

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 7
Renounce and Announce

feat. Jacqui Lewis

Brian: This idea of coming out is one of the many gifts the LGBTQ community has brought to the world. Up until now a person announces, “You have thought of me in one way, but I’ve come to understand myself as something different and I want to let you know.” Whether we stay Christian or seek to leave Christianity in a constructive way, we need to have our own kind of coming out. I’ve had to do this kind of coming out in my own way as a parent to my adult kids. As I mentioned earlier, I’ve had to tell them I no longer believe some of the things I believed when they were young. In particular, I’ve told them that I regret the authoritarian style of parenting that I learned from the Christian community I was part of. That I regret raising them even adjacent to a religious context where there was too much shame.

“I did my best as your dad,” I’ve told them, “but you deserved better.” Whether or not we stay Christian, we need to do something similar. First, if we’ve gone through a kind of deconstruction and reconstruction, we need to come out to our congregations, denominations, and other Christian associates. I’m not saying we need to come out from them, as if we are too good for them. I’m not saying we need to separate ourselves from others as superior and elite. Instead I’m saying that we need to very lovingly, non-defensively and non-aggressively be clear about where we are. If others reject us or prefer that we leave, so be it. In the long run, we will find it better to be rejected for who we are than accepted for who we aren’t.

Whether we have shifted out of Christianity entirely or into a new kind of Christianity, we have to be courageous enough to come out of our closets and go public, not minimizing the change, not feeling embarrassed about who we are becoming, not hiding our light under a bushel of polite ambiguity. Welcome back everybody to Learning How To See. In this season we’re talking about learning how to see our own Christian faith, if that’s our faith tradition, to see it in a new light, to see it in a fresh way. And in this episode we’re talking about renouncing and announcing, and something that has to happen for us if we go through a change in our religious identity. Do we keep it a secret? Are we ashamed of it?

Do we hide it, or do we decide to say, “I’m going to let people know and I’m going to announce what I’m for and I’m going to renounce what I think has been harmful.” And Jacqui, I just want to again welcome you. So glad you’re here as my conversation partner and friend in this. I want to tell you a quick story. When one of my sons was a freshman in college, so now here’s a guy who grew up in a preacher’s family and we took him away to college and hardly heard a word from him until Thanksgiving. He loved college and he had a great time and comes home for Thanksgiving and we’re sitting in the kitchen and we’re having a conversation. He’s just a wonderful adult now in his 40s, but I said, “So, Brett, have you found any kind of Christian fellowship or any kind of church?”

And he said, “Oh, dad, I really need to talk to you about that.” I said, “What’s going on?” He said, “At my campus, I tried to go to a couple of the Christian groups, but here’s what I found out. If I go to any of those Christian groups, I have to believe that all of my friends are going to hell unless they’re Christians, too.” And he said, “And you know dad, you didn’t teach me that. I don’t believe that. So I feel like if I go to any of those groups, I’m throwing all my friends under the bus.”

Jacqui: Wow.

Brian: “So I’ve just decided I really can’t go.” And I said, “Well, Brett, I mean, maybe the campus groups at your campus believe that, but you know that a lot of Christians don’t look at it that way.” He said, “Dad, you just don’t know what Christian means on my campus.”

Jacqui: Oh, my God.

Brian: But he was making a really valid point that the word Christian means a lot of different things in different places, and he knew that he didn’t want to lend his name to that. It’s really a challenge, isn’t it, as we have to figure out how we hold our identity. Yeah.

Jacqui: It’s hilarious. You say that and it makes me think about, I have a really wonderful staff and a lot of them, different ages and stuff, most of them younger than I am. And one of them, Ben, preached a sermon a few weeks ago. We did a duet about white fascism, Christian fascism. And Ben just pulled us all in with, “You know when you’re at a party and someone says, ‘What do you do?’ And you say, ‘I’m a minister, but I’m not a minister in just any kind of church. I’m a minister in an open-minded church, a universalist church, a church where everyone’s welcome. An anti-racist church.’” You just can’t say, “I’m a minister in a Christian church.” You end up disclaiming it. I think that he felt like Brett.

And I’ve been on my own journey of announcing and renouncing, Brian, for a long time. And my family, some of my family, and I didn’t know they were conservative, “How are you a conservative black Christian?” I thought, “I don’t know.” But when I first got to Middle Church and it was all so queer and fabulous and wonderful and all the different people, I had a couple of my family members say, “That’s great, but are you going to preach the truth to them?” Am I going to preach the truth to them? Yeah. I am going to preach the truth to them. Have you read Psalm 139 that everybody is awesomely and wonderfully made?

So, not to offend any of my queer siblings, but I had to come out to my family as a pro-queer Christian. I had to come out, and they’re like... I think some of them are still recovering because somehow they have in their mind that the only way to be Christian is to be homophobic and to believe that gay is against God. So there is something really powerful. It was something very powerful to declare myself and to say that my church “queered” me. My church queered me. I’m straight, but my church has queered me. You know what I mean?

Brian: Well, I think you should explain it. I’ll just tell you why. Because I live in Florida and we have a lot of political ads going on right now. And Marco Rubio does a little ad down here where he says, “The leftists are trying to turn little boys into little girls.”

Jacqui: Oh, yeah. Well, I’m talking about, when I say that my community has queered me, I think a lot of womanist writers would join me in saying that our life of faith or our journey has become more of a both-and as opposed to binaries. So I am both a Christian who follows Jesus, and I’m also a universalist who acknowledges that there’s more than one path to God. That is queer, is what I mean. When I say, “I really am a social gospel person who thinks everyone should have enough, but I understand that our economy is capitalist and we need to find a way to work it within it, to help people thrive and raise all the boats, because I can’t undo...” That’s queer because it’s both-and.

If I say, “I’m Black Lives Matter, but I’m happily married to a white United Methodist pastor

in a multiethnic family,” that’s queer. I mean that. And then because of them, I look at their gender, their sexuality, their sexual orientation as a part of the multiple places that people can be. There were sexual studies done when you and I were young kids about, “Are you on a continuum?” I’m saying my understanding of gender is less binary and my understanding of human sexuality is more, “Oh, look at us all.” That, they’ve done that, too.

Brian: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, my.

Jacqui: They have not turned me into a boy. They have not turned me into a boy, Florida people, and they’re not trying to. It’s just that when I got to the border with them, when I walked over to the border with them, the border helped me to understand how porous borders are.

Brian: Yes. When we talk about developing a contemplative mind and a contemplative heart, and we often say that we’re learning what it means to be non-dual, in other words to say the whole world is not organized into two opposed and discreet categories. So we might say, “Well, what about day and night?” Well, there’s also dawn and dusk. Yes, we can make statements. This is true or false, but very often if you look at the true statement, it can be used in some pretty harmful ways. And you look at the false statement and sometimes it comforts people. So all these things that we just want to dispose of by putting it in this category or that. So that’s a great use of the word queering that a lot of people will probably not have thought about before.

Jacqui: Think about the gray. Think even about, Brian, the parents of a queer child and they’ve been all their lives, like, “I think that gay is wrong.” That parent exists. But then their baby says, “I’m gay.” They are transformed, queered, in the way they love that child no matter what, right? Yeah.

Brian: Yes. Well said. So this really gift from the LGBT community about coming out in a sense is what I think more and more of us are going to have to do. We’re going to have to learn to have conversations where we don’t insult anybody, we don’t call anybody names, we don’t put them down, but we define ourselves and we go public with what’s been going on privately inside of us. I used to think that. I don’t think that anymore. My favorite little mantra for this is, “Wow, I see that differently.” It’s my way of saying, “I’m not trying to convince you I’m right, but I also do not want to be silent,” as if what you’ve just said, I’m happy with. “Wow, I see that differently.” We find ways to announce our difference without rejection and hatred.

Jacqui: I think so, Brian, and we got to curate that, right? There’s a way in which right now it seems to me, not like this is the first time, but there’s so much fear and anxiety and grief and sorrow and uncertainty. And I believe those conditions make us feel like we want to stand on concrete. Like, “I’m going to feel better if I stand on this concrete. I’m going to feel stable. I’m going to feel safe.”

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: But what we want to curate, I think, as a people is a curiosity, a yearning. I do want to go back to the word border, a border personality of both-and, a double

consciousness as opposed to duality. Like W.E.B. Du Bois says like, “I want to know your perspective on fly fishing.”

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: Which informs your perspective on the environment, inside your soul.

Brian: The power of knowing who I am and knowing what I stand for and not being afraid, not hiding it under a bushel, not pasting a smile on when inside I’m really disturbed, the act of holding and manifesting who I am without judging you and requiring you to agree with me. It’s funny that that’s so hard, but I think it is hard. I’m sure there’s psychological dimensions to this. We’re herd creatures and we like to feel safe in a herd where we all think the same way and speak the same way, but in a way we demonstrate something very beautiful when we are able to say, “Hey, look, I just want you to know, I used to see it the same way you do. I don’t see it that way anymore. It doesn’t mean I hate you or I’m judging you. I don’t judge you. You’re my brother, you’re my friend, whatever. But I just want you to know that’s not where I am.” That’s a beautiful act. It’s a gift in a way.

Jacqui: It is a gift and it requires courage. And maybe it requires practice. But it’s like if you and I are facilitating a group, like we used to, by the way, I still meet people who say, “Didn’t I meet you and Brian when you were in Louisiana doing that thing in New Orleans?” If we can imagine we’re in a group process and we’d say, “Here are the norms. You have something to say. You say your thing, but you’re not going to crosstalk. You’re not going to go, ‘Hey, stupid. That’s crazy.’”

You get to be you in that group. And we would say that, and people would say, “I agree to that norm. Why can’t we agree more to the norm of, I get to speak my truth in love, and you get to speak yours, and listen deeply enough to see if there’s some more to say,” as opposed to, “I want brave and safe spaces.” And the brave space is the ferocious courage to say, “This is where I stand and I’m not on concrete.” This is some shifting ground, right? Because the earth moves.

Brian: So I think we imagine what effect this could have if... For example, you and I are both examples of people who were brought up with a certain kind of theology and a certain kind of assessment of dualism. Who’s this and who’s that? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who’s us? Who’s them? Who’s friend? Who’s foe? And some of that has changed in the course of our lives, and we’ve learned ways to let people know.

I feel bad. Let me just say it this way. It breaks my heart for the people who don’t have anybody they can speak that truth to. In other words, a change has happened, but everyone they’re around, they feel if I tell that truth that I’ve changed, I’ll be rejected, so I just have to hide that secret to myself. I suppose one of my hopes is that we can find ways to express that truth that gives other people more courage to come out of the shadows themselves and speak where they stand and what they care about and what they love and what they delight in.

Jacqui: Yeah, man. I’d love to say to someone who’s listening, if you could imagine that because you speak your truth you are liberating others to do the same, to give

permission in the universe for your voice to be yours. And when you say it, when you announce it, when you, “I’m shifting, I’m now wondering...” Sometimes our announce can be not so declarative because we’re not so sure. But whatever it is that you are coming to, I think when we announce that, however we do that, we actually invite more colleagues, Brian. Look, short story. Really quick, but at Middle Church I inherited a beautiful, basically biracial church from a conflict-averse leader.

So how we did together was, we didn’t really talk about the hard stuff as I came out as anti-racist and Black Lives Matter. Some of the leaders in the church were asked by people, “Why is Jacqui always talking about race? Why is she always talking about race?” And they were like, “Well, we always talk about queer.” So these are the things we’re doing. As I came out, everybody came out. People began to tell the truth to each other about what they felt like. And not only that, the church grew because people found us. We declared who we were. We announced who we were, and the people who wanted to be there found us. So I think the loneliness of silence can keep us apart, but if we say what we believe, people will find us.

Brian: Actually, what you just described ties us back to a conversation we had in an earlier episode about movements. And it reminds me of Parker Palmer who describes how movements start. And he said, “Movements start with an individual who goes through an interchange so that he’s not in sync with what everyone around him or her thinks.”

Jacqui: Oh, yeah.

Brian: And for a while that individual keeps it quiet, keeps a secret. They’re afraid to come out because there’ll be punishment or rejection, but they start to experience pain. The public me and the private me are getting more and more out of sync. So he calls the first sort of crossing, he calls it divided no more. When someone says, “I’m not going to divide the public me from the private me,” and someone says, “Look, I’ve never told anybody this, but X, Y, Z,” and they speak where they are now. “And that’s the first step,” he said, “to a movement growing.” And the next step is somebody comes out of the shadows and says, “I thought I was the only one. I can’t believe you said that out loud. Oh, what a relief. Now there are two of us.” And then the two begin to speak and makes it easier for the third.

Jacqui: Yeah. Oh, that’s great.

Brian: Isn’t that a beautiful description? And that’s part of what is happening in our world now, is that more and more of us are getting the courage to say, “Listen, I’m a Christian. I grew up Christian, but these things that I inherited, I can’t pass on to my children or grandchildren or friends. I have to do it differently going forward.” And that creates space for change to happen. And of course some people won’t like it, but that’s all right. We can say to them, “I love you. It’s okay. I’m not telling you, you have to agree with me or approve. I just wanted you to know where I am.”

Jacqui: When you say that of Parker Palmer... By the way, what a brilliant human. I think he’s amazing. That’s Jesus, right? “I’m just going to pop out here and tell you a thing and I’m going to... It’s not what do you think.” And then suddenly there’s 12, and then there’s all of us. There is some power in just saying what you see, Brian, to get back to the name of your podcast. To see it, to recognize that a life of love is learning how to see it. And if you see

something, say something, right? If you see something-

Brian: Oh, that's great.

Jacqui: ... say something.

Brian: That's a great place for us to end, because it does. It begins with someone seeing and realizing they're seeing it differently than they used to. And then they say something. "Here's how I see it, and you don't have to see it this way. I understand you don't see it this way, but I just want to tell you how I see it." And if we can do that without too much angst... Well, even if we do have angst, that's okay. In fact, the first time we will have angst because it's hard to differ, but we develop that courage to differ both boldly and graciously. That begins to change the world.

Jacqui: One vision at a time.

Brian: Yes. I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from Do I Stay Christian?

Our announcement must include a renouncement. When some Christians make these kinds of announcements and renouncements, others will no doubt refuse, criticize, or double down on defending their innocence, maybe even their supremacy. That is their choice. When some of us make the announcements we need to make, when we break our silence, come out and come clean, other Christians will for the first time have a choice. Stand with a Christian majority who defend a status quo, or join with a growing Christian minority in our ongoing rethinking process? Our renouncement and announcement thus become an invitation. By renouncing the failures of our past and announcing that we are changing, we commit ourselves to live humbly, justly, and kindly in the present and future.

It may just be that if we sincerely follow that path, some Christians who are on their way out of the faith will find a reason to stay and stay in a new way. And some who have left Christianity may find a reason to return to embody Christian faith with us in this new way. Even if you leave Christianity, you will not be exempt from this hard but important work because it's not just Christianity that has unacknowledged skeletons in its trunk. Nations do, too, as do professions, industries, ideologies, races, and economies. You do. So do I. We all have to start somewhere, and that somewhere is with ourselves.

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.