

**LEARNING**

**HOW**

**TO**

**SEE**

with

**Brian**

**McLaren**

**Season 4, Episode 9**

**Stay Human**

feat. Barbara Brown Taylor and Jacqui Lewis

Brian: Welcome back to Learning How To See. Our first reading today is from the Bible, from the book of Micah, chapter six.

Listen to what the Lord says, “Stand up, plead my case before the mountains. Let the hills hear what you have to say. Hear you mountains. The Lord’s accusation. Listen you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the Lord has a case against His people. He is lodging a charge against Israel. My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you; also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember.”

The prophet Micah responds, “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with 10,000 rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul? He has shown all you people what is good and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

I cannot believe how fortunate and blessed I am to have two amazing conversation partners today, the Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis and Reverend Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor. Oh my goodness, I’m happy to be with you. I wonder if the two of you could tell me how you met and became friends.

Barbara: Jacqui asked me that and I can’t... When I love people I can’t remember when we met, but I think we met at Wild Goose either there or at a conference center in North Carolina.

Jacqui: I think it was North Carolina at a conference. It felt... This is my feeling, Barbara. The first time we met I had the words woo woo in my brain, so wherever we were, it was like one of these beautiful woo woo gathering of people seeking spirit like art all around the wall. Do you remember now? Like hanging things?

Barbara: I do. Absolutely.

Jacqui: Nice sounds and what was it called?

Barbara: Awakening Soul.

Jacqui: That’s it.

Barbara: Yeah. That’s it.

Jacqui: And girl, you awakened my soul. That’s what I’m trying to tell you right there. You awakened my soul.

Barbara: Aw, shucks.

Brian: Oh my goodness. Well, it really is a pleasure to have the three of us together and for me to get to chat with you both. I want to get us rolling. I want to read you a quote from Sarah Kendzior, I’m not sure if either of you follow her. She’s a scholar of authoritarian regimes, PhD in anthropology who studies authoritarianism, and a few years ago she wrote an article

that went quite viral and has just haunted me ever since. And I'm going to read you... It's like three paragraphs and then I'd just love to hear your immediate reaction to this.

Here's what she says, "Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control. It is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do."

And then she later says, "They can take everything from you in material terms: your house, your job, your ability to speak, and move freely. They cannot take away who you truly are. They can never truly know you and that is your power. But to protect and wield this power, you need to know yourself right now before their methods permeate, before you accept the obscene and unthinkable as normal. We are heading into dark times and you need to be your own light. Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal, even if it is sanctioned. Protect the vulnerable and encourage the afraid. If you are brave, stand up for others. If you cannot be brave, and it is often hard to be brave, be kind, but most of all, never lose sight of who you are and what you value."

I'd love to hear how that lands with each of you.

Jacqui: It is beautiful writing; evocative writing. I feel the truth of it. I can feel the truth of it in my body. It makes me pause. It makes tears come to my eyes. The brutality, the violence of the world right now is overwhelming. Right before we got together today, I was talking to my staff and I can feel their afraid of the world and they're afraid of our post-fireness and post-COVIDness and new processes and the world is crazy.

Boy shot in Mississippi with his hands up. Another boy kills five, six people on a rampage. Frightening world in which we live. I think it could cause us all to retreat from each other and to get into the dark caves of isolation as opposed to walking toward each other in the light. That's what first comes to me.

Brian: Yeah.

Barbara: You know what... I mean, A, true; whole thing is true. And what's important to me is not just remembering or knowing who I am, but having people I can huddle with who will remind me and I'll remind them because I don't think it's enough to remind ourselves a lot of the time, especially when we're afraid. So it just reminded me how important it is to have a community of two or three or however many we can gather who will remind us.

Brian: This quote I think came to my mind this morning because I was thinking about when I wrote this book, *Do I Stay Christian?*, I wanted to end by saying, "I really don't care if you stay Christian." In other words, I watch people under the label of Christian become cruel. I watch people under the label of Christian become... Do exactly what Sarah Kendzior said you do in the context of authoritarianism. Do things you thought you never would do, defend things you thought you never would defend. And of course, it happens under other labels: I'm a patriot, I'm an American, I'm a capitalist, I'm a communist, and whatever labels that in at one moment hold our high ideals then enable us to be way worse humans than we ever would've been otherwise.

And I guess this is part of the time we're living in. We're all witnessing this happening. Does that make sense?

Barbara: It does, and it reminds me as I read those headlines to keep up with the Northeast Georgian that comes out twice a week in my community. So I read our arrest report, but also our second-graders who are making cards to send to people in retirement facilities and the person who grew the 50 pound pumpkin and the people celebrating their 65th wedding anniversary. I need the local news to round out the global news, which will never tell me about the pumpkins and will never celebrate the happy things that are going on. I, just for sanity, have to read both.

Brian: It reminds me of another quote I was just reading yesterday from the historian Howard Zinn, who was talking about how easy it is to succumb to despair and depression and cynicism, and he just says, "Look, as a historian, I've got to remember that human beings not only do horrible things, they also do compassionate and beautiful and healing things." So, that reminder that humanity has this ugly side, but it also has an elementary school teacher thinking to involve her students in writing kind letters; that's all humanity, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Jacqui: I love the name of this podcast, Learning How To See. I had a chance Brian to read your book ahead of its publication. Beautiful. Beautiful. I kind of wanted to go back to, I don't know that I'm Christian, sorry you all, in the traditional sense anymore. I feel like I've found my way to say that I follow Jesus on the way and I love feeling that identity. I think that maybe connecting to what you just said, Barbara, the power of stories that remind us of what it means to follow on any of the ways that are the ways of love, the power stories to remind us about the sparkliness of humanity, the resilience of humanity, the joy in humanity, the sorrow in humanity, and the way we know how to comfort each other and wait in the waters and grab each other out when the floods come and put out each other's fires and care for each other's elders.

There is a rabbi at the Hartman Institute, Donniel Hartman, "A life of faith is learning how to see." So whether we're Christian or not, whether we're Jewish or not or Buddhist or not or atheist, learning how to see is our faith walk, learning how to see all the things that we just described, the beauty of our ability to love each other hard, fiercely. I wrote in my book Fierce Love, that's our path. Learning how to see that, right?

Brian: And to be able to see the ugliness and danger and harm and the beauty and kindness and tenderness it. I think there's something in all of us that... Well, it's that dualism that I just want to wrap it up in a neat bow and say, "No, humans are all a mess," or, "Humans are all wonderful," and suppress the other side. And this is one of the great challenges in learning how to see, how do we see the good and the bad? How do we hold one without canceling out the other?

And I think this is one of our problems of religious identity and specifically Christian identity, that in a certain sense when I slap the label Christian on myself or I slap the bumper sticker Christian on the back of my car or whatever, it's as if I'm elevating myself in a way that I can deceive myself about what a mess I still am.

Barbara: False advertising, right?

Brian: Yes. Yes.

Jacqui: Exactly. That's right. Because it's a facade, right? Brian, when you talk about the kind of identity of Christian or the bumper sticker of Christian, you and Barbara, this was wired into this identity of Christian is the need for an enemy, the need for an outsider, the need for the ones who are not in the club, right? Because we're in the club, we're chosen, we're in the club, and the sort of sad part about that is it's a facade and not true, and therefore it causes us to live a life which Donald Winnicott would call a false self. We can't be honest. We can't be vulnerable. We can't own... Watch me make this connection. We can't see our own ugliness and beauty because our eyes are glazed over with falsehood. And if we can't see our own ugliness and beauty, then we can't see the ugliness and beauty in our neighbor and the ugliness and beauty in the world. We can't love what we can't see.

Brian: I have felt in my heart this kind of flip happening and it doesn't feel this is a betrayal of my Christian identity. In many ways, it feels like it's the fulfillment of it to say what's really important is not that you have a label. What's really important is what kind of human being we're in the process of becoming. And here's the irony, as you say, Jackie, when we need an enemy, part of what we do is we say, "I'm apart from that enemy. That enemy is bad. I'm way better than that," or, "I'm at a better status. I might be at the status of forgiven or chosen or redeemed in some way."

And the irony is it seems like the act of separating yourself from other human beings helps make you a worse human being. It seems to pave the way for an awful lot of trouble. And so part of the struggle for me that I think relates to this idea of needing an enemy, needing an other is that what seems to actually draw me toward more maturity and love and compassion and justice is solidarity with other people, whatever their label, and I think it even goes beyond other people to the whole created order. Any thoughts on that, Barbara?

Barbara: Yes. And I wanted to be sure to talk about how staying human, speaking of remaining in connection with the ugly and the beautiful, includes staying connected to all that is not human. I hate defining it that way, but lives under the dominion of the human that doesn't have hands to sign petitions or pull voting levers or protest. So I think the pandemic really immersed me in creation. At the same time, creation is in peril like we've never known it before. So staying human and connected to the dangerous, the beautiful, and all the rest of it includes staying connected to my human responsibility to advocate for a creation that lives with the wreckage of what my fellow humans have done.

Jacqui: Ooh, that's really so profound.

Barbara: I wish when we looked at the covenants in the Bible that we paid attention to one that God made with Noah after the flood receded and God made covenant with Noah and all the living creatures that had survived. And we don't talk about that much, that we are in a divine covenant that includes all living things and we pay more

attention to the ones that have to do with us at the top of the pyramid. But I could go on.

I love it in the stay human chapter that you chose, Micah 6:8. You talk about being pro-justice, pro-kindness, pro humility, humans. And what I love about that is it is not sectarian; that's a human call. It is a call for within the body of a religious tradition that gave birth to two others, but it remains in the mind from that minor prophet, one verse, and it sticks in the mind as well as the great commandment from the New Testament. Between those two, there's no time to get around to any other religious teachings if you can't walk with justice and kindness and humility and you can't love God and neighbor as self, that pretty much covers the waterfront for me.

So thank you for highlighting those, or at least that's what my mind highlighted as I read this chapter. So thanks.

Brian: It really is the makings of a new chapter for humanity. If we were to put those at the top and let everything else fall into place where it will underneath. It is a new way for us to see the challenge before us, isn't it? The challenge of participating in and leaning into a new way of living as humans, not just a new way of being religious, but a new way of being human.

Barbara: Thank you for the reminder.

Brian: It's interesting in our current political context, we all in a sense know there's something wrong with our way of being human, but we tend to focus our frustration on some other group.

We see racial identity struggles. White people feeling that they're being misjudged for the bad behavior of White people in the past. White people perpetuating judgments of people of other races. People of color feeling their identities constantly under assault or erased and made invisible. And then the identities of our gender and identities of sexual orientation and all of... We have a word for it, identity politics.

It's complex and all of us are struggling with it, but maybe part of what... We need to step back, kind of open our frame of reference and see a huge part of what we're dealing with right now at this moment is a struggle for a new way of seeing what it means to be human. Maybe that will help us to put those other arguments in context a little more and maybe even be more gracious with each other to see, "Yeah, there's this other thing going on that we're hardly aware of." I don't know what strikes me. Barbara, does that make sense to you?

Barbara: It does. I just received a message from a man in Australia who had read something I'd written and was so surprised to discover that not all Southerners were uneducated, bigoted racists. He said pretty much that because from the news, politics and religion got so combined in the headlines he read, he just painted everybody in the southern United States with one brush. So it was funny and sobering to realize that somehow I'm called on to live in a collective identity.

I am responsible. I bear responsibility for what has happened and goes on happening in my part of the country. At the same time, because of what has happened here, Georgia has a chance of electing the first governor of color, the first Black woman in the nation. And Birmingham and Montgomery and Memphis have incredible civil rights museums because

we were stuck smack in the middle of it. The collective identity has got nuance in it. And then within that, the individuals that I know here cover the gamut, and there's a way in which I want to be proud of being Southern as well as to lament being Southern. But there's something in there about the collective and individual identities, and I wish we could allow each other within all the places we live a little more non-conformity.

It matches what you're saying, Brian, that if we could just give each other a little credit.

Brian: Yeah. It reminds me of something we talked about in another episode, Barbara. The idea that we often say to parents of young children when their child throws a temper tantrum or won't sleep through the night, "It's just a stage". But maybe we can look at the whole human race and say we're at a rather difficult stage right now. We're kind of teething or we're kind of in a kind of human civilizational adolescence or midlife crisis or something.

It might help us to stop personalizing everything as if somebody critiques White people, I have to take it personally as if it's all about me or Southerners or Republicans or Democrats or whatever. And for us to say, "Okay, let's just step back and say, we humans are trying to figure out what kind of humans we want to be right now". And these struggles and arguments are inevitable in this kind of context. How do I want to behave and what kind of answers do I not just want to argue for, but do I want to model in the way that I argue?

Barbara: Brian, how much was Florida involved in the Civil War? I'm thinking Floridians have got a different relationship I think to the Confederacy. True or false?

Brian: It's true. It's complicated. Partly because Florida has a part of its history as a Spanish colony. During the Civil War, a lot of fascinating things were happening. A lot of slaves escaped from Georgia and North Carolina and Mississippi and other states escaped into Florida and many of them joined with Native Americans who had escaped from different forms of oppression during the Trail of Tears and other periods escaped to Florida.

And actually there was... Anthropologists call it Ethnogenesis. There was a new ethnic group formed, the Seminole people, who included Black Seminole and Native Americans from a variety of tribes. It's a very relevant question to the question of a new humanity because a group of people forged a new composite, a multiracial, multi-tribal humanity in the midst of the carnage that was going on between the northern and southern states.

But what is really interesting, after the Civil War here in Florida, Florida had the highest per capita of lynchings of any state. That's why things that are in our more recent history like the murder of Trayvon Martin for example, or what we have here called Stand Your Ground laws; all of these evoke that kind of history of, in a sense, making up for lost time and jumping on the segregationist and apartheid bandwagon in the years after the Civil War.

Barbara: I'm so glad I asked. The reason I brought it up was I was thinking about how you opened the session in terms of authoritarianism, getting ahold where people are afraid, and I don't know if I can connect it, but there is a sense in which the southern United States contains still generations of people who were the only Americans to lose a war on their own land and to have their cities destroyed and their economy destroyed.

So there's still this sense of losership here and that Southerners continue to be losers in terms



of education and healthcare and high rates of all the things people want to avoid. Anyway, it hooked into the... I think we're ripe for authoritarianism here because there is such a sense of having been losers. So anybody will stand up for Southerners and say, "You're not losers".

Brian: There's a lot going on there, and it really does circle back to that quote that we began with because one of the ways that we seem to be trying to solve our problem of a contested humanity right now is by heaping shame on people. If I want you to change, I want you to be ashamed, or I might not even want you to be ashamed, but I say things that make you feel ashamed.

And the irony is when you feel shame, I'm a loser. Other people think I'm stupid, whatever it is. Ironically, it makes me more vulnerable to authoritarianism and this is where we're in this dangerous moment, and also a moment of opportunity because through our intentional actions and tone and are unintentional, including mine, even in this podcast, we can be contributing to a different kind of humanity for better or worse going forward.

Jacqui: Do you guys know John Kenny? John Kenny is a professor at Virginia Union University.

Brian: I don't know him, no.

Jacqui: Virginia Union Seminary. I met him a long, long time ago, and I was doing some research the other day and thinking about another book, and I found him again. I found his writing again. And one of the things that he said at a lecture one time that really moved me deeply was the concept of a fallen theology. The fallen theology.

In a nutshell, God makes us all very good, makes all the humans very good, makes all the creatures very good, makes us all good together, designs the world the way you're describing that, Barbara. We are connected all to all that breathes and to all the plants and the lakes and the earth, but then somebody has an imagination about a talking snake and the talking snake tricks the humans, and then all of a sudden the whole rest of our theology is built on we are worms. God doesn't love us. And we're in charge to dominate the world with our crazy messed up selves and subdue it and conquer it.

And he just goes on and out like, "Well, how can a talking snake be the foundation of our whole theological inquiry, Christians?" And that's true. And so-

Brian: Yes.

Jacqui: ... The rabbis are like we understand that's a myth. And I love Rabbi Kushner says that that story is actually about evolution; that the humans needed to fall to evolve. But Barbara, our whole worldview of domination and oppression over each other and over the world and over the animals is because of a talking snake talked the humans into eating some fruit. Come on. Why did we do that?

Barbara: And we did it.

Brian: And so here we are. We could have these thousands of intramural theological arguments about who is the true Christian or the true Muslim or the true Jew or the true atheist or whatever, and these arguments become a weapon of mass distraction from this deeper



question, what kind of human beings do we want to be?

And this sense that we've got to rethink our very human identity so that it isn't so separate from the earth and it isn't. And of course, all the other separations based on race or gender or orientation or politics or whatever else. I know this really grosses out some people, but a couple of years ago I read that every cup of water that we drink would've passed through the digestive system of a dinosaur thousands of times or something. In other words, the sense that everything that we drink, the dinosaurs were here so long, they would've interacted with all of that water. Or a similar thought is that when I realize every breath I take, the oxygen of one lung comes from the plankton in the Pacific Ocean and the oxygen taken in by the other lung comes from the rainforests of the world.

This sense and every breath... I'm porous and connected with the rest of creation. That's a new understanding of humanity, I think, for an awful lot of us.

Barbara: I think it fits into everything we've been talking about though in terms of... Jacqui, what you said, that the domination piece; anybody who is on that and banging that drum has to take stock of where he or she is in that system. And Brian, given what you said, to realize that kind of connection.

I don't know. There's a built-in theological humility there somewhere that by being placed in this creation. Actually on the last day... I mean, we were the last arrivals in that story, which means our elders are all the creatures that preceded us. They are our elders in creation. And that flips the pyramid.

Brian: Instead of thinking of ourselves as highly evolved at the top of the pyramid, we think of ourselves as the newcomers in the presence of wiser, older siblings.

Jacqui: I love that Barbara and Brian. The question you're putting out there makes me think about what is our purpose? And I do want to go back to learning how to see. Learning how to see our connectedness, our purpose, our calling, our vocation as co-creators with the Holy. Shepherds, stewards of this goodness and lovers.

Like I told you, I don't know, following Jesus on the way. And what's that way? The way is love. What if we loved each other and really... What if we really loved the earth, loved the deliciousness of the fruit and the smells of the forest, and the feel of the water. Loved that we get to bathe in the air, be alive. And what if we did that because we love ourselves? What if we loved that this body that we've been given is anointed and designed and then we could love the other bodies? I just think that's such an important bottom line, Brian, for your book, for these reflections is we are designed for love, not the label of Christian.

Brian: And it also makes me think, Jacqui, of your recent book, *Fierce Love*, and what's, to me, so intriguing about that title and relevant to this discussion is that we human beings and have a certain appetite for fierceness, but we haven't applied that fierceness to love, fierce competition, fierce domination, fierce argumentation, but to say, actually, what if we learn how to see our future as different from our past; a different kind of humanity with humility characterized by that fierce love.

Jacqui: That's my prayer. That's my hope, my joy, my calling. So honored to be able to talk with two

of my favorite people on the planet about this idea of us loving the hell out of the world, loving the hell out of religion, just like-

Barbara: That's good.

Jacqui: Love the fallenness and brokenness and stuff out of religion when they... Lets love the hell out of it.

Brian: I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from Do I Stay Christian? You have seen how I have found the permission and freedom to be a new kind of Christian, a progressive Christian, a contemplative activist Christian, a Christian humanist or whatever you want to call me. I'm learning to be content, whatever I am called, as long as I remain passionately eager to embody a way of being human that is pro-justice, pro-kindness, and pro-humility.

You have that permission too, if you would like it. In this space, we can ask previously unaskable questions, make previously forbidden confessions. Imagine previously impossible possibilities and form previously unformable communities so we can continue our spiritual quest. And what is that quest?

To become the most just, kind, and humble versions of ourselves that we possibly can day by day. To practice a faith that expresses itself in love. To lean with others into a new humanity, a new generation, or new kind of humanity, open to every good resource that can help us explicitly, Christian or not. That doesn't sound easy you say. There's not much certainty in what you offer. That is so true. But our either ease or certainty, even options for us being who we are, living when and where we live. In the absence of ease and certainty, what amazing things can happen. Life can happen. Wonder can happen. Faith, hope, love, unspeakable joy can thrive in difficulty and uncertainty. A new humanity, humble, just, and kind can be born. Can you imagine that fellow human?

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.