



## 202: Abuelita Faith with Kat Armas

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 202. 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.

Today I'm happy to sit down with my friend Kat Armas. She's the host of The Protagonistas podcast and author of Abuelita Faith. Her work is based on the question, "What if the greatest theologians the world has ever known are those whom the world wouldn't consider theologians at all?" I'm especially glad to host this conversation during a week where many of us will be spending time with family around tables, in kitchens and childhood homes. What better places to pay attention to the ways in which God is revealed through regular people? Kat's book tells the story of unnamed and overlooked theologians in society and in the Bible, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters whose survival, strength, resistance, and persistence teach us the true power of faith and love. Listen in.

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Emily P. Freeman:

Well, Kat, welcome to The Next Right Thing. It is so wonderful to have you here. If there's one thing that I'm learning as I'm growing older, it's that we all speak and think and feel from our own lived experience, and I would love it if you could just tell us a little bit about yours as a second-generation Cuban American.

Kat Armas:

Yeah, well, thank you so much for having me. I'm so, so, so, happy to be here and so excited to chat with you. Yeah, I love that you started with that question, because I think it's so important. I feel like to be a good, I don't know, theologian, and I would say that word lightly and consider myself a theologian in training, but yeah, I think to be a good theologian, you have to locate yourself socially and locally, because so much of who we are speaks from our social location and place and land, right?

So, for me, yeah, as you mentioned, I'm a Cuban American, second generation, so my parents and basically my entire family immigrated here in the early to mid-1960s, sort of at the height and right after the height of the Cuban Revolution in Cuba. And so, yeah, so a lot of my experiences... Well, they immigrated to Miami, and Miami, if anyone has ever been to Miami, it's a very Cuban city, you know. The Cuban people sort of made it their own after the revolution. So that's where I grew up, and I grew up with my culture as the dominant culture. You know, I really didn't have to wrestle with my ethnic identity growing up, because I was part of the dominant culture. It wasn't until I left that I was like, "Oh, okay, we

are unique. Our culture is different than perhaps the dominant culture.” So yeah, so that’s what shapes a lot of my experiences of being Cuban American and being raised in a very Cuban American city.

Emily:

I love that you say you’re a theologian in training, because for one thing, you’ve been studying women in Scripture for many, many years.

Kat:

Yes.

Emily:

And for listeners who might not be familiar with you or your work, you hold both an MDiv and a Master of Arts in theology from Fuller Seminary. So, a theologian in training with a lot of training.

Kat:

Right, right. It’s funny, the more time I spend formally learning theology, literally the less I feel like I know, and so it’s like, I can get more and more degrees and be like, “I’m still learning. There’s so much I don’t know.” But yeah.

Emily:

Well, I’m curious if you could tell us... So, you didn’t start studying women in Scripture going to seminary, you started before that, and I’m just curious if you could tell us how your own interest and curiosity in studying women in the Bible, particularly women on the margins in the Bible, how did that start for you?

Kat:

Yeah, so I was raised Roman Catholic, which is very common, again, in Cuban American culture and particularly in Miami; Catholicism is very prominent. So I was raised Roman Catholic, and I was raised by a single mother and a single grandmother, and so, you know, very matriarchal household. And then I, in my early 20s, I transitioned to Protestantism, and so I was introduced to a very evangelical sort of type of Christianity, I don’t know what’s the best way to word that, but I was introduced to evangelicalism.

And very quickly, as I began to get more and more into the evangelical world, it just felt very different than how I was raised in what the roles were, you know, it was very much men had specific roles and women had specific roles. And sure, that works in certain settings, but I think for me, it was kind of a culture shock, but also just a... I had sort of an existential crisis, being raised by a single mother and a single grandmother where men were not very just prominent in the roles, if you want to call it that, in my life. I didn’t have really many men that spoke into my life in that sense.

And so, I felt like for me, yeah, I really began to wrestle with that. I began to wrestle so much with what it means to be raised by strong and independent women. Was it wrong, or was my upbringing not Christian enough or not... You know, was it against God or against what we’re “supposed to” or how we’re supposed to be? So that was a struggle that I began to have, and that led me to really just begin searching the stories of women in Scripture, and what were... What was it like for women, and how did they interact in Scripture, and where do we get these specific “right ways to be” that much of the dominant culture tells us is how we’re supposed to be?

And so, I began really wrestling with that, and then of course, I got to seminary, and I was given more resources and more access and things like that, where I was able to really dig in deeper. So I think that that's kind of how it began for me, just really having to wrestle with my background and my upbringing, and how it was very different than what... Yeah, how it was "supposed to be."

Emily:

Well, I love everything that you're saying. I think there are so many of us who wrestle with the ways in which we were brought up, and then we compare that to the things we learn as we become adults. We're like, "Wait a minute, this, something... Am I, did I..." And you mentioned going to seminary, and we already kind of mentioned that, but I would love it, Kat, if you could share a little bit... So, I'm reading your book, *Abuelita Faith*. I had enough time to have finished it by now, but let me just tell you, I love it so much I'm reading it too slowly. So, I'm already not a very fast reader, but I'm reading this one extra slowly, because quite honestly, I'm learning some new things, and you are teaching me, and I'm wanting to underline and take notes, and so I'm not as far... I haven't finished it. I wanted to have finished it, but I didn't, and so... Not yet, but I'm halfway through.

But one of the stories you tell in your book is about when you... It's really about a radical decision, I think, that you made, just a short time after you got married, and you started seminary at one place, and then you changed your mind. Kat, tell us about this story, because, you know, Next Right Thing podcast, we talk a lot about decision making, discernment, kind of what leads us to make daily decisions, yes, which I'm going to ask you about in a few minutes, but also these kind of bigger decisions, like life-altering decisions, which you made one, I think, in this moment.

Kat:

Yeah. Thanks for asking that. That was, it was a very... Yeah, very big, very hard decision. So, to give you a little context, I had just began... Or not just, I mean, I had been in seminary already for about two years. And as I mentioned, I had been wrestling so much with all this existential crisis, cultural, whatever you want to call it, I was really wrestling with who I am as a woman, as a person of faith, as a Cuban woman, right? I was really wrestling with all of those things in a setting that, you know, I was not part of the majority as I was growing up, and in a setting where... For example, my grandmother being very Roman Catholic, you know, being in a setting where I was pretty much told that Roman Catholics aren't "saved," and I needed to, like, evangelize my grandmother to death, and she was just like, "What are you..." And I literally would, and it was just the weirdest, most bizarre thing, because she loved Jesus and she was so committed to the church. It just didn't look like, again, like I keep saying, the way that it's "supposed to."

So, yeah, that was a huge time of wrestling for me, and like I said, I just really began to search Scripture and began to search stories of women in history and in the Bible, and began to ask a lot of questions, and I think my asking questions and my speaking up in a setting where women weren't welcomed or invited to do that as they are in other settings, you know, it was very much a very patriarchal or very much a male-dominated space. And yeah, I was met with a lot of pushback, of course. People kind of looked at me like a deer in headlights when I would push back against a lot of things, like, "Hey, but wait a minute, how about this," and asking a lot of questions, and "But when you read the Bible, how about this, or what about this woman in the Bible?" and that kind of stuff.

And so, after several months of this, like you said, I had gotten married, and my husband and I just

began wrestling with this stuff together, and he was actually studying women in church history, and so he would... And he was also in seminary, so he would come home and say, "Hey, I learned about this woman in history who did this amazing thing and was translating the Bible in Greek," and I was like, "Wow." And there's this woman in the Bible, like Phoebe, who she, you know, carried the letter... She carried one of Paul's letters, and she read it, and she preached it, and she was like a leader. So, all of these things that we hadn't really been taught in church or in those kinds of spaces but were learning as we're digging and doing all this research.

And yeah, so I think after a few instances of just being met in class by professors or by pastors with just a lot of opposition, or my questions just not really being answered, or... You know, I was sitting in class one day, I remember, and a professor was saying like, "You know, it's so important if you're in seminary to learn Greek and Hebrew so that you can read the Bible in its original language," and all these things. And I of course was taking Greek and Hebrew, and I was really wrestling with these languages and falling in love with them and really putting my all into them. And I was in class, and after going off on this tangent, and I was like "Yes, amen"-ing the whole way, he said, "Oh, and ladies, your husbands will be very impressed if you can also read Greek and Hebrew."

And it kind of hit me in that moment, like, wait a minute, you're not talking to me? Then what am I doing here? Right? Why am I spending my money and my time and my energy if it doesn't matter if I learn Greek and Hebrew because I'm a woman, right?

And so, I think that a lot of little moments like that kind of just added up, you know, and I came home one day, and I told my husband... I mean, brand new, I think we were married like three weeks, and I said, "I think we got to go." And he just looked at me and he said, "Okay, go where?" And I said, "I don't know, but we got to get out of here." I didn't feel like it was a place where I could flourish, where I could grow, where I could... And I really had no idea where we would end up in that moment. I mean, I just knew that we couldn't be there anymore.

And so, I literally just started Googling, like, "women seminaries." I really didn't know what I was looking for. I started Googling, and then I found Fuller, which is the seminary I ended up at. And, you know, I called, I applied, we kind of just talked through it. We didn't know what we were going to do or how. I mean, we sold everything in our little apartment, packed my little Kia Optima, and we just got in the car about a month later, and we drove to California from New Orleans. So, it was cross-country road trip.

Emily:  
So many people's next right things start with Googling.

Kat:  
Yeah. I love that.

Emily:  
to the Google, and here... But that was a radical decision. I mean, you were enrolled someplace, and then you just started seeing signs like, "This is not the place for me," for all these various reasons. And what a lovely thing, I mean, three weeks into your marriage, you guys made a decision. Talk about needing to be unified in a decision.

Kat:

Right, right, right. Yeah, and I think, you know, me, my husband was feeling similarly, and we just kind of... Yeah, at the time, were just like... One of us said it, you know? We sort of said it out loud and confirmed that, yeah, I think this is what we need to do.

But yeah, when I arrived in California, I mean, it was really funny, because we at that time didn't even really have a place... We were trying to get into Fuller housing, of course, and it wasn't confirmed yet. And as we were pulling in to, literally pulling to the state lines of California, we got an email like "There's a unit ready," and we're like, "Oh my gosh." So anyway, yeah, but it started with the Google, so...

Emily P. Freeman:

As it often does. Well, Kat, I'm curious, so, when we hear the word "theology," or when I hear the word "theology," I tend to immediately frame that word with an academic framework. But you do something different. Tell us more about an abuelita theology that you write about, and you bring in personal narrative, biblical narrative. What is abuelita theology?

Kat:

Yes, so, thank you for asking that. Okay, theology, right, is the study of God, right? It's how we think about God and how we study God. And that, as you mentioned, yes, it really does have such an academic feel to it. Like, even myself, right, I call myself a theologian in training, even though, yes, as you mentioned, I have had a lot of training. But it's almost like theology needs to be formal, or theology needs to be legitimate, whatever that means, in order for it to be theology, right?

Emily:

Right, right.

Kat:

But as I was really wrestling with this abuelita theology, and abuelita, you know, means grandmother in Spanish, and as I was wrestling with this, and of course it was sparked by my, as I mentioned, existential crises and all of these sort of crises I was having about my upbringing and about my grandmother, and that really led me to, well, then what does my grandmother's sort of faith look like? What does her theology look like? What does her study of God or her thinking about God or her wrestling with the things of God look like?

And it was in this, as I was wrestling with her life and her lived experiences, and as I was wrestling with women in the Bible, I began to see that so much of this study or thinking or living out this faith, right, is very much connected to an embodied theology. It's very much connected to a way of being, a way of knowing, a way of living. And my grandmother, for example, she never led a Bible study, or she never... She never was formally educated, you know? Most people would say that she is "uneducated" by the dominant culture's standard. She doesn't have a degree. But her life was very much, I mean, God was... So much was beating with the divine in all aspects of her life, and she ran a clothes-making business from home, and she sewed, and she danced salsa on the weekends, and her table, she always had people coming over the house for dinner, her table was always full with people from the community, and she fed folks from all over the neighborhood.

And as I began to wrestle with this and really dig into Scripture, I began to realize, wait a minute, this is a

lived theology. This is the story of so many women in the Bible. You have Tabitha in Acts, who she sews tunics for the women in her community. You have so many women who invited folks around the table. I mean, Jesus was even someone who was constantly meeting folks around the table; the dinner table was sacred, right? You had women who just did things with their... used their bodies as means of protest, right, against injustice, or they used... You had the midwives Shiphrah and Puah who, they, if you study midwifery in the ancient world, I mean, they were spiritual leaders who engaged in rituals and things to bring babies into the world, and they ended up saving Moses, who saved the Israelites.

And so, there's so many instances in the Bible where theology, where the study of God is a lived thing, it is an embodied thing. It is not something that is just heady or theoretical. How we understand it, right, it's the opposite of that. It is just something you do with your body.

And so, yeah, so that's something that I realized. As I was studying these women in the Bible and reflecting on my grandmother's story, I thought, you know, this is my grandmother... You know, my grandmother lived an embodied theology. It wasn't heady, it wasn't formal, it wasn't how we would understand theology to be, but it was... It lived in her body. And so, to answer your question directly, an abuelita theology for me is a theology of embodiment, it's a theology of the body. It's a theology that we do with our hands, and it's a theology that stems from lived experiences. And what I focus on particularly is survival; it's a theology of survival, really.

Emily:

And so much of it, I mean, these women in Scripture that you just including, and then your grandmother, all of the descriptions that you just so beautifully laid before us, Kat, are active.

Kat:

Right.

Emily:

And these are... It's not about thinking the next right thing or believing the next right thing, it's actually doing your next right thing, and I love how you say that word "embodied," which I'm hearing more and more and more the last few years, which I think is something that for me personally, just growing up was, the body was kind of an afterthought; it was like, what you think and what you think about what you think.

Kat:

Right, right.

Emily:

And don't even get me started on emotionality. That was like, oh, man, that's way back there, not allowed to really kind of hold that in front of you much at all, that that was... But I'm learning kind of the importance of bringing all that kind of into the presence of God, and what does that maybe look like, and these... And just these women in Scripture, you talk about the decisions that they made and how we can learn from those decisions. So many pivotal things in Scripture happened because of decisions that women made. Can you talk any more about that?

Kat:

Yeah, and I love that you mentioned that it is a doing thing, because I think that that is... When I mention

this survival, right, this theology of survival, I think that that's sort of the crux of it, you know. So many of these women in Scripture and so many of our abuelitas, of our grandmothers, they were just trying to make it to the next day, you know? Like, it wasn't this super hyper-spiritual, you know, "I'm going to sit here..." No, it was just like, "We need to eat, we need to survive, we need to ensure our future." And so, for women who were widows, "We need to find ourselves a husband." You know? We just need to do exactly what you said, the next right thing, right? But they were willing to do the deeply right things in many ways, even if it cost them something.

I think, again, of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus. I mean, they had to make decisions, the deeply right thing, despite what Pharaoh or despite what empire was telling them to do. They decided, "No, we're going to engage in civil disobedience, we're going to lie to Pharaoh, because the right thing is to save the Hebrew boys, not kill them." Right?

And so, that's something that I kept noticing over and over and over again, is that so many of these women are just doing the next thing that they have to do, the deeply right one for themselves, for their communities, and in response to their God. And that's something that I love so much, and I think what's so interesting about it is, a lot of these stories are also so very scandalous, you know? You see so many women in the Bible doing things that, I don't know, maybe nowadays dominant culture may not be like, "Yeah, emulate that," you know? But I think it's just very interesting that they're in Scripture, and so many of these women are in the genealogy of Jesus, they are called blessed, they are called righteous for literally trying to survive, for literally just trying to make the best decisions for themselves, for their communities, and in response to their God.

Emily:

Beautiful. So, we, of course, learn a lot about God our Father. Jesus referred to God as Father. And your work is helping to provide more context for the mothering part of God. So, you point out that in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is referred to 84 times, and of those, 75 of them refer to Spirit in feminine terms. So, I'm curious, Kat, for you, what's been most transformative for you as you've done so much thinking and studying about the feminine reflection of the image of God?

Kat Armas:

Yeah, and that's something that has been so beautiful for me in this journey of really trying to excavate or investigate the different aspects of God in Scripture, particularly as someone who was raised in a very matriarchal, maternal household. You know, for me, I never called anyone father growing up, and so... I remember it was when I first read Julian of Norwich, and she talks about Jesus as a mother, and to me, that just made perfect sense. You know, she talks about how we eat at Jesus's breast, you know, Jesus, his body was broken for us, sort of like a mother's body is broken for her child when she gives birth. And then Julian talks about how, then, Jesus feeds us with himself, and that to me was just, it just made so much sense, right?

And that sort of began my journey of, "Wow, let me look into this." And so, yeah, so when you start digging into Scripture, you start finding so many references of God taking care of God's people like a mother hen, or God as a woman who is looking for the lost coin, or... There are just so many references of God being motherly and God caring for God's people like a mother cares for her child. And one of the things that I just love so much is what you mentioned, how many references of the Holy Spirit there are. Because, in Hebrew, sort of like in Spanish, you know, we have feminine and masculine pronouns and things like that, and ways to talk about different things in feminine and masculine terms. And the fact that

the Holy Spirit is so interchangeable, you know?

And it makes sense, I mean, God is a Spirit, right, God is not essentially male or female, God is a Spirit, at the end of the day. And of course, we've assigned, or it's been assigned that God is a male, but because God is a Spirit, I think that... And because all of us are made in the image of God, right, women and men are made in the image of God, then of course there are feminine aspects to God's image that women can relate to, that all people can relate to.

And so, that was something that's been a beautiful journey for me in discovering that. I think another thing that I really loved in my research of that is how wisdom is portrayed as a woman, right? And wisdom as we understand is also, speaks to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is sort of like the... In Scripture, in many ways, when we think of wisdom, we think of the Holy Spirit. And yeah, it's portrayed as a woman as well. And so, there are so many aspects of God's character that are nurturing and all of the things that we traditionally assign to women.

So yeah, that's been a very important part of this journey for me, is just embracing the motherly aspect of God and how... A friend pointed out recently how, when we talk about Jesus delivering us, even that is just this imagery of Jesus delivering us, or... I know it talks about how in, I think it's in John, how the baptism of blood and water, and it's like, so many things, if you think about it, have such beautiful, rich imagery. And it's just this sort of... It's a richness and it's a profound imagery that we can really, yeah, lean into and really understand in the fullness of God, and that is male and female, right?

Emily:

Images and imagery are becoming such an important part for me of my own formation, and even more so, in some ways, than when I was little. Like, you would think images and imagination are for children, and grownups, you know, we get to be thinky and academic. But in fact, I'm finding it to be quite beautiful to discover just, in Scripture, how often our imagination is engaged and how-

Kat:

Yes.

Emily:

You know, God does that on purpose, and I'm beginning to really appreciate that, and I love you sharing all these images. You're so good at that, Kat, kind of bringing in, like, "Look at this, look at that, look at this."

Kat:

Thank you.

Emily:

I have two more questions for you as we close. I could talk about this forever. How can we live out abuelita theology in our everyday lives?

Kat Armas:

Yeah, so, I would say, I think there's several ways we can do that, but I think that one beautiful way that we can live out an abuelita faith or an abuelita theology is really by embracing this idea of an embodied faith, right? How do we use faith, or how do we live out our faith in our bodies and with our hands, you

know? I think of art, or I think of... You know, in my book, I talk about, I mentioned this earlier too, of how my grandmother, she sewed, she sewed for her community. And that to me has become such a sacred thing, the idea of creating and sewing and using our hands to serve our communities, using our hands to provide for ourselves and our communities, and using our hands really for worship, right, and for reflecting on God and the divine.

You know, in my book, I talk about how there were women in Chile called the arpilleristas, and they were women who used their arts and their gift of sewing to protest against the unjust murders that were happening. And the government was taking people, and people were dying, and they used their art-making and their sewing to say, "Well, this isn't right." Again, going back to this idea of the deeply right thing, or the next right thing. How can we use our gifts and our talents and our passions to serve our communities, to... Any of the things that we feel like we need to do in our lives, right?

And so, for me, an abuelita theology really is a theology of the body, you know? There's a chapter in *Abuelita Faith* where I talk about dance, and how Miriam in Exodus, she literally, after they escaped Egypt and after they escaped the oppressors, she led her community in song and dance, and it was a beautiful moment of joyous celebration, and that dance, that movement of their bodies was sacred, and it was something that they all partook in together as a way to celebrate God and celebrate their freedom, and so I think... You know, that reminds me again of my grandmother and how dance was such a beautiful and sacred time of her connecting with her body and, again, connecting with her community.

And so, how can we use our bodies, how can we be more free in our bodies, whether that's gardening, or whether that's connecting with the land? As I mentioned in the beginning of this conversation, land and place is so important. If we believe in Genesis 1, that God made all things good, and God cares about the trees and the plants, and so how can we stick our hands in the dirt and get to know God more that way? So I think an abuelita theology is a theology that embraces embodiment, theology that connects that, as you mentioned, our heart and soul and our bodies, that we are holistic people, and we are not people that just function in our minds, but we function in different aspects.

Also, I will say that an abuelita theology is a theology that looks to those whom the world would overlook as genuine theologians. And so, someone like my grandmother, right, who was overlooked, no one would ever call her a theologian, again, because she wasn't formally educated, or she... Socioeconomically, she wouldn't be looked at as someone who has privilege or power. But an abuelita theology says that she is a theologian. An abuelita theology says that so many people in our midst who are forgotten or unnoticed or overlooked do or are genuine theologians, because we all think about and we all study God. And so, what can we learn from overlooked people? Yeah, and how can we sort of embrace this embodied, living theology? So I would say those are two ways that we can embrace an abuelita faith.

Emily:

So good, Kat. There are so many ways to love God and each other, and I'm just so grateful for how you talk about that and how you bring that to light. I have one last question I ask everyone who comes on and talks with me on *The Next Right Thing*, and that is quite simply, you can answer it however you want, big, small, what is your next right thing?

Kat:

Well, I am about to give birth any minute now.

Emily:  
Yes, yes, yes.

Kat:  
And so, I would say my next right thing is to really just embrace this new season, this new time. You know, I have a hard time saying no to things, and I'm actually really looking forward to having a really good excuse to tell everybody no. So yeah, so I think really just being flexible in this season and allowing myself to learn a whole lot and be really tired and be really... You know, be stretched and challenges, but to... Yeah, to just embrace a brand new season. So, I would say that my next right thing is to just learn how to be a mom.

Emily:  
Well, I'd say you are off to a fantastic start with the work that you have already done, my dear.

Kat:  
Thank you.

Emily:  
So, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us today. We're so grateful you came.

Kat:  
Yeah, I'm so thankful to be here, and thank you so much for reading *Abuelita Faith* and engaging with it, and for your wonderful questions.

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Thanks for listening to episode 202 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of learning from everyday theologians 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, you know the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are making our lives.

As always, you can find me online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com), or on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman), and you can find Kat online at [katarmas.com](http://katarmas.com), or on Instagram at [kat\\_armas](https://www.instagram.com/kat_armas), that's A-R-M-A-S. You can also find her book, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*, anywhere books are sold, and of course, I'll share a link in the show notes.

In closing, a few words from Kat's latest Instagram post. She writes: "Dominant Western culture might say we don't have much to learn about divinity from the poor or uneducated, from immigrants or women or young children or plants or animals. But an abuelita faith says we have the most to learn from them. An abuelita faith insists that we must lean into the myriad of ways marginalized folks possess a wisdom that is birthed from survival, a wisdom that lives in our bones, that our children carry because it is ancestral and embodied and sacred."

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

