

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

**Practicing Resilience in a Divided World
with Paul Rauschenbush**

Jacqui Lewis: Hey everyone. I'm Jacqui Lewis. Welcome to the third season of Love Period. In this season, we're 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's guest on Love Period is Paul Raushenbush. He is Senior Advisor for Public Affairs and Innovation at Interfaith America. I've known Paul for many, many years now in my life in New York. And no one winds up my speed of talk more than he does as we generate new ideas together. This conversation was about fierce love, much to my delight. I hope you enjoy this conversation.

Paul Raushenbush, I'm so glad to see you today.

Paul: I am thrilled to be with you.

Jacqui Lewis: How are you?

Paul: I'm good.

Jacqui Lewis: Are you?

Paul: I am good. When I sit back and reflect and look around, I actually am good.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. You mean like count your blessings good? Good things.

Paul: Count my blessings good. Look at the people who love me.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And whom I love.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And recognize that there is love surrounding me. I'm going into theme, if you haven't noticed.

Jacqui Lewis: I love it. I love that. This is like a communicator's communicator. He is going into theme. Yes, he is.

Paul: Well, and I also am coming off of three days of reading your book.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my goodness.

Paul: So I'm kind of living fierce love right now and it's been very helpful.

Jacqui Lewis: I can't wait to hear more about that, but first of all, tell me about the people you love. How's your family? How's everybody?

Paul: My family is glorious.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I have two young boys, a seven year old and a three year old who are so beautiful and so

wise and so funny. And my seven year old is a poet and just looking around and so glorious. And my three year old is a monster who is in destructive mode, but they're so warm. And speaking of love, I mean, it's just soaking up love.

Jacqui Lewis: Isn't it true?

Paul: And giving it off and there's zero agenda there.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: Aside from more love.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right. Honestly, honestly, right?

Paul: My partner Brad Gooch is coming off a book about Rumi, which was the Sufi poet of love.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: And now he's working on a book about Keith Haring.

Jacqui Lewis: Ooh, wow.

Paul: Whose work was very effervescent.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And difficult, but also you see joy in it.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And you see love. And he was motivated by that. So we're wonderful.

Jacqui Lewis: You're steeped in it.

Paul: We're steeped in it.

Jacqui Lewis: How's your work going with IBU?

Paul: So we just launched Interfaith America, which is extraordinary.

Jacqui Lewis: Ah, changed the name and the focus, right?

Paul: Yeah, we changed the name. It was Interfaith Youth Corps for 20 years, which absolutely was great.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And then recently we just realized that doesn't completely capture what we mean.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: What we mean is more expansive than that. And it's also a vision. It's an organization, but it's a vision.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: We are Interfaith America. We are not just one thing. We are many things and we are inter those things. We are connected. No one can be isolated now.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right.

Paul: You can't just be your own thing in the corner. You are bumping up against other people. And so the question is how will we train ourselves up?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: For those encounters? How will we engage those encounters with respect, with understanding, with some sort of awareness of where the other is coming from? Which are all kind of the ingredients of love.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely. And I'm geeky girl who wrote a book. This is my, I don't know, fourth book, but my first trade book. And so when your friends have read your book, you're like, "Hey, you read my book." And you feel like, woohoo. And you go like, "Oh, damn, also you read my book." So you know my business.

Paul: And I was reading, I was like, "Okay, she went there." But that's the gift. The gift of fierce love is the action, but also the book, is that you went to the point of where the trauma, the hurt.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: The pain, which frankly are the places where the love, the blessing, have to go.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: In order for us to heal.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And again and again.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: The thing about storytelling like what you did, is that you gave permission for the reader to connect with their own points of pain. You gave permission for the reader to recognize that, "Oh, I'm not alone."

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And, "I may not have exactly the same experience, but I have my experiences."

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And, “This is giving me space and permission to reflect on those experiences, go into those experiences, and how do I find the pathway through?”

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: Because you also showed us the pathway through.

Jacqui Lewis: Hmm. I’m so glad that you feel that way.

Paul: And it inspired compassion, in the way that the best narrative does, it invited. By being so honest, you invited us into compassion and the vulnerability place. I understand exactly what you mean by now like, “Oh, he’s read my book.”

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly.

Paul: But what you did is you actually allowed me to see what was going on in the inside and not just have the very, Jacqui is a powerful woman, for those of you who haven’t met her in person, she is a powerful, beautiful composed, and also fierce woman who-

Jacqui Lewis: I paid him to say that, all that.

Paul: Not at all it, but that’s the trick is how do we get beyond the front?

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And get into the real.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And that’s what you do as a preacher. This is like a sermon. This reads like a whole sermon to me. It’s storytelling with a story of redemption. It’s also, I know you are very interfaith in your outlook and welcoming of all people of all face. It’s also a very, for me, it resonated as a Christian because you just see how there’s no resurrection without the crucifixion.

Jacqui Lewis: There’s no resurrection without the crucifixion.

Paul: And the crucifixion is a reality of life, unfortunately.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen. Yep.

Paul: I mean I am not glorifying the crucifixion. Make no mistake. I just recognize that it’s there.

Jacqui Lewis: It happened. It’s happening. Right? It’s happening.

Paul: It’s happening, right now, to a lot of the people who are listening right now.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. That’s right, Paul.

Paul: And so giving us the story of redemption as well. And also that the redemption is not always a solitary thing.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: It often comes because community.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. Shows up.

Paul: Has come into play.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And been invited into play. And so now I'm preaching.

Jacqui Lewis: No, I like it.

Paul: Your book was a preach, it was a sermon, but now I'm preaching.

Jacqui Lewis: I love you preaching, but some of the listeners haven't read the book. I hope they will, but I really want to pull apart some of the things in that, Paul, and kind of veer your life in mine. And the world. And so one of the things I'm thinking about right now is let's start with your boys. Your boys, who you say, a poet and a monster.

Paul: And by the way, when I say monster-

Jacqui Lewis: I know exactly what you mean.

Paul: I love him. He's a force of nature.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. I've got that grandson.

Paul: And I love that. This is not like, oh, we have the good and we have the bad.

Jacqui Lewis: But you're describing. You're just describing.

Paul: I'm descriptive. And he's also extraordinary in so many other ways. So I just want, for the record.

Jacqui Lewis: Just in case, someday.

Paul: Glen, if you're listening to this when you're 18, please-

Jacqui Lewis: Daddy said I was a monster. The reason I actually wanted to come back to your boys is I've got two grandchildren that John gave me by way of marriage. I married John and I got Joel and Joel is my son. And he's amazing. And I helped him get fixed up with his wife, Gabby. And they're married. This all worked out so great. And we got two little people. And one is four and one is three and they are monsters and they are poets. And they love playing monster with us. That's our big game, run, tag, and we roar and they run. And Ophelia says, "Freeze." And Octavius doesn't have as many words yet, but he goes. So this place of kind of

knowing them, that's what you did. You gave us short stories about who your boys are and how they're flourishing inside the love that you and your partner have.

God, Paul, so many kids are not. So many little people don't have big people like your partner and you, or Gabby and Joel, or me and John, in their lives. And I have a broken heart about that. I have a broken heart about the way the trauma of these last years has our little people so vulnerable, Paul, where they are still separated from their parents and we don't talk about it. They still don't have safe drinking water in Detroit, Flint, and we don't talk about it. They still don't have good healthcare or good computers. They're still living on a dying planet and we don't talk about it. And they, and you know who I mean, they are coming for us.

They're coming for queer families. They're coming for interracial families. My marriage isn't legal till 1967. Hello? And they're coming for trans kids. Who knows what affiliate Octavius, Glen, the boys are going to be. Who knows? What is the thing that you took away from reading this book, *Fierce Love*, that would be a message to the adults who have to make containers for their kids. How can we love our children passed through in this time of craziness?

Paul: I think we have a sense of our children as simultaneously very, very vulnerable, but also as, "Oh, they'll get over it. It's fine. It's fine."

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Not realizing that they are soaking everything up.

Jacqui Lewis: Everything.

Paul: Every message.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: They're getting the message.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes, they are.

Paul: Whether or not you realize it.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And so to put my cards on the table right now, I would never go live in Florida. Because if you say that you can't mention-

Jacqui Lewis: Gay.

Paul: -gay families at all, that means you're erasing the family that my sons are in.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And that means like they don't exist, and it becomes very much the other.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: Whereas we're very fortunate here in New York City to have them going to schools where that's recognized. The weird thing is the idea that this is being forced on anybody. No one's forcing anything on any. It's just being acknowledged as part of the classroom makeup.

Jacqui Lewis: Part of the human experience. Whatever, yeah.

Paul: Part of what's going on in the world. And so I think our job is to recognize where we can, when our children are getting messages that are harmful.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And also where they're actually creating physical spaces that are harmful.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And I think what your book does, is it names them.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: It names them.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And it doesn't say, "It doesn't matter."

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: It matters.

Jacqui Lewis: It does matter.

Paul: It matters. It says exactly who we are.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Seriously, Paul?

Paul: That's the other thing that book your book does is it names things and says, "Don't say this isn't who we are. This is who we are until we're not doing it anymore."

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly.

Paul: And when we're not doing it anymore, we can say that's not who we are.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. That's right.

Paul: For now, this is who we are, so deal with that.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And let's deal with that.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And let's change who we are. One of the important ideas of the kind of faith I have is that, yes, there's personal redemption, but there's also societal redemption.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And the idea that we can't do better by the children in Detroit or Flint essentially is saying that God is not working in the world right now. And we are hopelessly fallen and there's just nothing we can do. Which to me seems a very anti-Christian message.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep. Absolutely, friend. Yeah. It's true. And one of the things, April is my mother's big month. Oh my God. Can you get through April? Her birthday's April 11. Her anniversary April 20th, with my dad. And she died on the 25th and then it's Mother's Day. So these few weeks have been very Emma-centric in my consciousness, my memory. I will say both super painful. And also, y'all, I've never felt more faith in the resurrection than I do now, post her death. And I do mean something different than some of the folks will be like, "Okay. See." I feel like I feel her all the time. She's here. Not wait till heaven or reign of God, but I feel her all the time. And I feel also the absence of her. So I both feel her in the absence of her. Does that make sense?

Paul: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Almost can smell her. Almost can physically feel the way her hands feel, a little arthritis. It's strange, but it's true. And I think it might be my trauma reaction is regressed into her arms, regressed into her womb, regressed into her care, just Mommy, where are you? And let me feel you.

Paul: Maybe progressed.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay. Ooh, I like that. That's better.

Paul: No regressed, maybe progressed.

Jacqui Lewis: No, that's good.

Paul: I'm not going to change your story at all. I just think what you're inviting is that nothing's finished.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, good, sweetie. Thank you for that. That's better. You did it better.

Paul: And you're not going backwards.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Going forward.

Paul: You're going forwards with her.

Jacqui Lewis: In a new way.

Paul: In a new way and in a intimate way, in a union way.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I think it's gorgeous and it's an empowering phenomenon and I'll just say it's a blessing.

Jacqui Lewis: It's huge.

Paul: I don't feel my Mom that way. I am very comfortable with the way I do feel my Mom.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: I'm inspired by her, but I don't feel her like that. So that's a blessing.

Jacqui Lewis: It is.

Paul: And how wonderful. I mean, in some ways, also hurtful. I mean, it also the pain of the-

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: The presence and the absence at the same time? That's hard.

Jacqui Lewis: It is hard.

Paul: But we don't know what's going on.

Jacqui Lewis: I don't know what's going on. It's a mystery. We've been to school a lot and we don't know. We collectively. But the thing that I'm wanting to communicate and I tried to write in Fierce Love is her dying, Paul, really did push something in me. I mean, how to describe, I think I say something like the truth that we got said between us, of me being kind of upset that she didn't know about my crazy bad touch story, but to finally be able to go there's nothing between her and I except just straight, clear, clean, beauty, gorgeous, truth, honest, the excruciating beauty of that, that then, I swear to God, Paul, if you can be honest with your Mom about the only thing you're mad at her about, your Mom? I think you have to tell the truth all the time.

Something changed to me. It's like she pushed me out of the womb more. And I cannot, our Spanish speaking friends say [foreign language 00:16:27] or something, I have no hair in my mouth. I cannot lie about stuff right now. And the container of, "Mom, this is what it looks like to be nice. This is what a lie is. This is how you care for the sick." I'm watching her watch the world. "See that right there? That's f'ed up, jack. Don't do that. Don't do that. This is what love looks like."

Holy cow, Paul. Your job as a dad, her job as a mom, my job as an auntie and a grandmother, and as a preacher, our job as adults, is to create a container in which we can teach our children how to love the hell out of this world. Paul, if we're not doing that, we should go home. That's it. That's everybody's job.

Paul: Yes. And it's our job to do and teach, at the same time.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. At the same time.

Paul: And to recognize that none of us are going to be perfect in our love, and to be in some ways gentle with ourselves.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Because you know, I have a lot of anger.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. What are you angry about?

Paul: I'm angry when I feel that good people are misusing their goodness. I feel very few people are really irredeemable, but I do feel like right now there is just so much energy being put into such bad faith.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I mean, a super clear example is like, QAnon.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my God.

Paul: And how QAnon is, it's really interesting, I was just reading an article about how QAnon is upending evangelical churches, because they're coming in there and saying, "You got to be preaching QAnon belief, not Jesus belief."

Jacqui Lewis: Wow.

Paul: These are not progressives. These are conservatives and QAnon is upending this. And they're saying all of their work is to save the children and it's all based on a lie. And it's all based on an illusion.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And there's so much energy that could be put into the kind of stuff we were talking about earlier.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Where real things are happening.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: And it's instead being directed towards a complete fiction.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And all this energy. It's ridiculous. And so I feel angry about that.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I feel like it's a missed opportunity to harness the moral goodness of people and it's being directed in a very destructive way.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I'm angry at what I view as an existential threat.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: To my family.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely.

Paul: And I think it's a really good point. You're in an interracial marriage. That is recent history.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: You know what I mean?

Jacqui Lewis: 1967, child.

Paul: '67. It's the same time as Roe.

Jacqui Lewis: It's yesterday. Exactly, exactly.

Paul: And in a recent confirmation of Justice Jackson, it came up.

Jacqui Lewis: I know.

Paul: State rights. And they were like, "Well, if we're consistent, yeah. Interracial marriage laws should also be put back to the states."

Jacqui Lewis: Right. And she who is married to a white man, sitting there listening to that, plus they raked her, they lynched her, Paul. They did. It was horrible.

Paul: So anyway, one of the hopeful things is I think that there's the courageous love that you talk about, in the book, the Fierce Love, is sometimes if you have a chance to be in front of someone who you thought was totally your enemy.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And anyone who's done Israel, Palestine.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Race work.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: Gender.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: Sexual orientation. The binary is very quick and you say, "Okay, you're the enemy."

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: And if you can be in front of them, because people can change their minds.

Jacqui Lewis: Of course they can. Yeah.

Paul: It's constant expansion. I view myself as like a case in point. All my life I've kind of assumed things and then had someone like slap me upside the head and say, "Why are you assuming that?"

Jacqui Lewis: Why are you assuming that?

Paul: I am not like the righteous one. I'm just saying so I'm hopeful that if we can find ways to encounter with one another, hopefully people can view your marriage and my marriage.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: Not as threatening.

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly.

Paul: But as expressions of love that should be welcome.

Jacqui Lewis: Period.

Paul: Period.

Jacqui Lewis: Would that your babies and mine can grow up in a world where we get there. I don't know that I can think, I think I'm older than you, but let's not be clear.

Paul: No, I don't think so. I'm 57.

Jacqui Lewis: Are you? Ha. I've got you by five years. I'm 62.

Paul: You're 52?

Jacqui Lewis: 62.

Paul: Oh, I thought you were going down.

Jacqui Lewis: 62.

Paul: Oh, when you said I got you by, I thought you had five more years not five less years than me.

Jacqui Lewis: Five, yeah.

Paul: Okay, 62. Well, so you're obviously wiser.

Jacqui Lewis: No. Just by five years. Only five years. But, look, have we ever lived in a time where it wasn't crazy? No. We haven't. We can't say we have. We haven't lived in a time, you and I, where we could go, "Oh, remember in 1942," which wasn't that time either but some of the people living in '42 would've said, "That was the time. Mommy cooked and had on an apron and Daddy came home from work and had gin and tonic," or whatever the hell they had a picture of that looked like something. We haven't seen that. I want that, Paul, I want so much. I mean you know I'm a Universalist Christian, but I want John's vision. I want a city with a river running through it. I do. I want Carly Simon's song being sang as the theme song. I want the leaves on the trees to heal the people.

I love that text that says God's presence is so in the city, you don't even need a temple. You

don't even need street lights. I want Zechariah 8. I want old people chilling, because I'm going to be one of the old people. I want to be listening to some Luther Vandross and the kids are playing Double Dutch and shooting hoops. I want the whole deal where your kids get to be themselves, where the immigration conversation doesn't disenfranchise brown kids and enfranchise white ones. I want Black children's lives to matter. I don't want to see anymore fricking films of people being shot dead. And I think we have a problem of white nationalist bullshit masquerading as Christianity.

Paul: I agree. And here's the hopeful part.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay.

Paul: That is not an expanding group. There are people within the evangelical world who have kind of forfeited their spirituality in some ways to kind of merge with a kind of Trumpist white nationalist agenda.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: But I don't think a lot more people are being converted to that. That's not something that you can preach on a Sunday and people are going to say, "Oh, I want to come to that altar call."

What you're seeing is literally white knuckling of an idea of America that they feel is they're losing.

Jacqui Lewis: So this is a death grip?

Paul: And so I know lots of evangelicals, from different faith tradition, different racial backgrounds, but including white ones who are aghast at that. And they are trying to rally and say, "That's not the future of our faith. It cannot be." And so I think if we really kind of say what is attractive about it and recognize it's a white knuckle movement.

Jacqui Lewis: I hear that.

Paul: Of a fist clenched, trying to hold onto a dream that they don't even know what that dream is. And then my prayer is that there's a releasing of the fist at some point.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And they actually see if they opened up their hand, they might see that they could take my hand, they could take your hand, and that they could be part of a circle.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: A broader circle that included everyone.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Instead of insisting on their superior place-

Jacqui Lewis: In the world.

Paul: In the world.

Jacqui Lewis: I like that.

Paul: That is my prayer.

Jacqui Lewis: Your lips to God ears and I'll join you. I'll join you.

So one of the arguments I'm making in this book is that if we loved ourselves, we'd be able to love our neighbors and love the world. True? What do you think?

Paul: I think the way you describe it, it's true. I think sometimes it can lead to a kind of narcissism, unfortunately.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul: The way you've laid that out, I think what I love about your book in regards to self-love, you're looking at the places in your life that you thought you could never talk about, because they were too shameful.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And they had had an effect on you that you thought was detrimental.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And you had to keep it hidden and you had to push it down.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And to flip that and say, actually those are places that in part made me who I am and I am a strong person.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep. I grew strong around that.

Paul: I grew stronger around that even though I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Jacqui Lewis: Anybody, yep.

Paul: And so that kind of self-love? Crucial.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: The kind of like "You know what? We should go to Big Sur, spend time with my chakras." You know what I mean?

Jacqui Lewis: You don't want to go there.

Paul: Sometimes it gets to a little bit like, "Yeah, and then why don't you go somewhere where

people need you?" So, it's a balance, but I do think everybody has to do the work that you're describing in Fierce Love of self-love. And then do what you did, which is reach out to people who have gone through similar things, created a community. People. If you do not know about Middle Church?

Jacqui Lewis: Holy cow. Right.

Paul: People, if you do not know about Middle Church, if you've never been to Middle Church on anything they're doing, you don't know. I mean, walking in there is to realize, okay, look, all these people who have all of this, because Jacqui has created a space where they can bring they're all their self in.

Jacqui Lewis: All their stuff. Bring your stuff.

Paul: All their stuff..

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And not inflict anything bad on it, but use it for compassion.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep, yep.

Paul: And making music and dancing and hopefully we're going to get to joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my gosh.

Paul: Hopefully we're going to get to joy.

Jacqui Lewis: We got to get to joy.

Paul: Because I think that's where I recognize that. I recognize where your insistence-

Jacqui Lewis: On joy.

Paul: On joy.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm so stubborn about it, right?

Paul: Well and you create spaces for it so that we have all this stuff and we have to love that self. And then we have to also, there's something cathartic of getting up and dancing.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely.

Paul: Singing.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Laughing.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Being silly.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Playing.

Paul: And also saying amen together.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen, yeah.

Paul: And I just think Middle Church is so amazing in that way.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you for saying that.

Paul: And you created it and everybody who's ever been there, and I'm just going to wax for a second. I saw you doing this amazing book event.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, yeah. That was so cool.

Paul: I mean, you're creating a congregation which is doing what congregations are meant to do. There are literal communities of people coming from wherever.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: That's the reason I went into this gig.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: There was a small church that anyone who walked in there and decided they wanted to be a part of it, they were part of it. So we had homeless people. We had people who did not speak English. And we had kind of one of each, it was like 50 people.

Jacqui Lewis: Where was that?

Paul: It was Madison Avenue Baptist Church at the time.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay, yeah, yeah.

Paul: This was in the '90s. Someone said, you know what? And I was like, "I am not going to be a minister." And someone said, "You should maybe see what it's like in a church." And I went there and I was like, "Where else?"

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: "Could these people come into a community and feel full dignity." They were recognized as human beings, not defined by all those other things, but fully a member. And that's what you do at Middle. It's astounding and beautiful.

Jacqui Lewis: Middle taught me. You've known me long enough to know that I was wrestling about what it meant to have a grown up God, for a long time. I worked on this book for 10 years probably and migrated from a talk of grown up God to a talk of God as love, because that was my journey. But Middle took me on this journey, really.

What does it look like when the building is burning down? My traumatized congregants are watching the fire and taking care of the neighbors next door. Because those women got smoked out. Not burned out, but smoked out. Is there anything we can do right here? Nope. So literally we're taking them into Midtown shopping, not the Kmart around the corner, but to Midtown to get robes and slippers and some extra lounge. I mean the DNA of open the doors for queer people to get married before it was legal, to feed the poor Polish kids and the Ukrainian kids before the neighborhood was Black and Hispanic and poor? To say y'all come and mean it? And, yeah, to party like its=

Paul: And to create a space for arts.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my gosh.

Paul: I mean, incredible. Throughout the '70s and 80s where like real artistic creation happened in that space.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely.

Paul: So, it's amazing. And now, I wonder if you want to say just a word about your relationship with the rabbi who I just-

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, my gosh.

Paul: I just think that's another example of love. It's also like what foundations are we laying?

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: With every encounter?

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: In order to build the next thing? And I think that that's-

Jacqui Lewis: That's what it is. Amanda and I talked to and she goes, "Can I ask you questions?" I'm like, "Sure." Yeah. I mean, y'all who are listening, many of you know, this is season three of this podcast, the Middle burned down in December of 2020. And we've had such kindness from people, such kindness from people, but really not space. We rented a space for a little while at this church that we were a tenant and it was about three months when between October COVID not and December COVID again. But the miracles, I would say, the things I have found in the fire, Paul. I have found these things in the fire, incredible kindness and generosity. 650 people have joined the church since March of 2020. That's two congregations. That's crazy town.

Paul: That is wild.

Jacqui Lewis: They have found us in Ireland, Paris, Perry Street. Crazy town, 650 people since we shut down in March have joined the church.

So we found colleagues, allies, that could come to church in their pajamas. There's a woman and her husband who pray with me every Wednesday morning at 8:00. It's their afternoon

tea in the UK. And they come and pray. It's crazy. But also Rabbi Josh Stanton and his people, who are one of the many people who wrote and said, "If we can do anything, let us know." And when I called and said, "Josh, it's now time for space." Basically the space we have is free. I mean, we got a little bit of money we're paying, but it's like zero compared to what it would cost. And one of their benefactors is paying three-fourths of our little rent. What do they say? They made a [foreign language 00:32:49] a tabernacle for us, to tabernacle with them. Why? Because Josh and I have a relationship.

Why? Because I understand that Jesus is a Jew. Hello? And why? Because it's true. So we have curated these interfaith partnerships for all these years, but especially the last 20, where we are friends with our Muslim colleagues and our Sikh colleagues, Valerie, and our Jewish colleagues and our Buddhist colleagues. We have a deep relationship with this interfaith bunch of clergy in the East Village. And, y'all, if we don't know that God speaks more than one language, we've really missed out on something. So it's a beautiful gift to imagine the partnerships we're going to do with them. They're going to host our Freedom School this summer. So how many more things will we do together? Like so many things, because that's what love looks like.

Paul: One of the lessons, of the many lessons I'm sure we could talk about, is open hearts are never wasted.

Jacqui Lewis: That's a preach right there. That a preach.

Paul: Invitation, generosity, kindness.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Taking time, which is our most precious commodity.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Taking time to find the relationship, to build it.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Paul: You could have said, "Oh, Josh, whatever." But you took the time to get to know Josh Stanton. And he took the time to get to know you.

Jacqui Lewis: To get to know Jacqui Lewis. Yeah.

Paul: Jacqui Lewis. And I just think that's instructive for everyday living. It's taking the time.

Jacqui Lewis: It is.

Paul: Looking around and it invites the idea that every day is fraught with possibility.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Including joy. I mean, let's do make sure we talk about it. Paul, we know each other through our relationships in institutions and as human beings. I always think of you as a joyful kind spirit. That's what I think of you as, among other things. I mean, you're also brilliant and thoughtful, but is joy hereditary? I don't know. My mother was like a

throw your head back and laugh out loud woman. My dad thinks he's funny and, Daddy, sometimes you're just plain off color and rude. But I know you think it's funny, but we grew up laughing. I have a video of my siblings. We did Christmas in February, because none of us could all get together at Christmas time. So we got there for my sister's birthday in Chicago. All of us came home. We were in the kitchen, which is so small. You go home and you're like, 'Did we actually fit in this kitchen?' In this kitchen, it's so small. And we turn on, Get Up Off Of That Thing, James Brown.

And my dad, who has a girlfriend, loves dancing to this song with her. But before that Daddy always had this weird dance when we were little, it was called a mockingbird. And it was a dance just like now you might do the Good Foot or whatever. He did this dance, so each of us just mocked the hell out of my father, dancing in the kitchen, teasing him. And he was laughing and we were laughing and we were like, "Now do that other part." Grownups, 62 to 50, dying laughing at each other, teasing each other. And we didn't have a perfect house. We had anger and drama in our house. We had hard feelings in our house. But we always had deep abiding sense that they would do anything for us love. And we always had so much fun together.

So I learned joy like I learned how to write. I did. I learned how to laugh and how to roll with it and how to not be embarrassed if you fell down. How did you learn joy, Paul? And can we teach it

Paul: Joy to me is one of those things where you feel completely right. So it doesn't have to be-

Jacqui Lewis: Loud?

Paul: It doesn't have to be loud, but it's where you're just like, it's not something, I wish I could teach it more. But I mean, even part of this conversation, I'm joyful.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Having this conversation, because I feel like I'm being inspired and we're vibing.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: So joy can come through a great conversation with a friend.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: Where you feel understood.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: You feel heard.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: You feel seen.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: And you leave saying, “Oh yeah.”

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: I’m alive.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: For me, it’s like saying, “I’m alive and no one can take that away from me. All the things that I worry about, I’m just going to be I’m alive and I’m overflowing.”

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: You know? And so there’s an overflowingness to it.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that. Yeah.

Paul: And I want to share it and I want to be a part of it. It’s communal. I think joy, it’s a personal experience, but it’s generally something you share.

Jacqui Lewis: In a community.

Paul: And a lot of my life was spent until I was like probably 35, 40, going to nightclubs.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay.

Paul: Nightclubs were the place where I found transcendence.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And ecstasy.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow.

Paul: And community.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep. You could be yourself.

Paul: Because on the dance floor-

Jacqui Lewis: Are you a good dancer?

Paul: You know what? I am.

Jacqui Lewis: All right, now, claim it.

Paul: I can do it. I can do it. Now, I’m like, “Watch out for Grandpa Paul.” But back in the day, in the day. I was in New York and there were nightclubs and people would be on the floor.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And you would get in there. And there was this song that said, [singing 00:38:37]And the entire place would be just thumping and people would be arms up. And it was like church. It was absolutely church.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow. Yeah.

Paul: Because people felt it and everybody felt the movement and we were all part of one thing.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul: And the DJ knew it.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And so those were really moments of church for me and that was actually really how I'd used to go out to nightclubs. I do feel like that's another, if you're not dancing, find a way to dance.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep. Find a way.

Paul: If you're not creating some poetry, find a way.

Jacqui Lewis: Make a pie.

Paul: Make a pie, make something. So joy feels to me like a very overflowing emotion and some things are just satisfaction, which is also great. But I don't know. You describe joy in a very particular way in your book.

Jacqui Lewis: I do? I do?

Paul: Maybe you can read just a passage.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm going to read a passage about the joy.

Paul: I think that it's revelatory the way you described it and I think very important.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that you wanted to talk about joy here.

The way I thought about joy when I was writing, which I was really struck, Paul, my own finding upon it that it's the water of life. I say joy is the water of life. So peaceable feeling. I had to move. I didn't want to move, but I had to move. I moved out of my parsonage to this apartment on 21st and FDR. I don't like the traffic patterns, but I have found myself waking up, sitting in the window, looking at the East River. Oh my God, joy. Coffee with John, joy. Watching Ophelia giggle, joy. Roaring with the children, joy. Making love with John, joy. Sitting down to a glass of red wine and the best chocolate cake, absolutely joy, absolutely joy.

And I fight in here in the book a little bit about happiness, joy, happiness, joy, like. Don't get stuck. I had a guy whitesplain to me one time, "Happiness is external and stuff. But joy is in the middle of your suffering, you still feel at peace." Maybe. Maybe. Or joy is like Rumi says, "when you do something from your soul." It's a river. It's a joy. I love that. That's it to me.

I'm looking at the ocean, joy. You got to know, listener, what gives you joy. [Foreign language 00:41:08], contentment in Spanish seems like it gets at it. I'm at peace. I'm feeling good. I'm feeling satisfied. I'm feeling resonant with the world. I think you can have joy in the midst of the suffering. I think you can have joy in the midst of the COVID. I think you can have joy in the midst of the heartbreak.

But I'm defining it as this essential feeling that comes in your soul, not because you pretended that everything was okay, but that you looked at your life squarely, took it on the chin, this part sucks, and I'm left with this. Joy doesn't come from being false. It comes from looking squarely at the truth of our circumstances, feeling what's inside authentically, and then turning a grateful heart toward the good and the bad and the ugly as part of living life.

My hip hurts. F it, I'm alive, joy. You know what I mean? My shoes are too tight. Sit down and put your feet up, go buy some new ones tomorrow, joy. I do think it is a character trait that we can develop. And I think it's about what we decide to look at, learning how to see. It's a perspective set. I think when you come out of a fire, and you didn't die in it, you have a feeling of joy. I think when you break up with your lover and you know that it's going to be better for you, it's joy. So you're right, it isn't always loud and raucous, but it is a kind of feeling of satisfaction resourced with truth. That's how I would define it. Does that make sense to you?

Paul: Yeah. And some of that was read directly from the book, in case you didn't notice that.

Jacqui Lewis: Some of that was faced.

Paul: Yeah. Some of that was straight from Fierce Love.

Jacqui Lewis: This is what I say on page 177, which I think you liked. "Can you feel what I mean by joy? Joy is a feeling of freedom, of bounce back, of contentment, of wonder. Joy is a reservoir of goodness that makes you rock back and forth and hug yourself. It makes you smile for no reason, or your smile might prompt it. Joy makes you tilt your head back full in full throated laugh. Joy comes around the way, on the way, in the interstitial places between now and not yet, tired and rested, broken and healing, worried and hopeful. Sometimes joy is an eruption, a surprise. Sometimes it's just peace way down in your belly. Like our talk. It makes your face shine with gladness and contentment. Mother Teresa said, 'Joy is strength.'"

Y'all. Can joy help us in these times of trauma, Paul? I hope so.

Paul: I think we're lost without it. I think that you can also identify practices in people.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: That give you joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Paul: And make sure it's part of your week.

Jacqui Lewis: Get some joy.

Paul: Get some joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Walk on the river.

Paul: Absolutely.

Jacqui Lewis: Coffee with a friend.

Paul: Read a great poem. Some people on TikTok can give you joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Child, for sure.

Paul: It's okay.

Jacqui Lewis: It's okay.

Paul: It's okay.

Jacqui Lewis: Get your joy where you can.

Paul: A lot of what my work has been, has been online. Like how are we online?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: And what the online world does to us, in good and bad ways. And I think it's especially important online.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: To find spaces of joy.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: Because the online world can be very alienated.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Paul: You can feel very attacked.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: So make sure if you're spending time online, like most of us are.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Curate it.

Paul: Find places of joy in online. There are beautiful things going on in the online, but you have to make sure you have them bookmarked.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Paul: So you can say, "Okay, I've hit it. I need to go to that place of joy."

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely. That's right.

Paul: And that's my one like pitch for self-care online, which I'm very interested in.

Jacqui Lewis: Love yourself. Get some care, find some joy for the facing of these days.

Paul: Amen.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Paul.

Paul: Thank you, Jacqui.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm so glad to talk with you, my friend.

Paul: The Reverend Jacqui.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you.

Paul: Fierce Love. Hello?

Jacqui Lewis: Hello. Hello. Thank you, my friend.

Paul: My pleasure.

Jacqui Lewis: Be well.

In my conversation with Paul Raushenbush, we reflected on personal aspects of our life, our partners, his children, and the very real ways that what we think might be evil is just not enough. I'd love to know what you think fierce love's got to do with all of this.