

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 3
Start with the Heart

feat. Jacqui Lewis

Brian: Over recent centuries, modern civilization generally started with personal desires, then as a luxury add-on, may have included social desire, hardly ever considering a desire for a thriving planet. Going forward, we will recognize a basic insight of systems theory. The wellbeing of any subsystem depends on the wellbeing of the larger systems of which it is part. So we start big with a healthy planetary system and then desire healthy human systems that thrive within it, and then we desire our own individual wellbeing within those larger human and planetary systems.

Where you might ask, “Does the love of God or spirit fit in?” It doesn’t. Love for the transcendent doesn’t fit in with the others as one item in the list. Instead, it is inherent in the desire that we experience in the other three desires. Divine love is the nest in which the other desires are nurtured, and it is inherent in all other loves.

What I’m suggesting recalls the words in First John 4 that God is love. When we desire the good of the planet, the good of all people and our own good, we are participating in a love that is bigger than us. As a Christian, I would say we are joining God in God’s loving desire for the wellbeing of the beloved. To love the love that loves the parts is to love the whole. To unify our desires and love is, I think, what Jesus must have meant by purity of heart.

When we feel in our bones and breath how the first three desires are woven together, how they constitute a permeating holy desire that is wholly benevolent, we don’t discover the fourth desire and add it to the list. Rather, we find that the fourth desire is already flowing within us, in and through the other loves. And we experience this desire as divine or transcendent love, universal, non-discriminatory, healing, creative, life-giving. We may use many names and words to point to this unifying desire, even though none of them can contain it. It must be lived, experienced, participated in, not simply spoken.

So Jacqui Lewis, I’m so happy whenever I get a chance to talk to you, dear friend. We have been friends for I don’t know how many years now through the Auburn Senior Fellows program. How many years has that been?

Jacqui: I feel like that’s a long time. Maybe it’s 15-ish years? Does that sound right? Is that? It’s a long time.

Brian: It’ll sound terrible if we say, “Well, it sure feels like a long time.” But it does because-

Jacqui: No, because it does feel like a long time.

Brian: Because we’ve really gone deep in each other’s lives and you’ve become an inspiration and friend to me. Jacqui, for folks who don’t know that the Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis is a pastor of a super exciting church in New York City that has been through a lot. Can you just tell people about your life as a pastor and what you’ve been through and are going through?

Jacqui: Oh, thank you for that, Brian. Before we met, I just want to say out loud, I’ve admired you and your writing and your ability to live on borders. I think of myself as a border person, not borderline, but border person. And I thought your ability to, you were then helping young leaders emerge into a different kind of faith. And I’m really proud to know you. And I think about rooms I go to where people are like, “I moved right toward love. I moved toward a different kind of faith because of Brian McLaren.” So I just thought I’d share that-

Brian: Well, that's nice of you to say.

Jacqui: ... about your work. Yeah. So I've been shockingly the senior minister at Middle Collegiate Church since January of 2004, which makes it an 18-year tenure. I'm like, "What? How does this happen?" I started work there on a Christmas Eve. Before that, Brian, I had to go because my predecessor mentor was sick. And so I've been in a church that has grown up with me. I've grown up in this church, the church of my dreams. I looked out on the pulpit King Day one year visiting them, preaching for them. Didn't know I was auditioning then, but I preached for them, and I looked out and I saw mostly white people, but a really significant, more than 20% Blacks, which makes it a multi-ethnic church and a spattering of Hispanics and Chinese people. And I thought, "Oh my God, this looks like the reign of God." And it looked like the promise.

But now we are 2,000 people strong in New York and 48 states, I don't know what's what the other two, 22 countries, fully multi-ethnic, fully many gendered and queer and straight and old and young and rich and poor. I'm so happy to be there. It is the church of my dreams.

And also we had a fire, Brian. So COVID came in March of 2020. We shut down because we love each other and we're vulnerable, and we literally shut it down. We were ahead of the curve. Started doing everything digitally, our conference Easter. And then it was December and a fire that started in the building next to ours just torched our sanctuary and left us with a facade that is crumbling and ashes. So it's been hard. It's been a hard couple of years. But also we continue to flourish. We love each other. We've grown by about 670 people in two years.

Brian: That's amazing.

Jacqui: How does that happen? So I just thank God for y'all, my people in the world who've prayed for us. And I thank God for my people at Middle, all around the world that connect to us. And I thank God for good work to do, Brian, that we get to do also together.

Brian: Yes. So before we go any farther talking about the subject for this episode, which is Start with a Heart, I wonder is there something that you just love, something that you delight in that people might not know about you? In other words, just something that is fun or energizing or makes you laugh or whatever?

Jacqui: That people don't know about me? They do know that I am a ridiculously goofy nana to Ophelia and Octavius. I love them. They're my heart, two and four and just sweet as can be. Lived with us at the beginning of the pandemic and bonded with them. But I love, love jazz music. I love jazz music.

Brian: Oh, that's so great.

Jacqui: Did you know that?

Brian: I didn't know that.

Jacqui: I love jazz music.

Brian: I didn't know that.

Jacqui: When I was four-ish, my dad, part of our playtime with dad was the jazz is on and you get to dance on his feet. So Yusef Lateef, Coltrane, Miles Davis, Earl Grant playing the piano. Nancy Wilson, I wanted to be Nancy Wilson singing jazz. I sang her version of Moon River, her rendition in a fourth grade talent show.

Brian: Oh my gosh.

Jacqui: My teacher called my mother and father and were like, "What is she doing?" I'm all singing like Nancy Wilson. Yeah. I love jazz.

Brian: Oh my goodness. I love it. Well, I never knew that about you and you probably never knew this about me, but when I was in high school, I played saxophone in a jazz band.

Jacqui: No, I didn't know that.

Brian: And we played big band jazz music from the thirties, forties, fifties, so yeah.

Jacqui: Oh wow.

Brian: Some kind of old timey stuff. And we got into, yeah, and I've always since then loved jazz too. All kinds of jazz stories we could tell. But I wanted to ask that question because when you think about things you delight and you love, like to love jazz music. I don't know why, I love fly fishing. I mean-

Jacqui: I know you do.

Brian: My wife jokes and says, "There's a fine line between fishing and standing on a shore holding a stick looking like an idiot." But I love it. And the older I get, I keep loving it more. So there's something when our heart rises up in delight. In this book that we're talking about and in the process of learning how to see, learning how to see the Christian faith in a new way. When I wrote this book, *Do I Stay Christian?* The first part I talked about reasons not to stay Christian and then the second part to stay Christian. And then in the third part, basically we say, "Some people are going to stay Christian, some people aren't, and there are all kinds of reasons for both."

But whether you stay Christian or not, you have to wake up the next morning and decide what kind of human being do I want to be. And so what I wanted to do at the last part of the book is just talk about the kinds of people who've struggled with Christian identity still have the question of what kind of person, what kind of human being do I want to be? And so one, this chapter and this episode, we want to talk about starting with a heart, that if we want to think about the kind of person we want to be, we've got to pay attention to that inner life. And you're a person who, you studied psychology and you have in many ways defined your, so much of your ministry and your leadership around revolutionary love and fierce love. And I wonder if you could just talk about love and desire and talk to us about your book. Yeah, just I know this is a subject that-

Jacqui: Are you giving me some space right there to just go crazy?

Brian: I am. I really am.

Jacqui: Yeah. Well Brian, I think one of the reasons that I was really drawn to you when I began to follow your work in the world was this, we're about the same age. And so therefore, we have a similar set of experiences about religion, let's say. What we learned to see. We learned to see the Civil Rights movement. We learned to see activism. We also learned to see, we saw weaponized faith coming for the folks on the edges, on the margins. And gosh, it just broke my heart, right? You'd be just heartbroken. And sadly, this is a recycling resurgence, therefore of how religion, which you taught me, religio, to bind together instead becomes a push apart, fall apart, break apart.

So I was thinking for many years, maybe a decade and a half, about what is the essential thing that I believe in? What do I believe in that keeps me Christian-ish, right?

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: Keeps me in the way. And I thought, "Well, it isn't so much of these kind of orthodoxy rules. What do you do to get ordained? And what do you do to stay connected in denomination?" I wanted to get to the essential stuff and the essential stuff to me was love, the essential heart stuff is love. So the essential thing I follow, my heart is Jesus is my rabbi, is how I want to say it. Whether or not, I mean, sure God can do anything, right? So sure, Jesus can be divine and sure, he can be born of immaculate conception because God can do anything. But it's so not the most important part to me. The most important part to me is what Jesus said was the most important. Yahshua is a Jew. He's a Jew, Brian, who is teaching around Nazareth, Palestine, Galilee is itinerate carpenter or just nail banger, who knows? Handyman, right?

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: But what is he saying? He is saying, when asked the essential faith is love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. Love God, love neighbor, love self. Love, period. Tony Campolo one time talking to a bunch of young people. I'm sitting up close. Tony could give you some spinning if you're up close, but I'm watching him and I'm thinking he's just the truth of just love. That's it. I used to try to catechize teenagers as a young adult, like, "Here's what you... Love. Love God, love neighbor, love self. Love, period. Everything else is commentary. Everything else is midrash. Everything else is opinion."

And so I left behind some things in my faith so that I didn't have to leave Jesus behind because I really love Jesus' teachings so much. And to me the core message in that is love all of the world, all of the world, all of the earth and the creatures therein, all of it. Oceans, trees, rivers, creeks. Love it like you love yourself. Love your neighbor, the one you live with, the one you fight with, the one you work with, the one you're married to, that's your closest neighbor of all, your kids that move back

home, they're your neighbor. Love those people like you love yourself. And do you love yourself enough to love those people in the world?

I wrestled with that with my psych hat on as a child who grew up in a complicated family system. What did I learn there about love? Mom and dad loved the world. They really did. They loved us with such ferocity, Brian, like fierce, like fire really. And also with sweet molasses. Like fire, but also salty, also lots of don'ts and lots of repercussions for being sassy, right?

Brian: I can't imagine you being sassy. Oh.

Jacqui: Oh my God, I really wasn't. I was sassy the first time I was 18 years old. Read my book. I was so good.

Brian: Oh, is that so?

Jacqui: I was so good. I was so good. I didn't want to get in trouble. But the missing piece in there, I think from two Black parents in Mississippi, raised in a culture of apartheid was did they learn really to love themselves? And that was one of my questions and my psych and religion identity development questions. So I'm going to get smaller on this now and say if religion or faith or Christian or Islam or Buddhism or anything does anything, I hope what it does is it fosters a self-identity that I am love, actually. I am love encased in a body and if I'm love encased in a body and I have power to love the world into healing because this is it. This is my magic power. I can point it at the poor, I can point it at the disenfranchised. I can point it at queer kids. I can point it at women who need reproductive healthcare. I can point it at the earth.

I have a light that is love, that is in me pouring out of me and I can give it to the world. And that is what I think fierce love is, and that is what I think we're called to. The paths that lead to love are many, but love is the only thing that's going to heal us.

Brian: Oh my goodness. Hey, that was a good riff and that was beautiful.

Jacqui: Was that all right?

Brian: And I wasn't saying amen out loud, but I was sure I was feeling it.

I grew up in this very conservative religious home where doctrines were so important and taboos had to be observed, but like you, my parents were loving people and in some ways they loved better than their doctrine required them to, and that made me think that that was really the most important thing.

So I suppose my plea, and this is what you have done so beautifully in your book, *Fierce Love*, but my plea to people is to say, "Look, if you want to say, 'Oh, I'm a Christian, I'm staying Christian,' but you're not loving, it's kind of a noisy gong and a clanging symbol or to put it today, it's like a car alarm that somebody can't shut off or a bad fan that keeps making a weird noise. It just keeps you awake and ends up being a bother." So if you're going to stay Christian, let's focus on love as the founder of this thing said. And if you're not going to stay Christian, how about focusing on love? Let's make that our shared focus.

Jacqui: Right, I love that.

Brian: Whatever we decide, however we decide to label ourselves. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that word “fierce” in the title of your book, Fierce Love, and anything else you’d like to say about the book?

Jacqui: I love the question about the word “fierce”, right? One day I was like, “Oh, someone’s going to ask me and you look it up and it’s so negative.”

You’re like, “Oh, but you picked that word.” Consistence with like combative or fiery or... and I thought, “Actually this is what I’ve experienced as love.” I’ve experienced my mother teaching me to be non-violent and to pray for my enemies and watching me just one time too many run into the backyard from some girl who’s trying to chase me and take my money. And for that day, mommy’s fierce love, the same, “I’m not going to buy myself a coat because you need shoes” fierce love or the “you get called the N-word”, these are stories in my book, Fierce Love and you get called the N-word and mommy’s fierce. That’s silly that someone doesn’t think you’re good enough because you’re a negro. I was a negro then. That fierce love of protection, teach you how to pray every day, fierce love. Also, that day, she met me at the back door with her hands on her hips and said, “What are you doing right now?”

It’s like, “Jennifer’s chasing me. I feel so afraid of her.” And she looks at me and she was like, “Well, you know what? There’s been lots of days where you come in here because Jennifer’s chasing you, but today you better go outside and handle your business.” “What? What is going to happen outside?”

Brian: Wow. Wow.

Jacqui: But she was not kidding, and I also was not trying to fight her. So I went up front outside and found her and talked to her about how are we going to share this money that you stole?

Brian: Yeah.

Jacqui: Her fierce love pushed me out of the nest, like it pushed me out of the womb. There’s some violence in that, you know what I’m saying?

Brian: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Jacqui: And so yeah, I do mean there’s some kinetic energy. I do mean there’s something combative. I do mean there’s something demanding. The same text you were quoting from Paul about noisy gong, and if we have not love... Paul says, “Love is patient, kind, not jealous, not boastful.” Yes. Until he says, “Does not insist on its own way.” I totally disagree with that. Fierce love, the love that comes from the heart that you’re talking about, Brian, absolutely insists on love. What?

Brian: Yes, yes.

Jacqui: Absolutely love insists on love. Sorry Paul. Maybe you didn’t know the right people. What? Right?

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: Love insists on love. Love demands. It insists on justice. It insists on wellbeing. It insists on care-

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: ... for the vulnerable. So that's fierce.

Brian: I love it. It's not just this sort of soft, warm feeling. It takes strength and courage. Something you and I both know from times where we've been in the streets or-

Jacqui: Yeah.

Brian: ... placed ourself in a situation we were subject to arrest and places where we've had to get some people really angry and upset with us because there were things that needed to be said because of love. We were driven by that love.

Jacqui: I want to get back to your book, but I do want to say that I feel like we have, you and I, this white man who likes to fish, this Black lady who's never been fishing ever, not one time, you got to, you're supposed to take me.

Brian: Okay.

Jacqui: And the ways we got to this place where we share these values or have been different paths, but we know love is the way and the truth and the life. Love is the way and the truth and the life. Christian, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic, love is the way.

Brian: One of the things I try to do in the book, in this chapter of Start With the Heart is I suggest, I'd love to just share this with you and then see how you would respond to it.

Jacqui: Okay.

Brian: I try to suggest that if we... When we're little children, we don't even know we have a self to love. I think our first experience of-

Jacqui: That's right.

Brian: ... love is we love mommy and maybe we even love daddy a little bit and we love-

Jacqui: Little bit.

Brian: ... our brother and sister and we have some friends. I think we have an unconscious love for ourself. It's the love that makes us scream in the night when we need our diaper changer, we need some food and says, "My wellbeing matters enough to wake you up, mommy or daddy." We love others. We learn in some way to love ourselves often like you in the backyard that day when your mother said, "Hey, you've got to love yourself enough to go back out there and stand up for yourself and work this out."

When we take human beings seriously, we realize human beings don't exist unless they can

breathe and drink and eat, so we better start loving the earth and the sea and the wind and the climate and pollinators and all the rest. So we have to really learn to love the earth. And my proposal is that when we want to talk about the love of God, it's not something we add to that list like it's item one or item four on the list, but rather it's in the experience of loving other people and loving ourselves and loving the earth. In the experience of love, we actually encounter God because God is love. Anyhow, that's a proposal I'm sort of making. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Jacqui: I like that proposal. I love that proposal. What's jumping in my heart right now when you say it is Victor Hugo's quote, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Right? That's beautiful. "To love another person is to see the face of God." Right? And just to kind of go to your proposal about what's going on with the child, the thing the child has right there isn't love yet, it's ego. It's self survival, right?

Brian: Yes, yes, yes.

Jacqui: It's I'm a self, it's a demand and it's going has to happen. One of my favorite psychologists would call it a kind of necessary narcissism. And these object relations people, Brian, would say, the psychologist, or object relation, meaning I'm having a relationship to my first love object and it is really the mother's breast or the bottle just because it's going to feed me and I like it. Right?

But there's a time where if a child is going to learn to love anybody including themselves, we have to let the child have an appropriate kind of narcissism. And it is, "I cry and someone comes." "What? I'm magic. I cried and I was dry. Look at me."

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: "I screamed and someone picked me up. Yay." Right? "I had a tantrum and someone calmed me down." That becomes that narcissistic moment or some feeling of aggrandizement goes inside the child as confidence and then the child, "I matter." And then the child can look around and say, "So does he and so does she." So you're actually really interesting about the kind of, that first thing isn't love, it's just a demand system that's cute. It's a cute demand system, but it turns into the ability to see others and love them. Isn't it cool?

Brian: It is really cool. It is really cool. And so here we are human beings and some of us think the purpose we're here is to make money. And some of us think the purpose we're here is to gain power over other people. And some of us think the reason we're here is to keep our nerves jammed with as much pleasure as possible, as often as possible. But then some of us are saying, "No, we actually think we're here, this is a school of learning how to love. And the act of learning how to see is learning how to see with eyes of love." And that that's what it's about. And if you stay Christian and you don't have that, you're missing the point. If you leave Christianity and you don't have love, you might be solving some problems, but to get to the point is to take love seriously.

Jacqui: And I think that's right. And what I love that you did though in this book right here is it isn't, I mean, unless you and I are doing midrash on the midrash, right? "Love God with everything you have, love your neighbor as yourself." So this is Jesus picking up Deuteronomy and Leviticus. But what Brian and Jacqui's midrash on that is, "When you're

loving God, you're loving everything because everything is God." That's Richard Rohr. All of it is God, you and I are part of God and so is the ocean a part of God, right? And so is the neighbor of part of God. And John or whoever, John, whoever was pretending to be John because they loved John wrote, "God is love and those who take up residence in love take up residence in God, and God takes up residence in them."

In that way, I almost think John's Jewishness is like, "See all this? You're taking up residence in all this when you take up residence in God because God is love." Now a lot of commentaries try to act like that was a metaphor. Brian, what was wrong with people? "They didn't really mean God is love. They meant God is kind of like love." No, that's not what they said, "God is love." So love is the womb, love is the jam, love is the earth, love is the water that's inside the mother, but also the water that's in this river that I'm looking at while we're talking. Love is everything, Brian, because God is everything and God is love.

Brian: This has been such a good conversation and just to circle back to where we started, I'm just picturing your love for jazz and dancing and music and the delight to just appreciate it and your heart is just on fire with love for that and my love when I'm standing in a river holding a stick looking like an idiot. In a certain sense, this desire of the heart for this expansive state, I think this is a good place to start.

Jacqui: I think it's a good place to start and if what we could wrap with is and come back to you maybe Brian, every time you say the word "desire", my mind goes "delight." And the definition of love from Jim Loder, I think a theologian we both know, a Christian educator wrote a book called *The Transforming Moment*, "love is the non-possessive delight."

Brian: Yeah.

Jacqui: Ugh. "In the particularity of the other, the non-possessive delight." So delight, like desire, delight, like our heart just going, "I'm curious about you. I don't want anything back."

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: That's what love is.

Brian: I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from part three of *Do I Stay Christian*. In this light to say "I love God" is to say that I give my heart to the divine love that loves in and through all creation. To say "I have a relationship with God" is to say that I am joining God and God's desire to relate to all creation as beloved. To say "I believe in God" is to say that I believe in the love that holds and animates the universe.

This beloved community resonates with the central message of Jesus, the kingdom and the justice of God. In this light, Jesus' great commandment to love God, neighbor and self make sense as a survival strategy, not just a spiritual aspiration. When we love God, we love neighbor, self and the creation on which neighbor and self depend. These loves are inseparable. They are in fact one love.

In saying this, I'm echoing the sixth century old wisdom of Julian of Norwich who wrote, "We are all one in love." When I look at myself as an individual, I see that I am nothing. It is only in unity with my fellow spiritual seekers that I am anything at all. It is this foundation

of unity that will save humanity. God is all that is good. God has created all that is made. God loves all that God has created. And so anyone who in loving God, loves all his fellow creatures, loves all that is. All those who are on the spiritual path contain the whole of creation and the creator. That is because God is inside us and inside God is everything, and so whoever loves God loves all that is.

If this episode has raised questions for you, we'll devote a final episode in this season to responding to listener questions. You'll find information in the show notes and how to leave a recorded or written question, and I look forward to responding. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.