



197: For Us, As Our Faith Changes

“Sometimes people who are very vociferous and moralistic are people who’ve erased the tug of opposition from their lives. They have little sense of the otherness that suffuses and surrounds them. Thus, they can allow themselves all kinds of moral platitudes and even moral judgments of others. It is lonely sometimes to hear them talk, because in their certainty, you can hear the hollow echo of a life only half-lived.”

Those are words from John O’Donohue in his book *Walking in Wonder*. I’m Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You’re listening to episode 197.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you 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. Listen in.

We were listening to the soundcheck before an event where we would both be speaking later that evening. It was 2012 and the band was playing the song *Oceans*. It was a song we both loved. The “we” in this short story was me, Emily and her, my dear friend, Annie F. Downs. It was a short, casual, almost non-conversation that we had there in the dim light, one she probably might not even remember, but one I never forgot.

Because as we listened to the song, Annie said out loud half to herself, but also to me, “I’m careful with this song. I don’t sing it unless I really mean it.” She had a great point. After all, why would you sing, “Spirit, lead me where my trust is without borders. Let me walk upon the waters, wherever you would call me,” if you didn’t really mean it.

I think back to the hymns I sang with my mother from an old hymnal she had on the shelf when I was small. We would sit in an overstuffed rocking chair in the corner of our small living room in Columbus, Indiana, and sing together each verse from great is thy faithfulness. His eye is on the sparrow. He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives in me. For the beauty of the earth and it as well with my soul. Is it really? Is it really well with my soul?

There have been some times over the past 10 years or so where I’ve kept my mouth shut in the middle of a certain chorus because I just couldn’t sing it from my heart. And then there have been other times where I sing every single word as an act of faith, even though it’s not my lived experience at that time.

Lately, I have this image in my mind, and it's of me with one ear leaning towards the heartbeat of the humans around me, and the other ear resting gently on the mothering and fathering heart of God. And that's not to say that I exclusively am hearing God or hearing on behalf of someone else. I hope you understand. It's just to say that I am keen to listen to both the people and to the divine, and in the listening, I hear the sound of suffering and the sigh of struggle.

Parker Palmer talks about the way suffering breaks our hearts, but the heart can break in different ways he says in his book *On the Brink of Everything*. He writes, "There's the brittle heart that breaks into shards, shattering the one who suffers as it explodes, and sometimes taking others down when it's thrown like a grenade at the extensible source of its pain.

Then there's the supple heart. The one that breaks open, not apart. The one that can grow into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life."

And so as I continue to listen to my own life, to the life of others and to the life of God among us and within us, I sense this great deep sorrowful groaning, and maybe you sense it too. I sense a great breaking. Our work right now is to discern if this is a breaking apart into thousands of irreparable pieces, or if this is a breaking open that will provide more space. Sometimes, maybe it's both, somehow.

But in this listening, I also sense this great giddy and ridiculous joy, the laughter of hovering spirit, the uninhibited movements of the divine dance, the welcome of the holy family, inviting us home.

As time passes and life becomes increasingly more beautiful and also much more terrible, my faith continues to change. My faith continues to grow.

And what I'm still trying to figure out, and I'll be honest in this weird job I have as a writer, as a writer of things on the internet, as a writer of books, and as a person who hosts a podcast, and also as a mom of teenagers, and a member of my neighborhood and our community, what I'm still trying to figure out is, how much of my own faith journey am I willing to share?

And maybe a better way to say that is how much am I being invited to share at this point in my life? At the season in time, even with you, and maybe in many ways, you're asking that question too.

One of the things that we've lost, maybe one of the things I've lost in the last few years, is my sense of certainty. And I guess we could have a real long conversation about what I mean there, but I trust you can relate that there's a lot of things that have just been uncertain in many of our lives, in all of our lives.

When we were certain, it seemed a bit easier, but certainty is no longer the most important thing I'm learning. And I'm grateful for that, but I'll also admit when it left, in many ways it took clarity right along with it. As a result, you get to hear my thoughts out loud as I process in real time, my own next right thing. I only share it here because I know you can relate, and I know I'm not alone. It's happening all around us, isn't it?

Back to the hymns and the choruses. This is what I know. If I wait until I fully believe something before I

belt it out and sing it, I might never open my mouth again. The truth is there are days when I need to keep my mouth shut, and not say words or spit out phrases that are familiar, but don't actually mean anything.

But then there are those other days, you know them well, I'm sure. Days when saying the words that I don't feel like I fully believe actually saved my life. When borrowing the prayers and stanzas and lyrics of artists and pastors and makers and friends who are not me are what get me through a dark night.

It's not because there's some things they say are exactly right or foolproof or measured or proven even. But because they are people like me saying words for the sake of others, trusting God, even in the darkness, holding themselves and each other in a light.

Borrowing the words of others and saying them with my out loud voice is a spiritual act of worship. It's a confession of humanity, a pledge of allegiance to God and to one another. We are lost sheep and some of us are lost shepherds. We are all in need.

A lot of us are looking for our truest words these days. We're taking the hymns and choruses of our childhood faith, the verses we've memorized, our adolescent optimism, our adult commitments, our 2020 cynicism, our 2021 exhaustion. And we're holding them all up to the light.

Some of us have thrown some things out. Others are holding on for dear life. In the sifting, there's sure to be some mix-ups. Maybe you'll accidentally throw out something good and beautiful and true because you can't figure out how to untangle it from this false belief you've recognized. And like delicate necklaces at the bottom of the drawer, it's hard to tell where one chain ends and the next begins.

Maybe you'll hold onto something for way too long because it's familiar, but not because it's true. I'm not going to tell you what things to hold and what things to let go. I trust God for that. I hope you'll trust God for that too.

So here's to you as your faith is changing. If you're afraid, you are not alone. If you're confused, that's to be expected. If you're angry or sad or holding onto questions, I hope you won't abandon yourself. I dare not pray that our hearts only remain whole. Instead, my prayer, right now today, is for our hearts to break, not apart, but open.

In our questions, our uncertainties and our longing for home, may God guide our holding on and our letting go. In our fear of the unfamiliar, may we hear the comforting heartbeat of God for us and for our neighbors.

When we can't find our own prayers, teach us to borrow them instead. When we can't sing the melody, help us to listen for the harmony. When we sense the tension, maybe we know it's not a dying, but a coming into new life.

When we worry that our faith is changing, teach us to say instead that our faith is growing. May we come to terms with what we've lost. May we make room for what's to come. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Thanks for listening to episode 197 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of allowing your faith to change can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while 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 online at emilypfreeman.com, or on Instagram at [Emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman), where these episodes are often born from small images that I take and share, or from tiny snippets of captions that grow over time and become full episodes here on the Next Right Thing.

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In closing, a line from a poem called For Equilibrium by John O'Donohue in his book *To Bless the Space between Us*. "As water takes whatever shape it's in, so free may you be about who you become. As silence smiles on the other side of what's said, may your sense of irony bring perspective. As time remains free of all that it frames, may your mind stay clear of all it names. May your prayer of listening deepen enough to hear in the depths, the laughter of God."

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