



316: The Faithfulness of Staying and Leaving

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 316. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family, and through my work I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, work, and life.

Today's episode is brought to you by my new book that releases two weeks from today. *How to Walk Into a Room* will help you through a four-part framework to help you discern whether or not now is the time to walk into a new room or to walk out of an old one. If you order the book anytime between now, before now, or on release day on March 12th, I have free gifts for you, including a brand new audio collection in The Quiet Collection app, Blessings for Hellos and Goodbyes, and a companion downloadable workbook to go along with it to help and name the hellos and goodbyes of your life. Learn all about it at emilypfreeman.com and start listening to those blessings today.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or maybe you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but distracting hum of entertainment, well, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. One thing that's important to talk about when we consider leaving and staying is that faithfulness can be found in both. Listen in.

\There's a saying attributed to one of the first Christian monks who lived in the wilderness of ancient Egypt, also known as the Desert Fathers. When a fellow monk came to another one seeking advice, and this saying was his response. He said, "Go to your cell. Your cell will teach you everything you need to know." In his book, *Domestic Monastery*, Father Ronald Rolheiser expands this advice into a metaphor. He points out that cell in this context does not necessarily only have to mean someone's private bedroom as the word cell was understood to mean, but a cell could simply mean a place inside life. He submits a cell encompasses your duty, your vocation, and your commitments. Rolheiser summarizes that statement. Here's a quote from him. "Basically, stay inside your vocation, inside your commitments, inside your legitimate conscriptive duties, inside your church, inside your

family, and they will teach you where life is found and what love means. Be faithful to your commitments and what you are ultimately looking for will be found there."

Now, there's a lot I like about this advice. It describes embodied faithfulness, what Eugene Peterson credits Frederick Nietzsche as having said, it's a long obedience in the same direction. It encourages steadfastness an unwavering commitment to something even if it's small or monotonous. I wrote a whole book called *Simply Tuesday*, all about small moment living in a fast moving world, and really I love thinking about what the days of our lives are made up of, the small, regular, ordinary days of the places where we actually are. There's honor and humility to be found in staying put. And so I found myself nodding along with those words from Ronald Rolheiser. They resonated deeply with me, but my resonance didn't stop there.

Instead, I found myself wanting to do improv with this monk because instead of a period I felt a strong yes and rise up to meet me as I read his words. Because yes, your cell will teach you everything you need to know, and that doesn't necessarily always look like what we think because I know how some will hear this and may draw unhelpful and untrue conclusions. Some may think life and love and faithfulness will only be found right where you are. You aren't allowed to leave anything ever, you aren't allowed to change your mind, reconsider rework or reimagine anything. If you want to be faithful, you must always stay, stay, stay.

But as a longtime student of the life of Christ, we see something different. Jesus did stay in his cell as Ronald Rolheiser describes it. He was steadfast in his commitment to his vocation and purpose, but that does not mean he physically stayed in one space too long, particularly once he started teaching, how many times did he move from town to town or leave before it seemed like the work was finished? He didn't live to old age, he didn't heal everyone he met. He didn't answer questions the way it seemed that he could have. On the outside, it looked as though he left a lot of things unfinished or unaddressed or he left them too soon it seems. He left again and again, but he also stayed. He was faithful to his vocation, to his commitment to love, even though it didn't look the way staying in one physical space always looks. He was faithful in the commitments meant for him, not necessarily the ones everyone else thought he should be faithful to. He's still faithful, he's still staying so this must mean sometimes faithfulness looks like staying.

But other times faithfulness looks like leaving. Sometimes we confuse the appearance of the thing with the thing itself. I'll use a somewhat simple example that really doesn't have a lot of consequence, but it would be maybe like how staying as the booster club president all four years of your kids' high school career, this doesn't necessarily mean you're being faithful and committed. It could mean that or it could mean you're stubborn, you don't want anyone else to do the job, or you're afraid that if you leave that role that you won't have a purpose to be at your kid's school anymore. I don't know. I'm making things up here, but I guess I'm just saying that something I'm learning and maybe you've learned too is that just because something has the appearance of faithfulness doesn't mean it has the heart of it. There are

gifts in the places where you stay and there are gifts to be found in the new places you walk into. There are also burdens in the places where you stay and there will be burdens found in the new places you walk into.

Nothing is all one thing, as much as we sometimes wish it were. It would be easier to stay if the room was always delightful and it would be easier to leave if it was always terrible, but that's almost never how it is. And so I don't know, I guess I felt compelled to talk about this here on the podcast with you because of course I'm talking a lot about how to walk into a room, but what precedes that is often how to walk out. And for some of us that's a tough sell because we are faithful and committed people who have witnessed the beauty and gifts of seeing things through even when they're hard and want to underline the point. It's not about staying at all costs or leaving at the first sign of trouble.

As with all the work I do, I hope you're continuing to see that this is all part of what it means to grow, to be people in a room with other people and to discern what faithfulness looks like today. Once again, this is all part of our formation. It's all part of learning how to walk with God as we are not as others think we ought to be, not as we pretend to be. It's about listening to our lives and to the life of Christ. It's about linking arms with people who love and know us and have our best interest at heart. And so if you ever feel the inner chords of judgment start to tug at you from within or without, if you ever watch someone do something that is the opposite of what you would do or what you think you would do in their situation, take a beat because this is what I know for sure, there's always more to the story.

There's more to the laugh, the procrastination, the unmade bed, the slight, the comment, the toast, the refrain, the time off, the silence, the peace. There's more to his behavior and her backtalk and their lack enthusiasm. There's more to your tearing up in the movie or your lack of interest or you're scrolling on the internet. There's more to your leaving and more to your staying, and there's more to theirs too. There's more to you and to me and to them. There's always more. Kindness is acknowledging the story beneath the story, even if it's one we'll never hear, and it's acknowledging that faithfulness sometimes looks like discerning when it's time to leave something behind as much as it often looks like staying put. So even if we don't understand it, here's to supporting each other as we continue to do our next right thing in love.

\Thanks for listening to episode 316 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of seeing the potential for faithfulness in leaving and staying 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 our daily decisions are making our lives. I've been saying this for months, but my next book, How to Walk Into a Room is in its most basic form, a book of discernment, where in addition to sharing a lot of my own story, I took many of the practices we talk about here on the podcast and narrowed them down to a

simple four-part framework that you can use as you cultivate discernment in your own life.

When you order the book now, you'll get access to some free gifts, including an entire audio collection inside the Quiet Collection app called Blessings for Hellos and Goodbyes, as well as a 30 page downloadable workbook with process pages to help you find low key closure for the various beginnings and endings of your life. But on launch day, that workbook will expire, so be sure to claim your bonuses before March 12th. Just visit emilypfreeman.com to learn more and claim your free gifts today because you may have to wait for the book, but you don't have to wait for the blessings. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman or online at emilypfreeman.com where we have a transcript of this and every episode. Thanks to the team at Immutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

In closing, a few words from John O'Donohue in his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*, a few words about endings. "Endings can be such a relief. When we suffer, we long for it to end. When we are in pain time crawls. It also darkens and imprisons our imagination. Consequently, we are unable to see beyond the suffering that plagues us. Often the greatest gift in such a situation is when someone manages to persuade the eyes of the heart to glimpse the vaguest brightening. Then the imagination takes hope from that and constructs a path of light out of the darkness. Such endings offer great promise and bring us to the edge of new possibility." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.

for the book, but you don't have to wait for the blessings. Just know that once that release day comes, the workbook will no longer be free. So if you want that companion workbook, go ahead and order your copy of *How to Walk into a Room*.

As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman where we have a transcript of this and every episode. Thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

Well, in closing, here are a few words from *How to Walk into a Room*. "Decision-making and discernment are connected, but it's possible to rush or bypass the discernment process in order to get to the relief of a final decision. When we do this, we miss out on the formation opportunities to know God, to know ourselves, and to depend on our community."

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