

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

**Trauma and Grace
with Serene Jones**

Jacqui Lewis: Hey, everyone. I'm Jacqui Lewis. Welcome to the third season of Love Period. In this season, we are exploring what fierce love looks like in a time of trauma, when all around the globe folks are trying to figure out how to be the best version of human they can be in these difficult and traumatic times. Today, on Love Period. My guest is the Reverend Dr. Serene Jones. She is an author, an activist, and happens to be the president of Union Theological Seminary. Serene is always deep, quiet, thoughtful. And this time we talked about trauma. How do we name it? How are we aware of it? What can we do about it in these traumatic times? I think this is a much needed conversation for times like these, and I hope you enjoy this episode. Serene Jones, my friend, how are you?

Serene Jones: I'm so good. I'm especially good, because I'm talking with you, Jacqui Lewis, today.

Jacqui Lewis: It's been too long.

Serene Jones: It has been.

Jacqui Lewis: It has been too long, COVID long, right?

Serene Jones: Too COVID long, too lifelong, too much.

Jacqui Lewis: How are you today? How's it going?

Serene Jones: I'm going really good today.

Jacqui Lewis: Well, I was looking at the Serene Jones corpus on trauma the other day. I'm going to be preaching, as we air this, it'll be Festival of Homiletics in Denver next week. And I was-

Serene Jones: Oh, me too.

Jacqui Lewis: ... sourcing you. That's right. Are you on video or are you coming?

Serene Jones: I'm on video.

Jacqui Lewis: What are you preaching about? So, I can just steal your notes. What are you doing?

Serene Jones: It has to do with trauma beyond words. How do you speak to trauma that you can't speak about?

Jacqui Lewis: Unspeakable.

Serene Jones: Because it exists in the realm that we're not even always conscious of.

Jacqui Lewis: This is your cup of tea. I remember reading your book when your first book on trauma, when it first came out. And I remember we did your Call it Grace opening a couple years ago at Union. And I'm fascinated that the Festival of Homiletics is saying preaching in times of trauma. Let's just dive into how you and I would exegete these times. What in the world is going on that is both the things we can speak about, Serene, and the things that feel unspeakable? What do you see, from where you are, as president up at Union Seminary? What do you see?

Serene Jones: Well, there's so much I see and so much that I feel and don't have the words for. I have a wonderful doctor that I see, who's a medical doctor but also very holistic into all different kinds of understandings of what health is. And I was talking to her the other day and she said to me, "Serene, we're at a moment in time where none of us are well. None of us are well, and only some of us know that."

Jacqui Lewis: Wow.

Serene Jones: If I were to exegete that statement, I would say, in the hopefully waning days of COVID, as we know often happens with traumatic events, when you're in the middle of them, it's very hard to process or even understand what is happened or is happening. But as the intensity of the trauma begins to dissipate, it becomes more and more obvious to you what you've been through, and in ways that we can talk about and then ways that I think we haven't even scratched the surface of processing, what COVID has done to our understanding of the world in which we find ourselves, and our relationships to one another, and what community is, and what we mean by life and death, and who suffers, and who suffers more and who suffers less, and why.

Serene Jones: And at the same time that we are disoriented by trauma, the force of our national and global reckoning with the generations of violence at the intersection of race, and class, and gender, and disability, you add on top of that a sense of real impending catastrophe with respect to what's happening to our climate. And then, we see across the globe, the rise of patriarchal, fascist, governments. So, everywhere you turn, nothing is what we had come to think it was. And we don't have new categories for what's happening globally and in our own individual lives, and finding language to talk about that and to even name it is a huge challenge.

Jacqui Lewis: I agree with that. You and I are both going to be preaching at that Festival of Homiletics. And I was sourcing myself with some of your writing on trauma. And I thought to myself, and some of my friends are therapists, and you know my PhD's in psych and religion, do we know what trauma is? Could you, Serene, with all your hats, give us a good working definition? So people who think they know what we're talking about, can go, "Oh yeah, that's what it is." How would you define it?

Serene Jones: Well, I still take, as my starting point, the classic clinical/trauma theory definition. And a traumatic event is an event in which a person or persons undergo an overwhelming experience of violence in which they feel that they are threatened with annihilation and against which they are helpless to resist.

Jacqui Lewis: That's super helpful. Can I say back those key words?

Serene Jones: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Threatened with violence that feels like they're going to be annihilated, cease to exist, and there's a feeling of helplessness that they can't resist.

Serene Jones: I would add the word that comes right at the beginning that's so important, that word overwhelming.

Jacqui Lewis: Overwhelming. Yeah.

- Serene Jones: Because traumatic events are overwhelming in so far as most often they exceed our capacity to manage, or understand, or process them as they're happening. So, they overwhelm us quite literally.
- Jacqui Lewis: And so, there's a lot of talk right now about these traumatic times. For you, Serene, as a woman, a mother, a professional person, a teacher, a theologian, what overwhelms you? Where are you finding yourself most overwhelmed right now?
- Serene Jones: Three things most profoundly in terms of what overwhelms me. First of all, I'm just overwhelmed by the magnitude of suffering in our world and its injustices. It's just, it's so present. I'm also overwhelmed by the simultaneous surprising goodness of people, and yet this sort of a sense of horror at what people are capable of.
- Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.
- Serene Jones: And then, the last thing that overwhelms me the most is I feel, on a day-to-day basis, I feel exhausted. I often feel confused. I'm forgetting words for things. I am dealing all the time with people who are themselves out of sorts. And I don't even understand what's happening to me, much less what's happening to people around me with this just feeling of dis-ease and disorientation.
- Jacqui Lewis: That's honest and vulnerable, that last piece there. Did you get COVID over the COVID time?
- Serene Jones: Yes. I had it around Thanksgiving. And I didn't have a very bad case, and I haven't had it since, so I made it through all these other versions without it. But I've had family members, many family members, and friends-
- Jacqui Lewis: Be sick. I asked you that question, Serene, because this it's my hard question for me. I too feel overwhelmed in ways that I don't... Like, I don't walk around in the world, like, "Hi, I'm Jacqui and I feel overwhelmed." I'm not in that support group usually. I think I'm like, "I can do this, and I got this, and I understand this." But I do feel waves of like the keywords that you said. I feel waves of violence and threat, and the sense of there could be a way in which I might not make it through. I who feel strong, and gifted, and resilient, and whatever, I also feel like the forces, Serene are huge, like a tsunami is what's in my mind.
- Jacqui Lewis: From the fire, from the fire forward, I mean, COVID happened in... We shut down in March of 2020. It's interesting to live in the same city and not get to see each other, right? We shut down the church in March of 2020, like March 15th or something. And we felt really like we were being loving and maybe ahead of a curve of like, we are not going to do this.
- Jacqui Lewis: And then, this fire happened in December. It is the fire that keeps on burning, Serene. If I'm honest, it has not stopped burning. The neighbor where the fire originated has been difficult in ways that it just were shocking to imagine that a fire started in their building. And then, they just have been unkind, and unhelpful, and weird. It wasn't arson, but it was an accident that they caused, not us, and we're out of a church. The fire that are some decisions that happened in the collegiate church that made financial

stuff just really difficult, and we're living with that. And the fire of the racism, the fire of the violence against Blacks, and Asians, and trans. It's just like, who are we? What is happening?

Jacqui Lewis: And when someone says, "This is not who we are," like, okay, yes, it is. But it doesn't mean it's not shocking and hurtful. I do find myself thinking, what's the process for just screaming, crying, grieving, and feeling all the feels? And then, how do we resource each other for then to get through this time that almost feels like it's not designed for us to get through. I don't feel a lack of hope, but I do feel worry in ways that I haven't in the past. Do you feel that way? Does that happen to you too?

Serene Jones: Yes. No. I don't feel it constantly. I can have parts of the day where the old energy and optimism comes back. But it's waking up at the morning and thinking, "Oh, another day of this very hard work." I find myself asking the question, can I do this? Can I do this? Do I have the resources to keep doing this? And that's not something that I've spent my life asking myself at every turn. I just would jump out of bed and start doing it, even if I didn't know what I was doing.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. On your marks, get set, let's go.

Serene Jones: Now, I actually know more about what I'm doing and I'm feeling overwhelmed by it. And it is that sense, as you say, of just the waves of violence and threat. I still think of it as the unconscious disorientation of having how all of us have lived our lives turned inside out for two years.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that unconscious disorientation. Yeah.

Serene Jones: That can't help but have knocked off some of the anchors of our unconscious life, and so they're swirling around in confusion and manifesting themselves within us. But we don't even know how to pull them up and talk about what's happened. I do find, when it comes to managing all this, just making the acknowledgement that it's hard and confusing, these are very difficult times. And that's a huge first step. Because, I find that people who at least take time to acknowledge that are less likely to act out on other people their own confusion, and come after people, and scapegoat to other people, and try to project that onto other bodies rather than recognizing this is what's happening inside of you and claim it and work with it. Even if you can't fix it, at least hold it as what's happening.

Jacqui Lewis: That feels like grace. I think about your writing there, but also experientially, it feels like a gift. Let's just use the word grace as a caress, right. It feels like a gift, if we could give it to ourselves, to say this sucks, or I'm frightened, or I'm confused, or I'm angry, or I'm lost, or will you help me. There's something about the vulnerability and the truth that I think, as you say, and I totally agree, it feels to me that, if we had better language for or patterns for permission to own the stuff, there would be less acting out. Some leader might say, "I need five people to come in this room and give me your best ideas. I have no idea what to do." Somebody who is going to make a decision about somebody's livelihood, a policy decision, an appointment, a performance review. I don't know, pick all the things.

Jacqui Lewis: Deal with somebody on the subway, like the moment of we could have a conflict on the subway. Freeze, hang on, let me pay attention to the people inside me, internal family system, okay. Past child, can you come over here? Kind mama, show up. Okay, ready? Go, go, talk it out before you punch somebody. But if we could just be in tactile relationship, in touch with the spaces in us that are in operation, and slow down, and breathe through the first response. Would it be softer out there, Serene?

Serene Jones: Yeah, well, it would be softer, because we would not be inflicting as much harm on each other, which then just escalates the experiences of violence. And that doesn't solve anything. It just escalates and adds more to what's inside of you. And now, you've added it to someone else, and someone else, and someone else. I do think that grace is an absolutely precious reality in the midst of all of this, because... For me, grace is the profound knowledge that the world and all of its people, and each one of us, and me, Serene Jones, is held in infinite love by the Divine. And I don't have to do anything to earn that and nothing can take it away, it just is. It's a gift that is constantly surrounding me and coming to me.

Serene Jones: Reminding yourself of that, at least lifts off your shoulders the burden of feeling like somehow, in the midst of all of this, you have to work really hard to save yourself, or prove yourself, or rescue yourself, or do get overly obsessed with you have to do the right thing and not do the wrong thing. When your starting point is, we're all loved, period, it takes the anxiety out of and it deultimatizes this whole flurry of feelings inside that are so conflicted.

Jacqui Lewis: I love... Deultimatize?

Serene Jones: Yeah, deultimatizes.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that, deultimatizes. That's cool. That's a good word. Your definition of grace really resonates with my whole Fierce Love, this book I wrote. I think I was working on the book when we did your book.

Serene Jones: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: And I finally finished it in November. But it's true, Serene, if we, and you said love period, we are loved period, I have found myself finally at my age, and we're the same age, as I recall, at our age, getting to this place where, what is ultimate for me is God is love. Period. God is love, period. And my calling from the God who is love is to love that God with everything I can and love my neighbor as myself, period. Love, period. Everything else is commentary. I do think, I 100% cosign, if we started with, we are lying in a sea of, floating in a bathtub of, pick your metaphor, on the massage table of, toes in the grape bin, I don't know, love so divine. Love's so amazing. Love's so... How did Jim Loder say? Love that is the non-possessive delight of the unique particularity of the other.

Serene Jones: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Including you, right? Including, Serene and Jacqui.

Serene Jones: All right.

Jacqui Lewis: If this is the starting point, imagine, we live, I think, in a world where some people actually

have taken seriously, I'm going to love my neighbor as myself, but since I hate myself, since I am so full of shame and self-loathing, that's what my neighbor gets. And so, if we started with, you are loved by a love you can't imagine, imagine the lack of competition. Imagine the generosity, you do, you can, you wrote it. Imagine the collaboration. Imagine the sharing of resources, imagining the celebration of the weirdo. Because, the weirdo is so much joy to be with, because that's a part of what God did. Instead, we are just run a muck by buttheads who don't love themselves at all, who don't think they're loved, and they're in charge, Serene.

Serene Jones: Yeah, I know. They're running things.

Jacqui Lewis: Honey, big time, big time.

Serene Jones: I know. You think about not loving yourself, the enormous amount, or feeling shame or having to prove yourself, the enormous amount of anxiety that produces and the amount of energy in the course of the day you have to expend to manage that anxiety, so it doesn't just fill you completely. Imagine if that energy was released for positive.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely.

Serene Jones: Just released for positive in the world. Positive realities. Positive lovings.

Jacqui Lewis: Curiosity.

Serene Jones: Yes. Curiosity.

Serene Jones: Wonder.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Serene Jones: Joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Serene Jones: Or even sorrow released for true-

Jacqui Lewis: Released for that.

Serene Jones: ... deep grief and sorrow. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm not this person, for sure, that I'm getting ready to say, I'm getting to say some stuff that's not really where I live, but I'm going to test it anyway. I honestly, please God forgive me if I'm wrong, but I did, as I was growing up to have this grown up relationship with a grown up God, honestly, Serene. I let go a little bit of God knows everything and God does everything, so I could stay in love with God. Seriously. If God was knowing all the things and doing all the things, then I was a little pissed at God. Like, what's going on with you?

Serene Jones: Yes. Lots of reason to be pissed at God.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm not happy with that God. But I adjusted my lens on God to be a softer, more partnery... Sometimes, God is a Black mama with big breasts and just holding me tight. And I can

smell the [inaudible 00:21:56]. I'm sure that's my projection on my mom. But for sure, a God image shift that made me stay in love with God that included vulnerability from God, if I'm in God's image. Also, I don't know from God, and also let's try it together from God. Anybody, this is where I'm not at, but I'm going to say it, somebody might want to say, God, let this trauma happen. All this junk happen, so we would hit bottom and get better. Now, I'm not saying I agree with that, because I don't think God's like that, everybody listening. But it did happen. We actually have hit a certain kind of bottom, most likely at our own doing, Serene.

Serene Jones: Yeah. We did it to ourselves.

Jacqui Lewis: Right? We did it. Here we are. The environment is sucking. The fires are burning. The polar icecaps are melting. People don't have any money. We unleashed viruses that are going to do us in. Can there be redemption in the something of it, friend? Can there be grace? Can there be recovery? Can there be healing because we're at bottom? Is there anything theological or philosophical that you would want to say about that rising up?

Serene Jones: Just a word about the first part of what you said about letting go of the god who is all knowing and all doing. That was made up by some Greeks and some Romans a long time ago, that to be God means to know everything and do everything. It's like, that's not an indigenous part of Christian faith. But what is really deeply embedded is that God is the source of all that is and is surrounding and present in all that is. It goes back to the notion of grace. God is love. God is in the midst of vulnerable to, tied up in, intermingled with running through the very breath that we breathe, and the light that we feel on our faces, and the ground beneath our feet, and the love that flows between us. That's how I've come to think about God.

Serene Jones: I often think about, feel closest in just when I'm standing barefoot on dirty ground out in the world. We have hit bottom. I think what we need is so radically different that it's almost beyond our imagination at this point. It's going to have to emerge from us in a embodied, emotional, unknowing way that will be the way that we begin to try to become in love. But it's very hard to imagine what you don't know how to imagine.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen, sister.

Serene Jones: Profound thing to say.

Jacqui Lewis: No, no, it's real. Also, I think about Brian Blount, when he was my professor he would talk about pockets of resistance. And I loved that. It made me think about just the in breaking moment of time, we go, "Oh, that's what it looks like." That, right there, is a glimmer. Where are glimmers? I told a story in another conversation, and I'm going to tell another piece of this. These grandchildren of mine that are two and four are these magical creatures who I could preach about them every Sunday. I mean, there is some kind of new humanity that I see in these little ones, Serene, that makes me just cry and laugh.

Jacqui Lewis: They're just so crazy, and fun, and wonderful, and delicious. And I would say, love you parents, but sometimes they seem feral, because their parents are just like, show us who you are, oh my God, Serene, with such patience. When we were little kids, they leap, and they jump, and they crawl, and they ping and pong. And my mother would've been like, "Go on, sit down someplace." They just are always being invited by their folks, and therefore by grandparents, because we are doing the same play, to be who they are.

Jacqui Lewis: So, Sunday morning, we're doing Nana at grandmother moment for a minute. And they've made me

these crazy things that kids make. You're like, "What is that? I don't know what that is." But when I open up one of the presents, I say, "Now, what is this one?" And mommy says, "That's for your office.:" And I say, "For my office? Wow, it's so pretty. Who made it?" Little girl raises her hand. I'm like, "Oh, that's so cute." And I say, "Can I put it in my office?" And they go, "Yes." And because she's screaming, the little brother's yelling, "Yeah." So they're roaring at me, "Yes," in this video. And then, I put it on my neck and I say, "Or is this a necklace for Nana?" And they go, "No." And so, what am I pulling to exegete in this moment about that? The kind of naked truth of their little peopleness. I'm scared. I'm sad. I'm mad, I'm crying. I'm laughing. Could we regress to naked truth? Oh my God, Serene, what if we could just be honest with each other?

Serene Jones: Imagine. It's hard to imagine, but you have an example of it. You asked me where I see glimmers. The first thing that come to mind, it's so interesting with the two of us, is the other end of life. My father, who was a theologian and scholar and theological education seminary leader who was, in his own way, a force of nature, very articulate philosopher, theologian, he's now in his second year in a hospice in Oklahoma City.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, wow.

Serene Jones: And for a person of action and thought, and someone who was always just trying to fix things, and be the leader, and take care of everybody, after about a year, his first year in hospice, which was hard for him, he went through this process that you knew it was happening internally, but you couldn't see it externally. And I didn't see it happen every day, because I could only visit him once every six weeks or so. But he's now in a place where, and I've never had this experience over an extended period of time with a person, is that he is so accepting of death. He's ready to die, but he's not trying to die.

Serene Jones: He only expresses love towards the people around him. And tells me over and over again, along with my sisters, how much he loves us, and how proud he is of us, and wants to hear us tell stories about what we're doing. And the change in his face, it's like, as he came to accept death, it's like years of weight, of worry, of having to control things just lifted off his face. He now spends a large part of his day either remembering playing basketball as a elementary school kid in his neighborhood in Oklahoma City or watching monster trucks on TV, because it's big enough for him to see, because his vision's not too good. But to be around someone who has no fear of death is just an incredible experience, and only feelings of love, and contentment, and acceptance of whatever is to come.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow.

Serene Jones: That's a very much a glimmer of hope of the possibilities of new humanity if we were not so afraid.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow. We've built a couple of things out there for the article we'll write together. Something about naked. I'm going to call it Fierce Truth.

Serene Jones: Yeah. Naked and Unafraid.

Jacqui Lewis: Naked and Unafraid by Serene and Jacqui. Yeah, I think that's right. My dad is 87. We lost our mom five years ago. And wow, Serene, her eight-year cancer journey changed him, but he is the softest version of himself. I cannot believe. I talked to him the other day. He called me from Mother's Day/ I didn't get to talk to him, because I was bipping around with those grandkids. And he goes, "I just wanted you to know, I love you. And I just miss you when we don't talk." I'm like, "What? Okay."

Serene Jones: Dad? Who is this?

Jacqui Lewis: This is so cool. "I just miss you when we don't talk." Okay. He who read my book cover to cover, including the stories Jacqui tells, that's the next book, the stories Jackie tells in the book. He's just softer. I think he's, like your dad, ready for whatever's next.

Serene Jones: And nothing left to, coming back to grace, with nothing left to prove, nothing left to earn, only a sense of giving love. I think it's such a blessing. I think it's a blessing to be present, either through giving birth yourself or seeing a birth, to the coming into life and the whole parenting thing, especially in those early years, how arduous it is but how glorious. It's also an enormously miraculous experience to watch someone age and die well, die well. Like, this is how we can die, age and die.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Serene Jones: You know?

Jacqui Lewis: I think that's right. I love that you said that. This is a weird feeling I had when my mother was dying, that she was plugging me into something in her that was birthing me some more. Like the way she was dying was also generous. Your dad, tell me some stories. And so, I've felt birthed more, not birthed again, but pushed further out of her womb into the world. I'm always sassy and feisty. You know this about me. I have been the fiercest, feistiest, sassiest Jacqui in the last five years. I was like, "Mommy, I don't know if that was a good idea what you did there."

Serene Jones: Well, it is true that being around my father, I think it's also just getting older, is that I have less and less capacity not to say what I think and not to be honest, which doesn't mean in a brutal or awful way, but I'm just clearer about not having time to mess around with anything but the things that matter. And that means getting to the point and talking about true things, and trying to perform less, and be present more, which is a great space to be in.

Jacqui Lewis: It is, isn't it?

Serene Jones: I love it.

Jacqui Lewis: My gosh. That goes in the article too, how to be our age.

Serene Jones: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: So, Serene, I wanted you to come today, because I think of you as this theologian and social analyst of these poles. It could feel like trauma, grace, but actually it's one space, right? It's one space. And I wonder if, just as we wrap, you would say a thing to the listeners that would feel almost, Serene, from you know, a benediction, a blessing, a takeaway. Here's what it is, guys, that can get us through these moments. What would you say?

Serene Jones: I would say to everyone, may you find deep and rejuvenating rest, may your breath calm your mind, slow down your muscles, untense. And in that rest, may you experience the glory of the unconditional beauty and love of just you in your body. May you feel it completely in your body. And may it unwrap your arms, and legs, and torso, and head, and toes, and fingers, and that's grace. And as that wraps around you, may it give you the strength that it takes to face these days with grace.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Serene. I'll cosign by adding, because you are loved like you can't believe.

Serene Jones: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Serene Jones: Because you are loved.

Jacqui Lewis: Because you are loved, loved.

Serene Jones: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Serene Jones, president, theologian, mom, friend, scholar wisdom, thank you so much for coming today. I appreciate you.

Serene Jones: Thank you for the conversation, Jacqui. And thank you for all you do and all the love you are.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you for listening today. Before I ever met Serene, I was reading her work on trauma. I'm grateful for the way she normalizes this quite ubiquitous experience. Sitting and talking with Serene Jones about trauma was like having a deep talk with a girlfriend about where it hurts. As you process your experience over these last few years, how can that transform and manifest in how you show up in the world?