



118: Start Small

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 118. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step. Today's episode is for anyone who's let go of something and is now considering what it might look like to re-invite that thing back into your life, maybe in a new way.

Whenever you walk away from something for a while, either because it didn't fit in the schedule anymore or you thought you grew out of it or simply because you needed a break, it can be difficult to know how to re-approach it when the time comes. Maybe the break did you some good and offered needed perspective, but in time you've learned you miss it and you want to re-engage, but you don't know how. If you've been thinking about returning to something you left behind but aren't sure where to start, listen in.

When you hear the words spiritual discipline, I wonder what comes immediately to mind. Your answer will depend on a lot of things, your personal history, your faith background, your family, friends, church, and your overall life experience both from the past and in the present. I have shared a lot in various places about what these two words, spiritual discipline, have held for me over the years and how they've changed shape over time. For years, I thought spiritual discipline had to be only something that would make sense for you to do in church, like reading your Bible or saying your prayers.

Of course, those things can be called spiritual disciplines, but over time I've learned the beauty and gift of broadening my understanding of what can qualify as a spiritual discipline. I've learned that God isn't interested in the ways I try to categorize spirituality, and he is as comfortable in my kitchen or the public library or the darkest alleyways of my own city as he is on the front row seat of the sanctuary at my church. The truth is anything can be a spiritual discipline when we recognize the presence of God with us in it. It could be something we do. It may also be something we abstain from doing.

During the season of Lent, some people engage in the spiritual discipline of avoiding sugar or staying off social media or turning off the TV, but the transformational power isn't in the thing we avoid. It's found in the space avoiding those things creates so that we can be more present to God.

In episode 11, I talked about the spiritual discipline of wearing better pants and even wrote about that in chapter 21 of *The Next Right Thing* book, and diving into the reality that God doesn't stop being relevant

when I walk out of the doors of the church, that he is present with me in everything I do and don't do, including cleaning out my closet, taking care of my body and being a whole person.

So a spiritual discipline doesn't have to be fancy or rigid or common, or listen, it doesn't even have to be explainable to somebody else. It can be anything we do or abstain from doing as long as it's something that produces freedom in us in the presence of God. So I'm sharing these thoughts on spiritual disciplines because I feel compelled to talk just for a few moments about how starting small really can be a lovely spiritual discipline.

I've already mentioned that this episode is for anyone who's maybe let something go, but would like to re-engage that thing perhaps in a different way. Sometimes when we take a break from something, we do it fully on purpose, but other times it's something we valued and loved, but we just couldn't make time for it anymore or it just fell off the schedule on accident really without our intention at all. I know, for me, when life becomes unpredictable or unsure, oftentimes, the first things to drop off the list are things that bring me joy, that creates space and allow me to feel like a person and not a robot.

So it could be something we've walked away from on purpose. It could be something that just didn't fit anymore or we got too busy for, or maybe you've realized you need time away, for example, from words in order to find them again, if you're a writer. You might need some space from certain people in order to just remember why you love them so much in the first place. You might need to put the paintbrush away or the guitar or the piano away to clear your head. Or depending on your stage of life, maybe you've been avoiding the dating pool just to find some sanity. Maybe you've let some things go unintentionally, like journaling or taking a neighborhood walk, attending a book club that you've loved, working out or reading fiction.

Sometimes the breaks are forced, maybe you had an injury or a loss, and you had to put certain things on hold for a time while you took care of logistics or tended to things that nobody else could do. No matter your reasons for the break or the time away, maybe now you're entering a season where you're curious about something again, but you sense some fear hanging around it. What if I've been gone too long? What if I no longer belong there? What if I can't keep up anymore? What if I've forgotten how? What if I start something and I can't follow through again?

If you're like me at all, you might struggle with getting back into your rhythm and maybe you feel awkward to bumble back into things, whether that be a small group you've not visited in a while or a book that you've put down and keep meaning to return to, or a conversation that you've been listening to from a distance but haven't stepped back into yet. Maybe your next right thing is to practice the spiritual discipline of starting small. Maybe God is whispering an invitation to all of us today, letting us know it's not too late to come on back. Maybe we don't have to walk as far as we think.

When I have neglected to engage in something for a while, it can feel like I have to somehow retrace my steps to get back to where I was before, and that just feels too hard. Well, that might be true when you take a wrong turn on the highway, but it's not true with this. No matter how far a change in your routine has carried you away know it's always only one step back to find the life again. One step in the morning, one prayer in the afternoon, one word in conversation, one appointment on the calendar, one email, one sentence, one moment, one breath.

So here's to taking the next right step. Here's to refusing to let our long absence keep us from raising our hand again. Here's to letting go of the myth that there is a normal to get back to anyway. Maybe we're not meant to go back, not really. Maybe in the returning, you're showing up changed and the change has done you good. Maybe we're simply asked to take the hand of our friend Jesus to start small and do the next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 118 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this invitation to start small can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or at emilypfreeman.com where you can click on podcast at the top of the page and grab a transcript for this or any of the episodes. If this idea of starting small as something you want to learn to practice more regularly, I wrote a whole book about that. It's called *Simply Tuesday*, and it's all about small moment living in a fast moving world. I'll link to the book in the show notes where you can find it easy.

If small seems irrelevant, remember these words, I've said them time and time again, acorns turned into oak trees, embryos might become president, love starts with hello, life starts with a breath. Small things don't always turn into big things, but big things always start out small. Lean into it, celebrate it, and in the words of Zechariah 4:10, do not despise these small beginnings for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin. Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.