



## 237: For When Things Are Changing (with John Freeman)

I'm Emily P. Freeman. And welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 237. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue with 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 discerning your next right thing.

Today, for the second time ever, I'm hosting a conversation with my husband, John Freeman, who is my favorite. We've been married for 21 years and have two rising college freshmen and one rising high school, sophomore. And we've lived in the same town since we got married back in 2001.

Professionally, John runs a local community-funded nonprofit called Grace Discipleship where he serves as a spiritual director, providing soul care and discipleship for the next generation. John has been a steady listening presence for several decades here in our hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina. And he regularly meets with teenagers, college students, couples, and ministry workers to prayerfully hold space for them to discern what God might be up to in and around them.

Emily:

Today, I'm eager to sit with John and talk about some times of discernment and decision making in our own marriage and how serving on staff at a church for over a decade prepared him for his work as a spiritual director. And then, we'll also talk a little bit about what's on our minds as we prepare to send our twins off to college. If you find yourself standing at a threshold of change, listen in.

\*\*\*

Emily:

John, welcome to the Next Right Thing.

John Freeman:

Hey.

Emily P. Freeman:

This is going to go well. I can already tell.

John Freeman:

Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, the last time we did this was a little over a year ago. We just pulled out the microphones on our summer vacation around our 20th anniversary.

John Freeman:

It was really good to be on the show, I mean, just reflecting on it and talking to a few people. That was awesome just to be together.

Emily P. Freeman:

Yeah. No, it was. Well, and I'll say I've had people ask to have you back. And now, it just feels like the right thing to do once a year. But I want to avoid sharing the exact same stories that we shared last time. Unfortunately, I did not go back and listen to the last episode. But I did ask on Instagram for listeners to share or to ask questions.

Emily P. Freeman:

So I pulled a few of those. I have a few of my own. But just to frame up this conversation, it's been a year since we sat down with microphones. We were celebrating 20 years. We just celebrated 21, a couple a month or so ago. And I would love to frame up our time in talking about transitions because, obviously, in any relationship, you live through a lot of transitions and making lots of decisions together and apart and with each other. And so, we've made a lot of decisions. But recently, we made one decision more quickly than ever before.

John Freeman:

Yes, we did.

Emily P. Freeman:

And so, well, why don't you, first of all, tell the people before we share about that decision just briefly about the work that you do because that feeds into our fast decision that we just made.

John Freeman:

It does indeed. So yeah. My work really is a combination of soul care and discipleship. I think some traditions call it spiritual direction. But it is a more of a hidden one-on-one work where I sit with people, listen, often earn the right to speak. And sometimes, it's appropriate to speak. What I feel like might be true for them in the moment and trusting that the spirit is moving in that conversation.

John Freeman:

That's the gist of my work. But it also involves a very specific group, so young people, even teenagers and young couples. I still officiate weddings. And then, just individuals who are really curious as to what God is up to in their life and just need some companionship in that, is what I do. And I love it. It's a sacred way to get to know people, but also witness the spirit working in very unique ways.

John Freeman:

So six years ago, we purchased my childhood home my mom. And we have been using that for our work. And so, that's where I've been doing a lot of this one-on-one spiritual direction. And it's very significant because a lot of my story is represented in that home. And even in my own memories of doing ministry and work there, I remember God working in our family and in my story. And so, sometimes, I will retrieve what God has done, is prior to meeting with someone. And so, that's very special. And then also just inviting people to that very much of a home feel really lent itself to a safe environment, to process what's God doing.

Emily P. Freeman:

So last spring and if you've been around a while, maybe you've heard me tell the story. But last spring, we decided, I mean, kind of fast, to sell that home and to buy a place in the mountains. And this is not an episode about us buying mountain house. But I think it is one about the decision making process when

there's really no right or wrong answer. And when you have to tap into something that you want when all else is equal, and so I remember we had this opportunity. We saw this lovely house. It was down the street from my sister and her husband where they had just moved in the mountains of North Carolina.

Emily P. Freeman:

And we kind of came to this place where we had to decide, do we keep the home from where we've been doing our work for the last five or six years and the home where we imagined doing our work for many, many years down the road, or do we consider the possibility of letting that place go and step into having another place, but also not knowing what that place would hold? So can you just share a little bit about your internal processing or you're kind of an external processor so you're external processing.

John Freeman:

Yeah, I am. Well, the first thing that comes to mind is a lot of people knew about the Leewood house. And where it was in town, people would drive out all the time. And so, there was a public aspect to this decision. And the house, even though we owned, it was represented the nonprofit that I worked for did its work in that house. And so, there's some close connection. So one thing that was difficult for me was we had to put a sign in the yard that we're selling it. And so, I did make it known to some of the followers of the nonprofit that we were doing this.

John Freeman:

But it just really started to kind of prick at some things in my heart of that were like, "Oh, people are going to ask you all these questions." And it just felt like a public kind of a public decision, which I know it really wasn't. But shame kind of came up some for me like, "Oh man, you're going to make a big mistake here." And you don't have enough time to process. So shame was right out of the gate. I don't know if I've told you that. But shame was an issue for me at the potential of making a big mistake.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, the problem in your mind, correct me if I'm wrong, that people were going to ask you all these questions for which you didn't have an answer.

John Freeman:

That's right. Yeah. So there's a lot of uncertainty. And things were progressing quite a bit. But I will say when the mountain house presented itself, it did unearth in us that we knew it was time to let the Leewood house go. And I thought that was really interesting.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, it didn't right away. But it did real quick compared to-

John Freeman:

It did.

Emily P. Freeman:

... because that's sort of something I wanted to ask you is how did this decision-making process, or did it, feel different than other discernment processes in the past that we've made in our marriage?

John Freeman:

So the public piece of having the sign in the yard and then also like this was something that was part of my childhood and just a big part of me I didn't realize. And so, there's quite a bit of loss associated with this decision. And it was all happening very quickly. So it made me a little wobbly, I guess that's an okay word, which required me to lean into some people. Even your dad, your sweet dad, just processing with him. And it did it. But it didn't feel like, "Oh, this is the wrong thing." So I had just enough to take the

next step and you too. We just had, okay, well, let's go. Let's take this step. Let's go talk to this person. Let's go look at it again. And so, I felt kind of pulled through that process instead of like kind of pushed in a way that shame would do or any sort of fear or uncertainty.

Emily P. Freeman:

What's your best advice for encouraging someone who might be second guessing a good decision? And I say that because using this decision we've made as a framework, again, it's not really about the actual thing that we did, like, yes, we sold a home that meant a lot to us and our family and bought a different home. That's what we did. But the process of making a decision when there maybe wasn't a clear yes or no, when you're talking about houses, you have to kind of make some decisions quickly and then not really being able to say exactly what you were stepping into. I think those are things that a lot of people can relate to, no matter... like in a similar decision making framework, even if it's about something else.

Emily P. Freeman:

But then, once you make that decision, some of us, not all of us, but I think we were... I mean, you can answer. I felt good about it. Once we made it, I was pretty sure like, "Okay. I didn't really second guess it." Did you?

John Freeman:

Yeah. No.

Emily P. Freeman:

Okay, good. Okay. So do you have any words though for those who might be in a partnership or a marriage where one of you feels great about the decision and the other one is second guessing?

John Freeman:

Sure. Yeah. What comes to mind is shame once again. It's just so powerful. And I think shame will probably always be in the room. But to be able to identify shame and name it and sort of put it in its place and say, "Okay, you're here. But you're not going to run the show," in our process, that felt like an important realization because there's sort of a lot on the line.

John Freeman:

Secondly, what comes to mind is just when we looked each other in the eyes. I mean, we really had to process this decision and listen to each other and listen to desire and listen to all the things that maybe in us. And so, that intimate connection with us, that always felt like a arrow or a right way to go about it because if we come out of this and really know each other and feel really close and connected, that's positive.

Emily P. Freeman:

Which really is something we talk about a lot on the Next Right Thing, which is when it comes down to it, the decision itself is rarely the point.

John Freeman:

Right.

Emily P. Freeman:

It's really the person that we're becoming. And our decisions play a part. And so in that case, sometimes, it can be a comfort. Sometimes, that's an annoying thing to say that, "Well, the decision's not the point." But someone's like, "Well, we have to make the decision." But I do think it can be a comfort to how is this decision making process enabling me or encouraging me or inviting me into becoming that maybe I would not have the opportunity to become where this decision not on the table. Even in something as I don't

even want to say as silly as a house because I don't think a house is a silly decision. But it's not a life or death decision.

John Freeman:

Yeah. And I think our relationship was becoming. There's something progressing in our relationship to where risk and facing things that may be a little bit heavier for us to carry individually can be done together.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, one decision that for us was not quite so quick was the vocational shift that you made back in 2012, 2013 from full-time youth pastoring on staff at a church to the work that you do now as a spiritual director. That was not a fast decision. That took years of discernment and listening, paying attention and being willing to dream. And so, I get a lot of questions. Whenever I say, "Ask John anything," or whenever we even talked on the podcast about this a little bit, the last time. And I think this is something people are curious about and also desperate for, is hearing stories of other people who have made larger shifts in their work in similar ways that you have. So I'm curious, what do you wish you would've known when you were working on staff full-time at a church?

John Freeman:

I think it would've been great to have had someone sit down with me and just say, "John, it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay," because deep down, I think whether it's fear, shame, frustrations, they poke at this sense of it's not going to be okay. And I think because of that, I would have been able to let things go a little bit easier. And I love the author who said, "I can let go of life because I have life. I have life with God." And so, I think there's something in that it can be so Christianese to say, "Let go. Let God." But I do think there's something in that with you have life, it's going to be okay. You can let go of this.

Emily P. Freeman:

What kind of things do you have to let go of?

John Freeman:

Gosh.

Emily P. Freeman:

You don't have to tell us.

John Freeman:

Well, I mean, I've told this story. I don't know if I told it last time. But two weeks after I had left that position, I was playing tennis. And it was just kind of a league. And what is the one thing that people ask to get to know you, if you don't know him is the-

Emily P. Freeman:

So what do you do?

John Freeman:

... what do you do? It's almost like the person was saying, "Who are you?" And I didn't have an answer. And I just fumbled a tennis ball dropped out of my pocket. And I just kind of fumbled. So that was kind of a deathly experience. I mean, death isn't the right word to use it. But there was a loss there. It was a loss of identity. And so, that's for sure, one thing and just walking along into everyday life by myself. There is a kind of a sense, "Well, who am I? What am I doing?" But I felt like that was such a sweet place for Christ to meet me.

Emily P. Freeman:

How would you say if it did, how did your work as a pastor on staff for 12-ish years prepare you for the work you do now as a spiritual director?

John Freeman:

I think when I was a pastor, I just had so much to say. I was saying things all the time. And the work of spiritual direction really is listening. It's listening to the person that you're sitting with and listening to God on their behalf. And I think being a pastor for a long time, I kind of learned the opposite of listening, which was talking. But it just was a dynamic that really became beautiful. And even in this post-Christian world we live in, I wonder if our proclamation really is listening and earning the right to speak a pastoral word to people. So I don't know if that answers your question. But it did, I think, set me up to really lean into the power of listening to people.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, I think, maybe your particular experience as a pastor helped you learn what wasn't working for you as a leader-

John Freeman:

Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

... in some ways. Even though you were a great pastor and you did a lot of things that I think "worked" and connecting with people, but maybe on the inside, you felt from where I sat a responsibility to carry the room-

John Freeman:

Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

... or to make something happen.

John Freeman:

And it didn't work. And I think that's what I learned, was this is not working.

Emily P. Freeman:

Coming at it from that posture.

John Freeman:

That posture for me now. I have to just say that for me.

Emily P. Freeman:

Yeah, because I think you can pastor with a listening posture and serve from that place. But that just wasn't where you were at that time.

John Freeman:

That's right.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, I'm curious, what do you miss about being on staff at a church?

John Freeman:

Well, if I'm honest, we just picked up these microphones. And this microphone is it's a lot like a church microphone. And I haven't really had this in my hand. And so, it's oh man, maybe this is revealing

something.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Tell us more, John.

John Freeman:  
Oh gosh.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Tell us more about that microphone.

John Freeman:  
I mean, I think the attention and the stage and the voice when your voice is amplified in a room, it does something, at least for me. Maybe, it touched and did something to my ego. So I paint myself into a corner.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Do you want me to edit this part out?

John Freeman:  
Next question.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Well, I've heard you say you miss the community of working with other people daily.

John Freeman:  
Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:  
You miss-

John Freeman:  
I'm embarrassed. Yeah, because-

Emily P. Freeman:  
But it's honest.

John Freeman:  
It's honest. I do want to come back around to what you just said. But our friend, Steve, a mentor, he said, "John, you're moving into a hidden work." And that hiddenness to me is like you're coming off the stage. There's no microphones here. The hiddenness is often like the sea that falls into the dark ground. That's a hidden place. But you're part of something really powerful and really small. And that too is beautiful. But the community piece that you mentioned, yes, absolutely. I mean, sometimes, the hidden work is a lonely work. So to find other people that are kind of doing the same hidden work, I mean, that is such a joy. That is such a joy.

Emily P. Freeman:  
It is odd dynamic as we grow older, very slowly growing older. That's happening so slowly. Just kidding. It feels like it's happening quickly. But as we grow older, it's like our Western minds are trained to think that growth means bigger, grander, brighter, more wonderful, more attention. And yet, that's not my experience. The things that are growing bigger in some ways are the ones I'm less drawn to. And I feel like my work in some ways seems to be more hidden, more invisible almost which can be equal parts

extremely satisfying and also deeply terrifying.

Emily P. Freeman:

But I also don't want to imply that work that grows in an outward way is wrong work or bad work that means that it's not meaningful or faithful. But the pursuit of that, it just wears me out, I think. There are some context where it's harder to resist that pursuit than in others. So for us, we've found spiritual direction, this vocational work of spiritual direction. And mine looks a little different.

Emily P. Freeman:

I do some one-on-one. John does more one-on-one work. But I think we approach any of the work that we do with kind of this spiritual direction posture. And sometimes, that means shutting my big mouth even when I have something extremely profound to say which is humbling. It's humbling because it says, "What I have to say is not the most important thing in the room right now." But holding space for maybe even for silence, sometimes, is the better work for me.

John Freeman:

Yeah. And asking those questions. I don't know if you remember the last six months I was at my last church. Everyone knew I was leaving. And I started this group with high schoolers and a few leaders. And we just started to ask questions that were soul-deep questions. It was like really kind of putting to practice some of the things I was learning at the time.

John Freeman:

And that was the most rewarding time because all these things started to come up out of these students. And they felt safe to share. It was kind of like spiritual group, spiritual direction. And that just put something in me to go, "Okay, whatever's next, I want to do this kind of listening, seeking God together work."

Emily P. Freeman:

It's creating spaces for spirit to move in ways that we can't manipulate or manufacture. I mean, we can't manipulate that anyway. But I think bearing witness to that and having a front row seat, it's a humbling position. I'm curious, John, is there something you hear over and over again from people that you work with just in general? Is there a human experience that you sense among the people that you're listening to or the spaces where you enter that has a commonality to it these days, like, in the last months, six months, this last year?

John Freeman:

I've heard different images used from people describing their connection with God. I hear things like I've hit a wall or my soul is dry or I'm at the end of my rope. And it's funny how we describe our soul and images like that. So I've heard a lot of imagery lately. And I think that gives great meaning to where people are and also have the privilege of connecting them with other images of a rose growing up out of the desert ground and providing hopeful images. But I think the dryness and the disconnect in their life with God are two things, I'm hearing.

Emily P. Freeman:

Yeah. I'm hearing a lot of that too. I'm hearing a lot of longing for God, but not using those words, and almost like there's a collective burnout among us. And I put myself in that category in a certain way because I can relate. I'm curious if you have words or new imagery for either someone listening who feels burnt out right now, vocationally, spiritually, relationally, or for someone who is in relationship with someone who feels that way, and they're not sure how to help or what to say.

John Freeman:

It's kind of a popular verse or a cliché phrase of beauty coming from ashes. But beauty has meant a lot to

me lately. There was one particular morning where it was a little down. And I was sitting by the window. And the sun just kind of made its way through the woods in our backyard and just shined me just for a few minutes. And I just stayed there. And I just held that kind of place and just considered God's face towards me. And I think that really taught me that when I capture a glimpse of beauty to really hold that, to really sit with it and write about it. And I do think the spirit does emerge from ashes or something that doesn't seem like there's any existence. So that's been really helpful for me. And there's a lot of writers out there doing that work.

Emily P. Freeman:

For beauty come from ashes, something's got to burn.

John Freeman:

Oh, that's right.

Emily P. Freeman:

That's what we say around here and listen. We've seen some things burn, haven't we?

John Freeman:

Yeah, we have. We have.

Emily P. Freeman:

What's something you learned this year that surprised you.

John Freeman:

I don't know if you're going to hate me for saying this.

Emily P. Freeman:

I will, I'm sure.

John Freeman:

I think you have surprised me. And I think what I mean by that is you've really allowed life to come up and out of you in the midst of things that burn. And that doesn't end just with you. That's really benefited me. And I think one very specific example of that is you help me name what I'm feeling. So you help me write a first draft of my emotions. And that has just helped me come alive a little bit more, wake up to being in touch with the emotions because I think that's a God created thing. And you, I feel like, are a master at that. And I know you probably think, "Well, yeah, I'm a mess. And I feel all the things." But that's what I'm talking about. You move through that. And the life of God just emerges through you.

Emily P. Freeman:

Thanks, hon. Are you saying I'm a mess? So you're saying I'm a mess.

John Freeman:

No. You-

Emily P. Freeman:

I'm just kidding. Thank you.

John Freeman:

Yeah. You're welcome.

Emily P. Freeman:

That's very kind.

John Freeman:  
You're welcome.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Yeah. That's good. Well, we sit here a couple of weeks before we take two children to college. When I say that taking two kids to college, what's the first word that pops in your mind go?

John Freeman:  
Freedom.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Whoa.

John Freeman:  
Wait.

Emily P. Freeman:  
They're going to listen to this, John.

John Freeman:  
I'm just kidding. Not freedom.

Emily P. Freeman:  
You mean their freedom, right?

John Freeman:  
Their freedom. Oh, I'm so happy that they're going to have all this freedom. They're going to love it. That's probably not the right word.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Well, it's because I put you on the spot to answer fast.

John Freeman:  
Well, I think there is some freedom in like at least in parenting, it's like, "Okay, we reach this goal. And now, we're kind of free from this high school life with them." Now, we're moving into another kind of phase.

Emily P. Freeman:  
Yeah. It's like a new... I mean, I'm very sad. Make no mistake. But I haven't yet dove into the sadness of what this transition, what this holds, what it means, whatever sense. And partly I think, the pandemic of so many things taken away from so many people from the most devastating people who have lost their lives to experiences and marking moments and weddings and funerals and everything in between, births, and graduations, and all those things. I feel like this last year, being able to experience some of those things, some of these lasts with the twins, I've been deeply grateful for in a way that I don't know I would have been if so much hadn't been taken away from so many people before that and even from us.

Emily P. Freeman:  
And so, I think it's highlighted for me the joy in the celebration a little bit more than what I am prone to which is the sadness, which I usually kind of find myself looking back a lot on memories. And what if I didn't... All the what ifs. What if I didn't teach them this or what if it's too late for this or that? That's where my natural tendency goes. But I want to name and celebrate the fact that I haven't gone there as

much this time. More, I think, I'm celebrating for them. They're moving forward.

Emily P. Freeman:

And there are things that you look back. And there are regrets. And there are things you wish you could've done better or differently or things you wish you would've known sooner. But I'm finding that that is not unique to us. It's not like we're the only parents who've ever thought that. It's almost like what I tell creatives and writers all the time, which is if you feel like you're not cut out for this work, if you feel like you're the worst writer that ever lived, congratulations, you're doing it right because that is part of the creative process. And I think this is part of the parenting process is feeling like, "Oh dear, God, we missed something and we wrecked them up." I think that's normal, right?

John Freeman:

Yeah. I think that's normal. And I think that goes back to my answer earlier of just deep down knowing it's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. I know we have a variety of definitions of what is okay.

Emily P. Freeman:

What is okay? Right.

John Freeman:

But I do think that's a good grasp of the kingdom of God, is that-

Emily P. Freeman:

The kingdom's not in trouble.

John Freeman:

Neither you.

Emily P. Freeman:

Amen.

\*\*\*

Thanks for listening to episode 237 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this conversation can serve as a small arrow for you as you discern your own next right thing. To learn more about John and his slow listening work, visit [gracegreensboro.org](http://gracegreensboro.org). If you're local to Greensboro, he's accepting one-to-one directees. And if you aren't, he does have some availability for remote one-to-ones as well. You can contact him via his website at [gracegreensboro.org](http://gracegreensboro.org).

If this is your first introduction to spiritual direction and you would like to learn more, I have two more episodes to recommend to you, episode 167, spiritual direction for beginners, and 178, how to find a spiritual director. You may also want to hear my conversation with John from last year where he is just as kind and deeply thoughtful as he was today. That's episode 184. As always, you can find me [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) or on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman, where I often begin the conversation that we continue here on the podcast.

In closing, here's a quote from Dallas Willard who says, "Prayer is Jesus walking right up to you and listening." And another similar image I love from John Freeman, "God does not come to us wringing his hands." Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.