



## 273: A Spiritual Practice For The Hesitant

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 273. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, well, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing.

If you're someone who maybe grew up going to church or used to have a steady spiritual practice, but you've either grown tired, weary, bored, or skeptical or something else, I get it, and you're not alone. Maybe lately you've been curious about God again, wondering if there's anything for you in the world of faith. Maybe you're tiptoeing back looking for something familiar, but then when you find it, you feel a bit cautious or hesitant. Maybe you have the desire to engage a spiritual practice, but you're not sure how to do that as yourself in this new space that you find yourself. If that's you, then today is for you. Let's discern your next right thing in love. Listen in.

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Hi, I'm glad you're here. Thanks for trusting me to host a conversation about spiritual practice at a time when you may be having all kinds of feelings about faith, spirituality, or God in general. This is an important conversation and I hope it's a generative one for you.

I'll start by saying, I practice my faith as a Christian. I'm careful not to say I practice my faith like a Christian because the reality is the way we practice our faith will vary even among those who share the same one. It's because there isn't just one way to connect with or express love for God, and perhaps that's my first point. I didn't realize I had points, but here we go.

There's not just one way. There are a million little ways. I wrote a whole book about that, by the way. It's called, ready for it, *A Million Little Ways*, and it released 10 whole years ago in 2013. The premise of that book is that there are as many ways to be a person as there are people, and the point of life with God is for you to become more of who you are, not less. But I start with that because my language will reflect both my faith background as a Protestant Christian who grew up attending evangelical churches as well as my social location as a white female married to a man living in North Carolina. All that stuff impacts how we see and talk about God and the world. So I think it's worth mentioning. This is the accent from which I speak, for better or for worse.

When it comes to this conversation about discerning your next right thing in your spiritual practice, I approach it with three instant postures. The first is excitement because I'll be honest, it's taken me many years and lots of practice to get excited about this. I do genuinely get jazzed about finding authentic, unconventional, sometimes ways to connect with God.

But my second posture is a slight hesitation. Because I'm deeply and personally aware of how much harm has been done in the name of God, particularly as it relates to spiritual practices.

And then finally, I arrive at this conversation soft. Filled with compassion, both for myself and for you who may be longing for connection with God, but you're just tired of what feels like judgment or performance and ultimately you worry you're just going to fall short.

And so we'll move forward with hopeful hesitation, recognizing there are good things to uncover in this conversation and also aware that these things are only good if you're able and ready to receive them. So as they say in London, before you step on the train, mind the gap. Watch your step as you move toward a practice, be aware of where you are and what's going on with and in you. Notice if you start to feel performance pressure or like you're trying to earn God's favor. Don't try to do a lot at once. Just consider one next right thing. That's what we're all about here. And remember, this is practice, which means we're trying things on. If they don't fit, try something else. I think that's part of why this conversation about spiritual practice can be difficult to navigate because many of us were taught that connection with God looks a particular way and if that way didn't seem to fit for us or if we didn't connect with God through the prescribed channels and avenues, then we decided or we were led to believe that we didn't connect with God, period. If praying with your head bowed and your eyes closed doesn't work for you, then lift your head and open your eyes. There's no wrong way to pray. Anything we do with an awareness of God can be a spiritual practice. Folding the laundry, taking a walk, reading for fun, watering plants, making soup, caring for children. God is always here.

And so if it's been a while since you thought about spiritual practices or rhythms, if you feel like you've wandered off or been roaming in a wilderness or just feel disconnected, I hope these words today are for you a kind hello, an invitation to remember that today is the beginning. Maybe that's my second point. Look at me having points I didn't even mean to. First, there isn't just one way to connect with God and second, every day can be a beginning. And I'll add third, don't be afraid of where you are now, which may be different than where you were yesterday or where you'll be tomorrow.

Where did this idea come from? That you can somehow find yourself in a place where God is not? The gift of friendship with God is that there is no long meandering road back. We don't have to retrace our steps and travel over ungracious land to find God again. We simply turn to look, and there God is walking right with us in the weeds finding a way beside us in the darkness, glad to be in our presence. There is no traveling back. There's only being here.

So the question, really the main and only question, that I want to ask as a next right thing question is simply what helps you be here where God is? That's the question to ask when it comes to engaging or reengaging a spiritual practice. What helps you be here now? Is it slow breathing? Is it belly laughter? Is it dancing, listening, prayer? Is it being outside among the trees? Is it driving alone in your car? Whatever it is, name it. What helps you be here now?

A few weeks ago, I was honored to be in the room as Father Ronald Rolheiser gave a public lecture at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Now, I'm not Catholic, but I was glad to learn from this wise and generous priest who has walked with Jesus for many decades now, and something he said about spiritual practice has stayed with me. He said, "If you find yourself in a place where your practice no longer seems to be connecting, where you might even feel like you're in the midst of a dark night, you want to feel and experience God's presence, but you're just not anymore, instead of thinking that you've been practicing your faith wrong or that your practices aren't working, consider this. Perhaps your practice has worked. Perhaps your practices have done their job. They've brought you this far with God. But now maybe you're entering into something new."

Above all, it's helpful to remember there is a presence with whom we can rest without performance, free from scolding, filled with delight, glad to be with you. There is a room into which you can walk and you will always be welcome as you are not as you should be. Of course, in the presence of divine light, you'll change, you'll grow, you'll be challenged, but it will be with a challenge that feels like love, not one that feels like judgment, discrimination, or exclusion.

There is a love that will not lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you who will invite you to take a real rest. There is a place where you belong, a light that has no boundaries, a love that knows no bounds. There is a community into which you are welcome because you are, not because you do. This community is always happening in the divine dance of God, our parent, God, our friend, and God, our present witness, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who will never scold you into change because no one has ever been shamed into freedom. Consider today, what helps you be here now? And then simply do the next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 273 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of imagining what helps you be here now 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 our daily decisions are making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram at @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com where you can also find a transcript of this and every other episode of the podcast. A special thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock, who is keeping me organized and creative and all next right things, including our podcast tech and show notes.

In closing, here are a few words from poet and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama in his book *In the Shelter*. "What is the name for the place where you now are? It requires close looking. It requires the dedication of observation and a commitment to truth. To name a place requires us to be in a place. It requires us to resist dreaming of where we should be and look around where we are. Hello to here. Hello to the name of here." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.