



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 that 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 and that's what is essential. If you had any trouble at all answering that question, it could be because you've 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 is called a chef's life. It follows the life and work of award-winning chef Vivian Howard, a native of Eastern North Carolina. With The Avett Brothers theme song and the gorgeous North Carolina scenery, it's easily one of our favorite ways to spend 30 minutes on a week night. 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've watched each season as she had to field more and more requests for catering, traveling, 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. But as it turns out, something else she always wanted to do was to be a food writer. She even has a degree in English. So, 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 didn't come without mess and complication because, oh yeah, her husband Ben is also her business partner. And together they have young twins and that's something she's constantly struggling to navigate and to balance.

She puts that 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 best-selling author. Even more than the peek behind the scenes of her kitchen or the beautiful presentations of food or the simple and compelling interviews that 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, 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 it's 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 realized 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.

Now, less you get carried away and think that's fine for 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, "Stand up because Jesus is calling for you." 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, that 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 interactions with those who are 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, nevermind. 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 he answered quite simply, "I want to regain my sight." And that is what happened. Jesus didn't ask him, "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 it is that we want, I think it's 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, that knowing what you want and getting what you want are two very separate things. Notice, Bartimaeus 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 being selfish, even when 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 has 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’s 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 simply knowing what you want. Number one, knowing what you want builds your confidence. Usually, this can be discovered outside of some time alone, some quiet, some deep thinking. So, the actual process of determining and discerning what it is that you want can actually be a gift to yourself. It means you’ve taken the time to give your inner voice a place at the table. You have, as Elizabeth Gilbert has said, 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 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. Now, I know this one feels counterintuitive, but hang with me because 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 some type of disappointment, the truth is you will still feel that 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 and anger and frustration and fatigue after some life experience. Only to realize at the end, it’s because I had a particular desire I had not yet named. And 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, all kinds of weird things. 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 every day disappointment. There’s just no way to avoid it. When I’m honest with myself about what I most want, I have to 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 11. Basically, she longed for something that in the end belonged to someone else. As her mom, I see all of 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 tried to teach on purpose.

Still, I sense that 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. But 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 is only my teacher, forgetting He's 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 you 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 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, to be seen, and to be loved without condition. In the end, we have all of that and more in Him.

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