all at once. The moment, holy. The chopping, liturgical. Making soup becomes a spiritual act of worship.

4. The 20-Hour Retreat

There isn't time for a weekend away. There isn't even time for a full 24 hours, but I feel the need for retreat so strongly that I pack up my car and drive an hour to the retreat center run by the Sisters of Mercy, taking refuge in a simple room with two twin beds and enough silence to fill a stadium. I'm nervous about eating with strangers as we always have to do at retreat centers, but sitting around the table and talking about the weather is strangely calming tonight. For dinner, they serve Mexican food and kale salad. I leave the table without having to clear one dish, and even though that combination of food was kind of weird, walking to my room that night was a moment of joy I'll never forget.

5. Dinner at Home

Our daughter has a band concert tonight, and my mother-in-law is coming with us. We invite her to dinner beforehand. We're having Edie's perfect beef stew recipe with carrots and sweet potatoes and perfection. Thirty minutes before dinner I realized I forgot to pick up bread at the store. Oh, well, I think the soup is good on its own, but it would be better with bread. Not five minutes later, the doorbell rings. A box sits on our doorstep from a publisher, one of the nearly daily deliveries I get now from friends and colleagues releasing their books into the world. I open the box and I see Ann Voskamp's newest release, *The Broken Way*. I smile, I pick it up, and I whisper a prayer for her. The book is beautiful and then I look in the box and I have to blink twice to believe it, because there, tied up in a simple plastic bag, is a loaf of bread delivered to my doorstep just in time for dinner.

Not one of these was fancy food requiring a long dinner or the gift of hospitality: a chocolate chip cookie; a grilled cheese sandwich; soup in my kitchen; Mexican food with strangers; a loaf of bread in a box on my porch. But as I list them all together, isn't it all a miracle? That a weary, thirsty, exhausted body can be restored in the span of time between bites? Our simple offerings go further than we might think.

The healing gospel of Jesus shows up in simple ways we might never think to expect.

How has the offering of food been an extension of the gospel to you?

Where have you seen God around the table?

This week, as you consider the places where your feet take you, the plates and the platters your hands will exchange, the conversations your ears will hear and the memories you'll make, both some you'll cherish and others you may try to forget, may you be ever aware of how your friend Jesus is with you. No matter how ordinary the moment. And may He make himself obvious to you as you do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 104 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope the simple habit of making soup or bread or any other kind of simple meal can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true that this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. The more we're able to pay attention to the presence of God in our regular everyday moments, the more we'll recognize His voice and presence when we have decisions to make both big and small.

If you're celebrating Thanksgiving week with friends or family, but find yourself feeling a bit overwhelmed at the idea of all those people and all that togetherness, check out episode 16, *Walk Slow and Carry Questions*.

As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman on Instagram, or at emilypfreeman.com. And the two books mentioned in this episode are *Bread and Wine* by Shauna Niequist and *The Broken Way* by Ann Voskamp.

Well, during this time of Thanksgiving I have to mention how grateful I am for you. Thank you for being a listener of The Next Right Thing podcast, for supporting this work through your reviews, but also through your personal notes and DMs and messages. I can't tell you how encouraging is to hear from you. And so I just wanted to let you know how grateful I am to be able to do this work every week.

Well, I'll close with a few lines tucked away in a blog post Shannon Martin wrote back at Thanksgiving in 2016. These lines have stuck with me since I read them and now maybe they'll stick with you.

Shannon writes, "I could tell you family stories that would singe your heart and I'm certain you could burn me back. We have lived full lives, haven't we? And aren't they all forged from flames? I don't have to convince you we're strong or faithful because mostly we aren't, but we hold onto each other when the chips are down. We shake our heads at what an unlikely group we really are. And then we eat more pie, together."

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