

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

In Trembling Boldness with
Rev. Natalie Perkins

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?

Today, my guest on Love Period is the Reverend Natalie Renee Perkins. She is an actor, a musician, and minister for worship and online community at Middle Church. Natalie is the co-author of a new book, "In Trembling Boldness, Wisdom for Today from Ancient Jesus People."

Today we're going to be examining how these extra canonical texts point us to the text in the Bible. Natalie Renee Perkins, hi.

Natalie Perkins: Hello. How are you?

Jacqui Lewis: Girl, you know. Things have been happening.

Natalie Perkins: All of the things have been happening.

Jacqui Lewis: All of the things have been happening. We got our boxes unpacked. As I'm talking to Natalie Renee Perkins today, friends, my husband and I just moved, so our boxes are unpacked and it's a little chaotic in here, but it feels like it's going to be a place to call home, so I'm excited.

Natalie Perkins: Good.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Natalie Perkins: Congratulations.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you. Thank you, honey. And congratulations to you Miss Published Author Book. Girl, go ahead, woman.

Natalie Perkins: Thank You. Thank you very much.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you. I'm so glad to be able to talk with you about this. This is our second book talk, right? We had a chance to do some book conversation on Juneteenth at Middle Church.

Natalie Perkins: Yes, we did, which was a really fruitful conversation.

Jacqui Lewis: It was beautiful. Beautiful. Friends, you're going to want to look that up at middlechurch.org, the Juneteenth conversation that Natalie Renee Perkins and I had about, "In Trembling Boldness."

Natalie Perkins: "In Trembling Boldness with Fierce Love," or "Fierce Love in Trembling Boldness."

Jacqui Lewis: Yes, we did. I thought we mashed that up. “Fierce Love with Trembling Boldness.” Natalie, in this season of Love Period, we’re doing a reclaim and reframe Scripture. That’s language that you and I are familiar with from our work at Middle Church. Before we dive into the book, just talk a little bit about Scripture matters. How does it work in your life? How do you feel about it? How do you feel about reclaim and reframe in that context?

Natalie Perkins: Well, our traditional canon has thousands of years of orthodoxy and orthopraxy stacked on top of it, which makes it hard for us to really see what is on the page, really see what’s in the spaces in between what’s on the page, see what’s left out. We just go with whatever we’ve been handed, generally.

So most people, for instance, assume that Paul fell off of a horse on the road to Damascus, even though it’s nowhere in the text. But because art, for instance, has depicted Paul on a horse or someone preach something like that, then that kind of stuff is sticky to our text. We know that art and the power of storytelling really is what helps people carry things through. It’s what gives it its longevity. And some of that has been misrepresentative of what’s there. And so when I’m looking at the Scripture, one of the things I’m trying to do is really find out what is on the page, what is not on the page, and what the context was for the audience that was receiving it.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that. You and I talk about our... We’re always thinking, as womanists, that the person was political and the political is personal. But our hermeneutic, our lens with which we approach these texts, Natalie, you describe yourself as a womanist process.

Natalie Perkins: Womanist process Christian universalist.

Jacqui Lewis: So I’m just going to say all four of those things. So say something about that. Tell the audience what you mean by that.

Natalie Perkins: Yeah, well, I imagine that you have talked about womanism here, so I’m going to skip that one. Process theology is just as a quick and dirty, and there’s way more to it than what I’m going to say, so I really do mean it when I say quick and dirty, is really the idea that Octavia Butler’s idea even, but it didn’t start there, that God has changed. Even if you want to generalize it even more than that, God changes God’s mind might be a way that some people understand that.

So the example in the Bible, one example, it happens all over, but again, thousands of years of orthodoxy and proxy don’t let us see the things. So an example is Noah in the ark, the flood, and God floods the world and then afterwards God is like, “You know what? I’m not going to do that again. My bad. You know what? And I’ll give you a sign to show you that I actually, I won’t do that again.” So God does a thing and then changes God’s mind and is like, “That’s not the way in which we’re going to approach this from now on.”

And so where do we see those sorts of things that our ancient audiences were experiencing or trying to get across to their audience? And how does that happen down to the molecular level now? So, the idea that the options available to you in any given moment are different to the options available to you at 11 o’clock at night, and whatever choices you make of those options shifts then to a whole nother set of infinite options that are available to you. And the ultimate goal is the good, is the God.

So the mark of the MLK saying, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but bends towards justice.” In this sense it’s, it bends towards the good, it bends towards the God. And so there’s all these tiny little shifts that keep it bending in that way, but as a result of whatever choices I’m making, you’re making, the tree outside in its molecular form is making, shifts what is actually available to us.

So the options available to us when the skies were filled with smoke last week, or the week before, rather with the Canadian fires are very different than what the sky is what we’re given right now.

And I think you all have talked about universalism too, right?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Yeah.

Natalie Perkins: The universalist portion?

Jacqui Lewis: I think so. And I think the way that we both would say that there is more than one path to God, and this is the one we’re talking about. All paths lead to God, and this is the one we’re talking about, because this is the one we studied. We got that thing, that M Div, in it. So I love that Natalie.

I particularly am curious and always intrigued by your conversation about process. In my little parlance about the God thing, I would add alongside what you’re saying there, this idea that as the universe is bending toward the God, toward the good, we’re also creating theologies about that God, creating an image about that God. We’re in process two. So there’s a dynamism that is both what is happening that is really, fully, let’s say God, or energy, in that direction, but also our understanding of it. I think you’re saying that, too. I love the sense that there’s a dynamism, a dynamic, between how we’re experiencing God and how we’re talking about God and writing by God and preaching by God, and also what is happening about with God, themselves.

And I think therefore the fluidity of God still speaking and us still speaking about God, which is just why we have a job. Part of the reason we have job as clergy authors is to help elevate, excavate that dynamism, that conversation.

Natalie Perkins: Right. Totally agree.

Jacqui Lewis: Which brings me to when you were my intern, 416.2 years ago.

Natalie Perkins: We’ve come a long way, baby.

Jacqui Lewis: We’ve come a long way, baby. As an intern, and you were a student at Union, I was so interested in your extra canonical interest. So I’d love for us... I was so glad to have those devotions, those reflections, on the extra canonical texts in your book. But also just wanted to know if you would say a little bit about why you’ve been interested in those words that are on the page and the spaces between the lines, et cetera. Talk about that some.

Natalie Perkins: So the extra canonical texts, for those who do not know, are texts that were

written around the same time as everything else in our traditional New Testament, but for one reason or another, we're left out, often for the same reasons things get left out today. Like hashtag patriarchy, or in the case of thunder, perfect mind, for instance, there's a female deity that also uses masculine language. So then what does that mean? That is the idea of a trans God, if you will. And even though it's in our traditional texts, we have all these years that have buried it and made it disappear.

In this text, it's too clear for that. So they were like, "We can't put that in the canon. We're trying to uphold this very specific thing." Even though these texts were used for a very long time until the canon was "standardized," until it finally landed on the thing, which was to be completely honest, right around when the printing press came into being. People were still reading all these other texts, but then once the Bible was mass-produced and it was the King James version, these other ones weren't as sticky.

Before that, each emperor would say, "These are the texts I want you to read. This is the religion we're following. This is my brand of X, Y, and Z." Which, Constantine that was very deadly about it. "This is really what it's going to be. Christianity's going to be like this." And so again, we see a shedding of texts even before we get to the 16th century.

So that's what the extra canonical texts are. Some people call them non-canonical, some people call them gnostic. We don't really use the term gnostic anymore because we have learned that that is not a name that they used at the time when these were written. That's made up. Didn't come around until the 17th century, which is directly after the printing press, and we have this standardized thing. So that's when they were trying to other these texts, starts happening in the 17th century.

And these texts give you such a wider understanding of the texts that we already have. It helps to shed some light on our traditional canon so that you can see through some of the stuff that's stacked on top of them and read them a little more clearly. You have a wider understanding.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, like opening an aperture, right? Opening up the aperture in the lens.

Natalie Perkins: I would say taking the lid off the container.

Jacqui Lewis: I like that better. I like that better.

Natalie Perkins: Let a little light and a little air in.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh yeah. It's not so musty in here after all.

Natalie Perkins: Exactly. It's not stagnant. It can grow.

Jacqui Lewis: Jesus people. Early Jesus people. Just put that right there. The counterintelligence, the revolution against white supremacist, fake Christianity. Let's just talk about Jesus people for a minute.

Natalie Perkins: The book is called, "In Trembling Boldness, Wisdom for Today from Ancient

Jesus People.” And that is because they didn’t describe themselves as Christian. The word Christian didn’t come around for a few more centuries than that. Let’s say the fourth century. I’ll give it the fourth century, but this first and second century audience are... And followers of Jesus weren’t using the word Christian. They were following The Way, and they were made up of all kinds of different people.

So much, it reminds me of middle, like this multicultural, everybody’s thinking on it and saying things and wondering what they think and what somebody else said about it. And it’s just a conversation and amusing, there’s real, theological discourse happening at this time and people are duking it out, trying to sort out what they really think and believe. And the closest thing we have is what? 30 or 70 years after Jesus was crucified. And I dare you to remember something that happened 30 years ago in great detail that it’s being written about. So that there’s something about how we need to tell stories that makes it important.

So, in that sense, we use Jesus people, Jesus peoples, all of these different ways to describe people who are following Jesus, or what Jesus taught, or trying to follow the way of Jesus but don’t have this nomenclature.

Jacqui Lewis: It’s not only Jewish, because it’s a multiculti, as you say, many religious community, but there is a kind of Jewishness to that idea of mid-rush and conversation. And here’s the... I’m going to say havruta. “Here’s the study. Here’s the conversation I’m having with you. What do you think about that? Well, look at this passage. Well, what did so-and-so say about this passage?” Why the Tanakh is so big and fat and juicy with the thinking of rabbis, of rabbis, of rabbis. And this is just folks, all kinds of folks, multi-class, multicultural, multi-ethnic, figuring out what it is God is saying in this new. Which is gorgeous. It’s gorgeous to imagine that.

Natalie Perkins: You have people who, some are brilliant and doctors, and some who are just ordinary people saying the thing. And both of these points of views are valuable. It’s not about... We often approach our text as fact. It’s actually not about fact. If we approached it more poetry, this is a way that you can describe the divine, then we get a richer sense of the divine as a result.

Kind of like music. We’re both musicians the way that you hear an orchestra and the way that I hear an orchestra is going to reach us in a place that is further than we will ever have words to talk about it together even in our shared experience.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that. I love that metaphor.

Natalie Perkins: And then how do we share that out? If I were to tell the story of how I experienced that orchestra and you went and told another group and they went and came back together to talk about it, would they say the same thing?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, they would not. Indeed. I’d be listening for that oboe. I have a thing about oboes. I just want to... The hot boy. Did I say that? Now you make me frisky.

So, we are both musicians. You’re an artist. I feel like I know that you have a co-author in this book. I feel like I hear your artsy voice, though. I hear you sing. I hear you in this text. Oh yeah, I do.

Natalie Perkins: The funny thing is I wrote an album, as well, a few years ago while I was in seminary using one of the texts, the Odes of Solomon. And each of the songs is a different genre to describe what I imagine in are different communities that each of these texts came from. And also to describe the different ways in which we do church now. No two churches are exactly alike.

And then we recorded that, and I was going to have an album release in March of 2020, and then the pandemic happened. And so I never released it. I just had a thousand CDs under my bed as a result, and then everything went completely digital.

But when I was writing the book later, years later, some of those songs came back to me and found their way into these pages, which I just didn't really imagine would happen. So it's interesting to read them, and then listen to actual music that already exists in the world, that people are using in worship right alongside it.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm thinking about Salome's couch. Who are you, Mister? You are on my couch and are eating from my table.

Natalie Perkins: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay, now. This is just juiciness, right? I come from the one who's connected to all. I was given some of the things of my father. Salome comes back, "I am your follower." And Jesus says, "Because of this, I say, when one becomes equal, one will be full of light. When one is in parts, one will be full of darkness." The Gospel of Thomas chapter 61, verses two through three. Come through, Gospel of Thomas.

Natalie, this is such a beautiful piece. How does it speak to you?

Natalie Perkins: Yeah, I think that there's a way in which we don't allow Jesus to be a person. And this just really reminds us of the humanity of Jesus. Jesus just plopped down on somebody's couch.

So the first churches, if you will, are really called associations, and existed more like a dinner party where everybody is sitting around on couches and just lounging and having some food and some drinks and having toasts to whoever they're holding for their association. So, their association around all kinds of things. And in this sense, Jesus is at this one and pops down on Salome's couch, and she's kind of like, "So I'm sorry, who are you? What are we doing? This is...?"

And they have this real moment, collegiality, I'll say, where they recognize each other as partners in the work. It is covered up in our traditional texts. A lot of the relationships that we uphold between men and women in our Bible are supposed to be of some sort of romantic connection, versus there's a real work that we can do together. And so here's just an example of Jesus upholding the work of a woman and recognizing that this person actually has a space.

Jacqui Lewis: And I just think I am a thunder follower, or something. If Christian is about Christ, thundering, I don't know. I like it.

Natalie Perkins: That'll be the one I get a tattoo from. My next tattoo I think will be, "I am she who exists in all fears and in trembling boldness." Thunder is very much like the gospel of John in that she presents a lot of I am statements. "I am the first and the last. I am she who is honored, and she who is mocked. I am he the mother and the daughter." So it does this thing that we already know and are familiar with.

And the thunder perfect mind, it's also the one that I think has made the most splash in pop culture. So you see it in a Prada ad or in a Tony Morrison book or in that movie, "Daughters of the Dust." It makes its appearances all throughout our contemporary society, our contemporary times.

Jacqui Lewis: Why do you think that is, Nat? Why do you think that is?

Natalie Perkins: Oh, besides the beauty of the poetry, I think that there is just a deep connection in hearing the, what are put together as binaries are almost dichotomous and noticing that they... And noticing how we all contain multitudes, that this is a way that we all exist. I am all of these things. I'm the whore and the holy woman. I'm all of these different things all together. And as a result, what does that actually say about how we try and position people against each other? Particular the stereotypes we put on women. I think that that's what really gives it some life.

Jacqui Lewis: If we're created in the image of God and we are, then this text feels like it speaks to our complicatedness, the multitudes, the vicissitudes, the shades of us that are also about God. And this makes me feel happy to think God is complicated like us.

Natalie Perkins: Is all encompassing like us, right?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, yeah. All the things are in there. Yeah, that's right. That's even better. Yeah.

I want to just talk a minute, Natalie, about what would've happened this, if we could dream a world, which I wish we could, but if we could dream a world in which these texts that are extra canonical that didn't make the cut were in the cut, and that what we were reading, studying, preaching, writing hymns, dancing to, with all of these texts as well, what do you think our orthodoxy, the words that we would... How would it be different? How would it have been different? How would the church be different?

Natalie Perkins: I would love to have a very flowery and optimistic answer here, but I think that ultimately, religion is a tool for how we understand the world, and what the world really idolizes, I'll say, is power. And so, even if we had a different canon given to us, I'm curious how these texts would have been manipulated to be able to still have this sort of outcome.

And so what I love about where we are now, Reverend, is that we have a different opportunity, with some of the scales removed from our eyes, as Saul became Paul, that we can see a little bit clearer how these things have been used, and then maybe use some other tools that they left behind that didn't build the master's house. You know that Audrey Lorde saying, you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. So let's use some other stuff that got left that wasn't used in order to do that dismantling. So that's what I think is the beauty of bringing these texts from that same time period into today, placing them right alongside what you've already read and already know, and holding in account what has happened to them as a result of that. Like, oh, Mary actually wasn't... Mary Magdalene wasn't a prostitute. That was a bad sermon. You now can see these things clearly and dismantle that and stop saying it.

Jacqui Lewis: That's not flowery, but that's powerful. I love that. I do. I think that's so inspirational to me. We've got new tools.

Natalie Perkins: We do.

Jacqui Lewis: We've got new opportunities.

Natalie Perkins: We do.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that. I really do. I love that.

Natalie Perkins: And there's so much. Each generation can do a little bit more. We're always passing the baton forward. And so there's so much that we can pass forward now with this newness if we allow it. If we are willing to share this thing that we know and help them see the thing next to what they already know, versus running from it because we don't understand it. Lean into the work.

Jacqui Lewis: Lean in, y'all. Lean in. And Natalie, you know, Reverend, some of what needs to be dismantled, I would say is deeply inside us, meaning, not them. I'm saying us. So I'm as a Black, womanist, universalist, Christian, I'm talking about my people, my folks, my us, us, where we are afraid to stand in the balcony and look at what's before us. We are daunted by the possibility of new theologies. We are daunted by the possibility of assumptions being questioned, our ideas being shifted, shattered even, broken apart. What else is left here? And especially, I think we both would say in a compassionate way, when the world is on fire, when things feel uncertain, when we feel unmoored, then we are, as humans, want to stick to something that feels sticky, which is to stay static, and we can get even more of concretized in the thing that we really would like to change.

Natalie Perkins: Exactly. Exactly. What part of that is attached to something that we've been given that actually never belonged to us in the first place, an alignment with something that we've had to exist inside of. I always say whiteness is a hell of a drug. You've heard me say that. And so what portions of things are we picking up because we had to assimilate, and what really belonged to us?

I always think of politics and respectability. What does it need to look like? Because that's acceptable. But also inside of that is... It's hard. It's such a double-edged sword, is a distancing, a severe distancing from anything that is white that doesn't allow us to really examine it from either side. So you have this one side that is like, okay, kind of subscribing to whiteness and not really knowing that that's what you're doing because you're not calling it that, and another side that's running as far as you can and as a result, can you just stop and look and see the thing for what it is.

And when we don't do that is when we start to villainize people, and that's when whiteness becomes white people. Like, a person is this, that, and the other versus this is there's a whole set of a system that you subscribe to, and that's what we're talking about. It actually isn't about you. There's a whole way in which you've been taught to exist in this world that hurts other people. So, could you stop? That's actually what we're talking about.

So it's about that. Can you let the pull and push from it go and stop and see what the thing is so we can actually examine what is helpful and hurtful?

Jacqui Lewis: That will, indeed, and did preach, right?

Natalie Perkins: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, and I would add to that, and we talk a lot at Middle Church and in our life together about the whiteness as a system. I know that I'm not going to say this well, so I'm apologizing in advance anybody who takes offense at this, but also there can be, when you talk about just the polarity of over here, this white system that we imbibe, take part of in, this other place where we just might want to run away from everything we think we want to call white. So do we want to call scholarship white? Do we want to call seminary white? Do we want to call exegesis white? Do we want to call... I'm going to actually look at some Hebrew and some Greek and some Aramaic and some scrolls, and know what it actually really says, as opposed to the King James version of the thing, and that, otherwise it's white.

So now our "Black faith" doesn't get aired out in the light because that's white. And it's actually not white. There's whiteness over there. There are texts that are white, there's white assumptions in, like say, John Calvin, that's not in James Cohen, but the rigorous interrogation of text is not white. That's actually early church, including Black folks.

Natalie Perkins: That's exactly right. And we tend to forget that Black folks were in the early church. Because the documents that survived are the ones that are in dry climate. So anywhere where it's wet, we don't have any documentation. That stuff gets ruined until we learn how to preserve. And so you find the text in very particular areas, and you assume this is where it all came from.

But there's a way, even in that, that our way of dealing only in the polarities leaves out a whole lot of people. That's how we end up with so many on the margins.

And so our goal in the book was to bring forward these texts that a lot of people have never heard about and tell them from the angle of marginalized people. So I had never read a devotional or reflection, whatever... I used to write for Daily Guideposts, I would write devotionals for them, and I'd never read one that centered the story of a trans person, in a book that was published by one of our big publishing houses out in the world. I've never read that. And so these are the stories you and I hear as ministers walking with people, these stories are there. And so it felt very important to see how do we make sure that marginalized people get to have their lives held and honored as well when we are looking at Scriptures.

And they're in the text as well, the text supports that. They've been here. There's nothing new under the sun. It's just that now you've decided, our country's decided we don't like them, but they've always been there. So how do we help our country let go of some of this really toxic theology that it's picked up as a result of trying to hold power?

And it's by the way that we read, it's by the way we write. It's by the way we paint and sing. It's always going to be the arts that lead that sort of thing. It's a love. It's a heartfelt, meaningful, deep thinking place. That's where that comes from. And that's where you and I and our fellow clergy, that's where we meet this work. That's where we meet the deepest need of the world, right?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Really, really so right on. Love everything you're saying right there.

I just want to, as we think about coming to a close a little bit, I'm thinking about how crazy

the world is. And it's crazy, and I know, because I know you, that crazy world can cause us to over-function, can cause humankind to over-function, to bip and skip is my favorite expression, hither, thither, and yon, trying to fix it.

But there's some really important wisdom in these texts, too, about how to be a human. There's a do and there's a B. I love this. "Comfort has been revealed for your salvation. Trust and live and be safe." What? Not, stand up, sit down, fight, fight, fight? What? Not works? What? "Comfort has been revealed for your salvation. Trust and live and be saved." Hallelujah. The Odes of Solomon. 34 seconds. Speak about that. Give us a calling in about some nap ministries, some rests. Come through church, Trisha Hersey. Talk to us a little bit.

Natalie Perkins: And trust in that, right? Yeah. The nap ministry, Trisha talks about how our rest isn't for us to recuperate so we can get back out there and run again. We're just due that rest. We rest because we are. That's enough. We don't have to come up with another reason.

And so I love, I think there's a devotional in there that you just read from that talks about her and how she... Her beginnings, and that's where that one met me, is in that comfort. Like, "Oh, I can actually just ease into and relax into comfort, and trusting that."

And that is in itself life-giving and salvific, even. Which I think is just a beautiful concept, particularly for Black women who are out there doing all of the things, having to meet every single moment and every single need, everything everywhere, all at once. That movie resonated with me in that way, that we really do show up in so many different ways. And what if we just stopped? Because we can and because we're doing.

Jacqui Lewis: Because we are. Just because we are human on the planet.

Natalie Perkins: That's part of our right as people.

Jacqui Lewis: Well, I'm going to be meditating on that day in, day in, day in and night, day and night, day and night with my little hyper-busy behind, and thinking about even just, "Comfort, comfort, oh, my people," says our God. How many times have we read or sung that text in some kind of way? And it feels like it's about something like, "No more shall you be killed by enemies," or something like that, as opposed to comfort, comfortable, contentment, rest, ease.

So, my wonderful colleague, sister, author, minister, friend, I'm so proud of this book and your voice in it, and delighted that it's in the world and that we get to talk about it today on Love Period. So, thank you.

Natalie Perkins: Thank you for a chance to share it with the world.

Jacqui Lewis: As you reflect on my conversation with Natalie Renee Perkins today, think about this. We each have our own canon, the Scriptures that we return to again and again, to inspire us, to edify us, to challenge us, to comfort us. Maybe to think about a commercial, what's in your canon? And does this conversation make you want to widen your aperture? Think about it.