

# LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.  
JACQUI LEWIS

More Than I Imagined with  
John Blake

Jacqui Lewis: Hey everyone. I'm Jacqui Lewis, and I am the host of Love Period. A podcast produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation. This is our fourth season, and in this one we're thinking about how to reframe and reclaim Christian as a religion of love, as the religion of Rabbi Jesus. What about if we took it back to Jesus, and took it back to love? What if we take it back to scripture that elucidates this beautiful movement of love and justice? Join us this season for beautiful conversations with folks across the spectrum to talk about what's love got to do with scripture, and what's scripture got to do with love. My guest today is author John Blake. And we'll be talking about his new book, *More Than I Could Imagine*. And his journey to meeting his white family, and how that transformed his life. I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as we enjoyed having it. How are you today, John?

John Blake: Fine, how are you?

Jacqui Lewis: I'm fine. I'm so glad to meet you.

John Blake: Well, same here. Thank you for inviting me. I read a lot about your background, so I think we have some common interest.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes, we do. Absolutely we do. With humor I'll say, my dad likes to tell me I'm one of the blackest kind of black people he knows. But I'm also in this relationship with this incredible white guy, my husband John Janka, who is a United Methodist minister and I'm Presbyterian. So that puts us in a mixed relationship. But we're in a biracial family. Our son is white, his wife is Jamaican American, black. Their children are biracial. And I'm always fascinated about those of us who claim multiracial, multi-ethnic-ness in our family systems. What's that like for us in this country that is so split around race and ethnicity? John, what's it been like for you to be a man whose mother's white?

John Blake: Well, it was very difficult for me in the beginning because I was born in an era in the mid 60s when interracial marriage was illegal. There was no Obama, Kamala Harris. There were no biracial role models. There were no biracial kids on Cheerio boxes, anything like that.

Jacqui Lewis: Correct.

John Blake: And I had a kind of unusual upbringing. I grew up in this all black inner city neighborhood in West Baltimore, a very infamous community. And I knew I had a white mother, but that's all I knew. When I was born, all I was told about my mother from my mother's family was that, Your mother's name is Shirley. She's white and her family hates black people. That's all I knew because she disappeared from my life not long after I was born, and I didn't know why. So I grew up in this all-black neighborhood, as what I call a closeted biracial person.

I didn't want anybody to know my mother was white because there was so much hostility toward white people in my neighborhood. And I felt ashamed to have a white mother. And I felt ashamed to know that there was this whole white family that didn't want anything to do with me because my father was black. And so suddenly at 17, I get an invitation from my father's like, "Hey, do you want to meet your mom?" And that began this journey where I met my mom and I began to meet with these white family members who rejected me. And who were, frankly, they were captured by racism. So that was the beginning of my journey, and that's what it was like for me.

Jacqui Lewis: I love the way you said, “They were captured by racism.” They’re captured by racism. And then your black community, your deeply black community, is captured by their capture, right?

John Blake: Yeah, definitely.

Jacqui Lewis: Just talk about that a little bit, about the complex ways in which the white people who are racist, are captured by a phenomenon, right? A philosophy, a worldview, that then captures the rest of us.

John Blake: Yeah. I use the word capture because it seems to describe the process because they weren’t aware of it. Some prisoners are aware that they’re captured by something, but they weren’t aware of it. And that what what so insidious about it. It wasn’t like they grew up in an environment where people said, “Hate black people, disown these two black nephews.” It was part of the world they grew up in. It was very racially segregated. My white mom was a poor Irish Catholic working class woman, and no black people dared venture to go into her neighborhood. And so they never saw black people. When they went to school no one talked about civil rights or black history. So if you told them that they were racist, I think they would’ve laughed. It would’ve been bewildering to them. It was just, that was the way everybody in their environment saw race.

And at the same time, in my black world, if you would’ve came up to me when I was 15 and 16 and said, “When you say you hate white people, you’re being racist.” I wouldn’t have understood what you have said. Because everybody disliked white people in my environment. So we were, the white and black side of my family for different reasons, it’s a different history. But we were in our own ways captured by racism. And that was part of the challenge when I had to meet the white members of my family, they didn’t know they were captured by racism. I did. And I had to kind of find a way to accept people who hadn’t accepted me, and didn’t even know that they were being racist. When they would say, for example, that white and black people should be kept apart. Or when they would call my father the N word. Or when one of them physically assaulted my father. But if you said they were racist, they would say, “No, we’re not racist.” So that was part of the challenge I had to confront.

Jacqui Lewis: And a challenge, I think, for all of us, right? We’ll get into that a little more later, John.

John Blake: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: But that is the challenge. Do you feel comfortable talking about how your mom and dad ended up producing a beautiful person like you? Is it a comfortable story to tell?

John Blake: Yeah, I do. If you say I’m a beautiful person, I definitely feel comfortable. Who could resist that?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

John Blake: Yeah, I do. I do.

Jacqui Lewis: So tell us. Tell us what happened. Because they weren’t in these worlds of like, we’re in an Ivy

League college or something, meeting each other. Or at work, meeting each other.

John Blake: What they did when they saw each other was dangerous. Physically dangerous. So like I said before, interracial marriage was illegal. They met during the mid-sixties. My father worked part-time at a hospital, and my mom worked as a nurse's assistant. And he just saw her in the cafeteria and asked her out for lunch. And she said, "Yes." And on the surface, that sounds so simple today, but in that world, in 1963, a black man was taking his life in his hand. And my white mom was defying her family, and her community. But nonetheless, they begin to date each other. And for anybody familiar with that time, you can kind of predict what happened next. They would walk out in public, police officers would stop them, harass them. People would stop their car on the middle of the street, look at them. And then do a U-turn, come back and glare at them.

Cab drivers wouldn't pick them up. They went to a bar once, and when they were drinking, after they finished drinking from the glass, the bartender took the glass and shattered it in front of them like it had been contaminated. So that was the world they came up in. But nonetheless, my parents endured that harassment. And because they loved one another, and they had two sons, me and I have a younger brother who's not even a year younger than me.

Jacqui Lewis: Irish twins.

John Blake: Yes. Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: So before Loving versus Virginia makes it legal to be married, yep in 1967, here are your parents having this courageous relationship because they love each other. And you and your brother grow up apart from your mom. Why is that, John? What happened there?

John Blake: Well, a big part of the reason why we grew up apart from my mom is because her family didn't like black people. They didn't want anything to do with us. They felt that white and black people should remain apart. So that was a huge part of the reason. But when I met my mom later, I found out that there was another reason that my mom was apart from me. So when I was 17, when my father asked me, "Hey, do you want to meet your mom?" And I said, "Yes." I was driven three days later out to this very menacing looking red brick building on the outskirts of Maryland. And I tell people, think of the Shawshank Redemption. You remember what that prison looked like? The building looked like that.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow.

John Blake: And I walked in that building along with my younger brother, and we were escorted to a waiting room. And as we waited there, we could hear people moaning in pain in these distant hallways, while others just kind of erupted in hysterical laughter. But we still didn't quite know where we were. And a thin young white woman came out to greet us, and her eyes lit up. And she said, "Oh, boy. Oh, boy, John. It's so happy to see you. Oh, boy. Oh, boy. Oh, Pat." And she came to us and gave us a hug, and we didn't know what to do. I had never even used the word mom before, so I didn't

know what to say. I just gave her this awkward hug. But it was my mom. But part of the reason, this goes to your question, it was so awkward, is because of where I was standing. I was standing in a waiting room of a mental institution. My mother had a severe form of mental illness called schizophrenia.

And that day when I met her was the first time that I learned that that was the other reason that she was away from us. Nobody in my family told us that until we got there to that waiting room that day. That was the first time I discovered what had happened to my mom. And I got to keep some context. In those days, if a white woman, particularly like my mom was a very devout Roman Catholic. If she got with a black man and had black children, some people in the Catholic Church would consider her a wayward woman. And they would institutionalize when she's not in her right mind. So even though mental illness was a huge reason why she was there, racism could have also influenced that decision.

Jacqui Lewis: Influenced the diagnosis, right? Because only a wayward, out of her mind woman, would have this relationship.

John Blake: Right. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: John, that is so sad to me. When you and your brother Pat met her...

John Blake: Yes. Patrick.

Jacqui Lewis: How did meet her, how did encountering her, affect your sense of identity as a young man?

John Blake: It would take me years to kind of digest how that meeting impacted me to work that out. But there was one thing that was immediate when I met her, she began to shift my racial attitudes. So in the world that I grew up in, white people were distant. We only saw them as these police officers that abused people in front of us, or authority figures. They had everything. We had nothing. And before I met her, I felt like no white person could understand what it meant to be black, to be poor, to be treated with contempt, to be looked down upon. But when I was in that waiting room talking to my mom and I saw her, she wore these hand-me-down clothes, people screaming in the background. And I thought, she has been living in this place for most of my life.

I thought to myself, I've never seen a black person suffer like that. So all these assumptions I had about white people, she shattered those within the first 15 minutes of our meeting without ever saying anything. So to answer your question, what it did is it developed empathy in me for white people. It was the first time I felt any empathy for a white person. And that began to shift my racial attitudes.

Jacqui Lewis: That is such a vulnerable truth. I love the way you say that now, I love hearing that from you. That encountering her vulnerability, her poverty, her circumstances, develops empathy. A black man for a white woman, and I think you say this in the beginning of your book, let me just read a bit. "I used to think if more white Americans had more information, if you showed them enough videos of unarmed

black people being harassed or killed, if you cried enough history and facts about racism, they would change. But facts don't change people, relationships do. I couldn't lift that kind of weight with intellectual muscle. I needed spiritual tools." Empathy is a spiritual tool, isn't it?

John Blake: Yes. And my experience has been, it comes not through reading a book, going to a protest, taking a diversity panel for two or three days. It comes through relationship and community. And so me developing that relationship subsequently with my mom, developed that empathy. And I like what you said, that part that you read, because that's a big thing that I believe in. So a lot of times people will ask me, "Since you're biracial, did you have to endure this tug of war between your identities between black and white?" And I tell them, "Yeah, yeah, I experienced a little bit of that." But my story is, I felt more tension between my identity as a journalist covering race in America for 25 years. I felt more tug of war between that identity and my identity as this biracial man reconciling with these white family members who didn't want anything to do with me.

And I'll be more specific. And this goes back to this thing that you just read. Journalists, we are trained to believe that facts are everything. That facts change people. So when I begin to see the rise to Black Lives matter, when I began to cover events like in Charlottesville, and Ferguson. And I saw all these videos that we've now seen, I had this hope that I think that a lot of other people had. That this would shift something in America. That this would touch a critical mass of white people in a way that we received some kind of sustainable change in race relations. I thought that that would happen. I think some people felt that when Obama was elected. That has not happened. And I asked myself, "Why didn't it? Why didn't it happen?" And part of the answer I got was from my own life. That when you're dealing with these kind of issues, there's certain changes that only come about when you're having relationships with people, and you're in a community.

The things that really changed me was getting to know my mom, getting to know these other white members of my family, joining these interracial churches. The trial and error, dealing with all this ugly stuff in me and ugly stuff in them. That was this thing that changed me. So, what I try to tell people, if we're going to address racism, definitely we need to change laws and policy. I'm big about that. But I feel like that we've forgotten the importance of in creating these interracial relationships in communities, that that is also an indispensable part of addressing racism. And we don't really talk about it today. So that's why I say facts don't change people, relationships do. That has been my experience with my family.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, John, you are singing my song right there. When Dr. King was killed, I'm a little older than you, I was almost nine. He was killed in April, and I turned nine that May. And I was devastated. A young black woman living in a family that was black. We were at that point in time, a pretty black family with some indigenous roots, etc. But my parents were Air Force people, and so we always had all kinds of folks around. Their house was the house where the party would happen, where the cards would be played and the dances would happen. So Japanese folks, and white folks, and black folks hanging out with my parents. By the time we moved to Chicago, John, we were living in a black neighborhood. And Dr. King is killed and the neighborhood erupts with just anger and sorrow.

And I remember when he was killed, I thought, “So we live in a nation where you can just be doing a good thing, a love thing, and you can die.” It was very traumatic for me, but it also kind of catalyzed this calling that I have. I felt like I was supposed to be a drum major for peace, and I felt called to help build an anti-racist, multiracial society. So Middle church is this church of my dreams, my church, my multi everything. Multi-ethnic church. And I’ve fascinated that over time my family, my dad’s children are married to a Filipino woman. I’m married to a white guy. My sister is as well. We’re this kind of UN family that was raised by this black Mississippi dude. Who was raised in the heart of segregation, he and my mom. What am I trying to say?

I’m trying to say, the relationships they had with the people in the Air Force were seed planters, softeners. The relationships that we had as children in a multi-ethnic high school, softening the ground for the relationship that it ended up being very intimate. I’m married to my best friend. He just happens to be a white man. My dad loves my husband. These relationships do change us. And somebody’s going to listen to this and say, “Are you saying all the relationships, all the marriages need to be biracial.” I’m not saying that. But I am saying what you’re saying, we’re not going to really heal our world of white supremacy if we stay in our segregated silos.

John Blake: Why do you think your father was like that growing up the way he did that he was so open to...?

Jacqui Lewis: To my husband?

John Blake: Yeah. And other people too. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: And other people. Yeah, I think time did it. And exposure did it. Because he wasn’t open. He did not come to my wedding. He was furious that I was marrying John. But John, and I write about this in my book, *Fierce Love*, pursued my dad. John pursued him. We got married, he didn’t come to the wedding. We went to visit him right after the wedding. And John took him a bottle of his favorite rum and sat in the backyard with my dad and listened to his stories. And talked to my dad’s stories. Understood my dad’s background. Then they began to share stories about the civil rights movement, and what racism has been in their lives. And so John took the initiative to pursue my dad, and my dad’s openness was because he loves me. I think all of that is about the way the relationship dynamics engendered a new relationship between the two of them. Does that make sense to you in your experience?

John Blake: Yeah, it makes sense to me. I think of two quick reactions. One is, when you write about race like I have for 25 years, I’m very familiar with the history of segregation in this country. But now I see it a different way. I used to think that there was a segment of white America that installed segregation just because they hated black people. But now I know, segregation was installed to a huge degree because certain white people in power knew that if black, white and brown people have intimate contact, it would breed, it would create these conditions where people could see their shared humanity.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

John Blake: It’s a deliberate political strategy. They don’t want, say, working class white and blacks to be around each other to see that they face the same problems, the same challenges. So even



when we're trying to segregate history now where certain people are saying, "You can't learn African American history." Because they know this contact between different races breeds a certain kind of shared understanding.

So that's one of my first reactions. The second reaction when you talk about John, your husband pursuing your father. I was pursued by my mother's sister. A little quick story. My mother's sister, I met her probably about five or six years after meeting my mom. I was in my mid-twenties, when she sent word that she wanted to meet me. I didn't want to meet her because I heard stories about her. This is, she's white, grew up working class. I heard stories about her through my father that she hated black people. And when I met her, whatever kind of suspicions I had were deepened. Because when I met her, I thought she wanted to apologize for saying, "Oh, I should have reached out to you when you were a kid." He had no apology. So finally as we begin to talk, I asked her one day, "Why didn't you reach out to me when I was younger?"

Was it because you were black? And she said, "No, it was because you weren't Catholic. That's why. Your race had nothing to do with it." So that made me even angrier.

Jacqui Lewis: Well, yeah.

John Blake: She was in denial. So I kind of wrote her off. But to go back to the pursuit thing that I'm hitting, she continued to pursue me with letters to reach out to me. And something happened one day that I talk about in the book something really dramatic to me, where it forced me to take a second look at her. And so what I did is, I went up into my office where I kept all these letters she had written to me over the years. I had not opened them, because I thought, "Oh, she's just a racist." And I opened these letters, and they were full of all these long apologies for her embracing racism.

Her reaching out to me saying, "I admire you. I want to have a relationship with you. I grew up in this all-white world and I didn't know anything better. I hope we can be close, but if you don't want to be close to me." And I didn't even know that she had changed that way, but she had been pursuing me all that time. So there's a thing that I say at the beginning of my book, is that the people in my family, the white family members who were racist, that they taught me lessons in empathy and forgiveness. And I never saw that coming. And that was such an example. She did things like that. Like, wow. She was reaching out to me though I treated her a certain way. And I was right to be angry. But she kept on reaching out to me. And that's why I say, you don't define people by their worst act, that people can change.

Jacqui Lewis: I think dad and John, we could say they star in my book as characters. My dad will be 89 in November of 2023. He's just been diagnosed with ALS. Brain is sharp as a tack, body deteriorating. If there is a God, and I really believe there is. If there's such a thing as transformation, and I really believe there is, watching my dad soften over the years, not just about John. Or white people, let's say. But just become this nurturing, loving, gentler version of himself. He who is fierce, is fiercely loving and tender. So yes, there is a transformational narrative that I think happens in the context of our faith in God, but also our faith in each other.

John Blake: One of the things I've noticed as a journalist doing this for a long time is, I'm getting the sense that a lot of Americans no longer believe in that transformational story. I'm getting the impression that a lot of Americans now believe that racism is a permanent part of American life. That we can't get past it. And I was talking to a guy the other day and he's just said that, "Racism is embedded in our DNA." And I just don't believe that. I've seen white members of my family change in ways I never expected. You talk about how you seen your father change in ways you never expected. And I think that's one of the reasons I think it's important to tell my story. Because, I tell people, if we're going to



make sure that this multiracial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic democracy survives, we have to become better storytellers. And we got to tell stories that show people, yeah, we can change. Yeah, racism.

Yes. Ibram Kendi said it this way. He said, 'It's not this all powerful deity that can't be conquered.' And I just don't know if enough people believe that anymore. And I think we have to tell stories to show, yes, people can change. And if people can change, a country can change.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. I love that. I love that about your book. I love what you're saying here about it. And I'm a believer, I mean, I am convinced that narratives, the stories create us. Like race is a story that's created by us, right? Your journalist background, and my mine is, of course, theology. But also psychology, particularly identity development. How do we get to be an us? We get to be an us in the context of the stories told to us, about us. So race is a construct. Racism is a narrative that has served a purpose in our country, as you said, so well, John, to keep us apart. To keep us from collaborating, to keep the wealthy, the real white people are the wealthy 1% right? To keep them in charge, and to keep us fighting with each other. So stories that change that story mean so much to me.

Scripture's a story. Scripture's a story that has truth in it about who God is, but also of course has been used also to weaponize us against each other, right? Class, status, caste. And I wonder to just think about for a second about your relationship to scripture. Like Theseus from Greek mythology, but also some scriptures like David and Goliath or Joseph, the coat of many colors. You talk about finding strength in these stories as a boy. Tell me where you find your most strength from scripture?

John Blake: There are two passages in my life, well, that scripture's really helped me, and they still help me of course today. But as a kid, I spent most of my time in foster homes. And so this is thankfully before the internet, before all these video games. So all I did was read to escape, and I lost myself in stories of the Bible. Old Testament. I want to read stories like Joseph, he had the coat of many colors and how unjustly he was treated. But he believed in God, so he found a way to escape. So I would read stories like that and that helped me. But what they really came into importance was when I became an adult. After meeting my mom, I joined in a church that just happened to be an interracial church. And one of the things they always talked about, that scripture, "There's neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for we're all one in Christ Jesus."

And that was just drummed into my head. But more than anything I tell people, what converted me is that when this guy evangelized to me, knocked on my dorm room in college. When he talked to me about atonement, salvation, and baptism, that didn't really matter to me. What converted me is when I went to church and I saw white, black and brown people hugging one another. Calling each other sister and brother. Going to each other's homes after Sunday, being friends. I had never seen anything like that. That was what converted me and made that scripture stick. And finally, how scriptures helped me. When I'm trying to reconcile these white members of my family, who had problems admitting racism and treated me so... Just, disowned me as a kid. Scriptures became our common meeting ground. My mom and her family were devout Irish Catholics, Roman Catholics. And so that language of grace and forgiveness, and that we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of the God, they came naturally to us. So that's where we met, and that helped us reconnect.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that, John. Scripture as a container. The sacred stories as a container for transformation. Which is a theme I feel like is running through your book and through this conversation, is that there is a laboratory, I would say. There is a container in which we get to rehearse, I say at Middle a lot, rehearse the reign of God on Earth. And so this whole, "11 o'clock is the most segregated hour in America" thing, is not a good rehearsal space for the reign of God that we want to have happen. So congregations like Meadow and those you experienced I think along the way, have a really powerful antidote to offer what sometimes can feel as a permanent state of racism in America. I love the way

you're describing. Seeing it in action, seeing the healing in action is what converts us. What about Jesus? I went to seminary. I graduated in '92, just feels forever ago now. But some of the conversations we were beginning to have then is about the identity of Jesus.

And as a multi-ethnic Cain Hope Felder. Let's say a multi-ethnic African Semitic black man, like the people that are Jewish are Afro Semitic. I'm like, "Wow. What if the church claimed the blackness, the Africanness of Jesus. Our mentor, our savior, our friend? How would that affect the way we think about race in America?" Have you thought about that?

John Blake: I have. I'll respond to it two ways. One from my personal life in the book, and one as a professional journalist who also writes about religion. One of the keys for me becoming a Christian, was when I read Howard Thurman, *Jesus And The Disinherited*. And I remember when I came across that book, it was like a supernova exploded. This little slim little book. I don't even know how many pages it is.

Jacqui Lewis: It's like 45 or something. It's very skinny. That's right.

John Blake: Yeah. Yeah. And I remember at the time, I was so angry at the white members of my family, and I was working in Los Angeles as a reporter covering gangs. I was seeing all these young black men being killed, and I was so angry at white people. I had this anger building, and I remember we had a Bible study and a pastor told me in this black church in South Central that Howard Thurman's *Jesus And Disinherited*. He said that Jesus was a black man growing up in the Jim Crow South. That if a Roman soldier pushed Jesus in a ditch, there was nothing He could do. He was part of this oppressed minority group. And that the gospel that He talked about when He talked about forgiving your enemies and not letting yourself being consumed by hatred, that wasn't this wishy-washy stuff.

He said that, "The gospel was a technique of survival for oppressed people." And I began to see Jesus another way, and that made it more real to me. And it gave me more reason not to be consumed with the anger at the white members of my family. So that was a pivotal moment for me to say, when people say that Jesus was a white man and scriptures was used to enslave us, which they were. But I'm like, "No, if you look at the life of Jesus, where he come from, the historical context is very much similar to people like us." And then secondly, this Jesus we're talking about, I think if the church is going to survive in this country, it has to lift up that type of Jesus. Because we know now, I don't know about you, but I go to a Presbyterian USA church. And I look around and it's like becoming a nursing home. We're the young people.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

John Blake: We're the people of color. And I wrote a story recently about how, if the white Christian Church is going to survive in this country in the future, they have to find a way to get non-white Christians in their churches. Because the people that are moving in this country from the global south, that's where Christianity is growing. And if they don't get them, if they don't lift up that Jesus and adjust the way they do things, they won't survive. So that's another reason I think we should lift up that Jesus that you talk about.

Jacqui Lewis: So John, you're saying that if the church, the white evangelical church, could have a different vision, a different image of who they think Jesus is, that might save the church. Say a little

more about that.

John Blake: Yeah, I think it's going to be key to their survival. It's pretty well known that the mainline churches, that the membership is declining. Young people aren't going. And I remember going to a church in Atlanta recently. It was weird. It was an all white Presbyterian church and they had about eight members in there, and it was surrounded by this black neighborhood. Nobody in the community felt the reason to go there. And so we know that where Christianity is growing is in a global South. Like Latin America, South America, Asia, and a lot of these immigrants are moving to the United States. If the white evangelical church is going to survive, I think one of the things they have to do is find a way to draw these non-white immigrants coming, Christians who are now moving to this country.

If they don't, they're not going to really survive. I mean, as an institution, the church will always survive. But as an institution, I don't think they will. And so I think what that means is they have to think about the way they present Jesus, the way they worship, the songs they choose. All sorts of things they never had to think about before, but they have to do it, I think, to survive.

Jacqui Lewis: I think that's right. And I don't want to be cryptic or pessimistic in any kind of way, but I sometimes think there are just parts of the church that will need to die so that the church can be resurrected. So that it can live. So it can thrive. I'm thinking about just getting to the truth of this Jesus that we follow. He's not blonde, he's not blue eyes. He's not a peacenik. He's a kind of love warrior. So maybe just shift here real quick for a minute to the insights that you have had about who God is, who Jesus is. Maybe inspired by your friend, Darren. Do you want to talk about that at all?

John Blake: Oh, Darren. Yeah. I was just thinking about Darren. Darren, for background, I go to Howard University, historically black college. And the last thing in the world I'm thinking about is becoming a Christian. And Darren is a classmate at Howard who just knocks on my dorm room one night with a Bible in his hand and wants to talk to me about the Bible. And I indulge him. I'm not really interested, but I like to debate. So we developed this kind of friendship. And he comes to visit me. And after a while, what impressed me the most is that Darren was a very shy engineering student who wasn't accustomed to talking about ideas and reading. But no matter what the weather was, no matter what was going on, he was always there. I could just tell it was so important to him. And it showed me that things that are really important when you're trying to reach people a lot of time, it's not the intellect, it's not how smart you are, how well-spoken you are, but that people know that you care for them and love them.

And I knew that Darren cared for me and loved me, and that was key. And he guided me to that interracial church. One of my favorite scenes in the book is when I got baptized, Darren said, "Come on down to the church basement. I want to show you something." And I thought, "What is this?" And I go down there and I'm surrounded by all these black, white and brown members of church. And they surround me in a circle and they sing this song of welcome to me. And I'm looking at all these different colors, all these different people, all these different classes. And coming from a world where it was so full of racism, coming from a family where white members didn't want anything to do with me, it was like seeing a glimpse of the kingdom of God right there in front of me. And that would not have

happened without this shy, young man named Darren who kept on knocking on my dorm room. That's Darren.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that, John. And I want to say you writing this book and putting this book in the world. And this conversation, I like to hope that there are more people like you and me who will have a chance to see a glimpse of the kingdom of God, the reign of God on Earth. This is our hope and our dream is that these conversations inspire people to see more. To see more, to believe more. There's a Rabbi Donniel Hartman, who says, "An ethical life is learning how to see. I like to think that if we could see each other more clearly as connected, that many complexions, many sexualities, many gendered, many castes' life that we're all kin, that that is heaven on earth. That's what I'd like to think. Yeah. Let me ask just one more question. Which is maybe if you had an insight then that was a glimpse of heaven, reign of God, where do you see that now? Where do you see signs of the reign of God on Earth?"

John Blake: In my mother. When I first met my mom in that mental institution, I felt so much sorrow for her. Any chance that I would've felt angry at her, like "Where were you when I needed you?" All that just went out the window when I saw her. And as I get to know her, I felt tremendous sympathy for her. And because, you had no freedom, she had no freedom. She had to stay in these group homes. All of her life people looked down on her because of how she looked. And I never thought of her as somebody who had power.

But until the very end, when I thought, which she did. So when my mom met my father, I think the polls showed that over 90% of Americans opposed interracial marriage. If you would've went back in a time machine and said, "There'll be a day when interracial marriage would be commonplace and biracial children would be... Nobody would think twice about it." People would've thought, "You talking about? No. No way." But we live in that world today. And I asked myself, "How did that happen?" And it happened because of people like my mom. In the mid-sixties before the courts decided it was right, before politicians said it was right. They went out and they said, "Love is love. I'm going to marry and be with whom I want. I don't believe in this race stuff. There's only one race, the human race." And so she was part of this vanguard of people that broke barriers, that created this world that I live in now.

And so to me, I look at the New Testament talks about power, that God's weakness is stronger than man's power. I just see that in my mom. That this is a woman, who on the surface who had very little, but she still had that courage. And she was willing to act in those convictions about race and willing to pay the price. And because of people like her, I live in this world now where, like I said, interracial marriage is a norm. And so I tell people, you can't really say this can't happen. This can't change. I'm a living embodiment of how ordinary people can really change things in this country. So I just want to think about my mom. I tell people she had a lot more power than she realized.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that, John. And as we're having this conversation, which we hope lives on forever, we're on the way to the Pentecost holiday in the church liturgical year. And that beautiful scripture that says, where Jesus tells the disciples to go to Jerusalem and just wait. And when you get there, you're going to receive power and you're going to be my witnesses in Judea. But all over the world. And the way that power comes, in the Holy Spirit, is it comes with the ability to, I'm going to say speak in tongues. To speak in the many languages of the people

who are gathered there in Jerusalem at Shavuot.

All of those people, the Creeds, and the Metins and the Alomites and the blah, blah, blah, all those names that are hard to pronounce. But there's a whole group of people there that represent the multi-ethnic-ness of God's world. The many textures of humanity, and the power that is received is the ability for us to be in relationship because we can communicate. I'm sticking that on the end of this talk with you, that your book, this conversation, point to the power to dismantle the falsehood that is race. And to remind us that we're one people.

John Blake: Yeah. Yes. Well said.

Jacqui Lewis: For that, I'm thankful.

John Blake: Thank you.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you so much for listening to this conversation with John Blake and me, and I hope that you'll share it in your networks. One thing for sure that I know to be true is his journey to meet his mother, his white mother and his white family, built relationships that promoted empathy. That led to healing. That led to change. You and I, are only going to be able to heal the painful legacy of racism in America because we also decide to explore relationships. Real true relationships, with someone whose skin tone, whose experience, whose location in life is not like ours. I'm inviting you, maybe even challenging you to build a relationship that might make you understand someone else's point of view, someone else's social location, so you can discover what is true. There's only one race, and that is human. And we actually are each other's keepers, and need each other to survive. We'll talk soon.