

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### HOW RADICAL SELF-LOVE CAN HEAL THE WORLD

**LAURA FLANDERS:** It's that time of year when we all need a little resilience. Elections, holidays, the change of the season, we need fortitude to get through it. And today's guest would say we need fierce love too. Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis knows a thing or two about resilience. One year ago, almost to the day, her church burnt to the ground, a church that had already been through its own history of near death experiences. Reverend Jacqui Lewis is Senior Minister of Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan's East Village. She's no stranger to this show and in her latest book "Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World", Jacqui weaves together autobiographical anecdotes with theological reflections and practical tools. Today, we're going to explore the force Reverend Jacqui says underlies and inspires that change-making, fierce love. Welcome back to the program, Jacqui. It is always a pleasure to have you with me and wow, congratulations on a book with a long title, a beautiful cover, and a lot to say.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** That title's a mouthful. Happy holidays to you, Laura.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well, you too.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Thank you so much for having me here.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** It's not just me, right? That needs extra special fortitude and resilience in this season. Do we all go through it? Do you, are you feeling it too?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Absolutely it does. And I think that's what's good about the holidays, the holy days, they mark these times for us, joy times, sorrow times, they remind us of people who should be at the table who are not, but there is a kind of ubiquitous call to just be nicer, to be kinder, to love each other better, at least for a little while. And my hope is that people will extend that all year long.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Yeah. Well, we're working on that. One of the great things about the holidays though, quick segue, is that they bring people together and bringing people together is something that Middle Collegiate did in holiday seasons and all the weeks and Sundays in between. The church burned down last year. As it turns out, that brought people together too. Can you talk about first the fire and then what followed?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Yeah, it's been a wild year, Laura, as I think about the year, I think, wow, oh my gosh. But I do feel like we survived. I mean, we're here, you know, we're here, but it was a six alarm fire on a Saturday morning, December 5, that just torched our building, leaving only the facade there just standing. A burnt memory, a burnt skeleton, if you will, of what that church had been since 1892. Immediately, our neighbors, our friends, I mean, from around the globe, people carried the fire in the news in China and Australia. And what we found, Laura, in the fire was how much people loved us. Kind notes. I remember about two weeks after the fire, I opened up my Facebook feed, finally, and read about 500 love notes from people all over the globe, who would just, we love you, we're holding you, we think of you like the cathedral in Paris, you're our hope and our dream and we're going to stay with you. And they stayed with us, Laura. People joined the church. Some 500 people joined the church since March of 2020 during COVID and during the fire grieving time. And so I believe that what we have found is the theory of fierce love is actually practiced and real in communities, in digital spaces, poor people sent a dollar, folks sent lots of money, but mostly, people loved us through this time, their prayers and their commitment to us.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The church was gone as a place, but outside, its people convened there in the street in the East Village of New York in the winter, December. Can you talk about what took place there?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** So we're standing outside, literally watching the building smolder. It took days for that fire to stop burning. And as we were watching, the women next door to us, the Women's Prison Association women, were being evacuated from their building because of the smoke and my friends, Claudia and Susan, and my friends, Katrina and Yusuf, saw that they could do nothing at Middle, but that they could do something for those women. And they literally made carpools, carpools to take the women shopping. And they did trip after trip and then took the women to their temporary location. Laura, that's fierce love. In the midst of that excruciating grief, my friends, Susan and Claudia, were the ones who called me that morning to say, "Oh my God, the church is on fire." To watch our people leap into action like that and then another group of Middle people came and kind of sat shiva for the building. They set up across the street in front of our neighbors, a grocery store that loves on us and helps us do Thanksgiving stuff, and they set up hot chocolate and food and sandwiches, and shift after shift of people from the church and the neighborhood which claims us, came, ate, sang, lit candles. It's not theoretical. That love outlasts fires. It's truth that fierce love can not be snuffed out by a flame.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Yeah, and I had mentioned at the top that this wasn't the first time that Middle Collegiate had gone through a near-death experience, right? It has a long and pretty extraordinary history.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Absolutely, I mean, the church, which dates to 1892, that building, but the Collegiate Church dates to 1628. So we've got centuries of stuff, right? We have, honestly, being the Dutch reform church that "bought" Manhattan from the Lenape, lots of apologies and repairs needed around that. Some of our folks, some of our senior ministers owned Black people. Our church was built with stolen labor, okay? And that's real and I think the work we've done in these last few decades since Gordon Dragt, 1985, for sure has been all about repairing that harm. LGBTQ justice, opening the doors for all the people in the community dying with HIV/AIDS and their families living. We fed them, we housed them, we gave grants to them, we loved on them. We became the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, anti-racist church in the country. People count on us for anti-racist trainings, 6,000 people or so, we trained in the time of COVID in the digital space. So I'm claiming reparations and I'm saying also, I'm reparations, right? This Black, dreadlocked leader leading Middle Church is part of the way the Collegiate Church offers repair in the world for things we participated in.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well, it's no coincidence that "Fierce Love", your book, came out this year and fires feature in the book too, so I don't want to spoil anything. People should go and check it out, but the book starts in a place that was very resonant for me and I don't think I'm alone. It starts with one of the hardest things, self-love. Talk about that choice and why starting with self-love is so important in your view.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** This book had been cooking in me for years and you know that because we know each other. Just, what can we do about the hot mess, toxic politics, horrific banter in this public square, erosion of civil rights, the pandemic of killing Black people, right? All of that, Laura, has been grieving me for years and I preach that, I write that, I teach that, but I wanted to do something that would push even outside of the religious boundaries, certainly I'm a Christian pastor, but you know that I'm a Universalist and I wanted to put words in the world that could be consumed by, ingested by, transform the lives of anyone who would dare to pick up the book. And here's the deal, Laura. All the world's major religions say something like love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. Don't do something to someone you don't want done to you. Don't withhold from your neighbor that which they need. One tradition says don't break anyone else's heart. Don't break anyone else's heart. So if that's true and that's hanging out in the religious space, why, why, why are we so horrific to each other? Why are we so intent on wounding each other? I think it's because, actually, we don't love ourselves. That's my working hypothesis. So, what, you don't love yourself? You don't give yourself care? You don't think you deserve love? You shame on yourself, should on yourself, self-loathing. I am convinced that our founding fathers left Great Britain — your people, sorry buddy —

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Sorry.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** — Came over here across the pond to make a safe place for themselves and brought with them their oppression at the hand of the higher classes, right, their imperialist oppression, and then they passed it on. They passed it on to the Indigenous people. They passed it on to the Black people. And I think our whole nation is built not only on stolen land, by stolen bodies, but on principles that looked democratic but are actually steeped in self loathing.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Oh, it's those British patriarchs.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** I mean it. It's true, right?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So sorry about that.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** It's not your fault, my love, it's not your fault, right? But, if you build a culture in which Black people are only three-fifths of a person, if you build a culture in which you think you have the right to "discover land" that already belongs to some other folks, you are clearly moving from a place where there's a hole in your soul where love should be. That's my theory. And it's grounded in my experience as a psychologist, as a pastor, as a counselor, and so I wanted to start there. We're not taught to love ourselves, but if we don't love ourselves, I think we're going to keep repeating these patterns of abuse and oppression toward everyone who's not us.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Why is it that during this part of the conversation, I'm thinking about all those white women who voted for Trump?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Because you should be, right? I mean, I think that's a really important observation. You know, think also, I mean, I'm a woman.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Trump or Trump-ism, let's be clear. I'm looking at Virginia or New Jersey, you name it.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** It's as though, so I'm a woman. I'm a Black woman. I'm a womanist. The womanist theologians kind of fight in the places where feminism didn't go far enough to do Black women's rights or Latinx women's rights. In a way, Laura, if you are in a culture like ours, that strong patriarch is almost archetypically attractive to us, right? In fact, I would argue, that's the kind of God many of us have made up. And maybe that's why Trump gets to win because there's a way in which we want a mean patriarch, we want a domineering patriarch, we want a violent patriarch, because we've been taught that power lives in those places. And you and I know that's not power. That's not the kind of power, anyway, that will heal us. It is actually narcissism gone amok, in my mind, and I feel sorry for the women who don't

understand that there's a different kind of power that we can all have together and we don't need to live into male, patriarchal, heteronormative, you know, homophobic, xenophobic, worldviews in order to survive and thrive.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So that's part of it, isn't it? The desire to perhaps associate ourselves with power and where we perceive power to be. But isn't there another part of it, too, that has to do with a disinclination to associate ourselves with any disparaged or less powerful class, like a gender class? What you're calling on us to do then, I think, is not just love ourselves, but to love ourselves while acknowledging that we have our challenges as a class, that we are part of a disadvantaged class, a gender class, in this instance, and others too.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Which, right, is a circular — no, it is. It's a circular conversation and you have to start somewhere, right? So I start with love yourself, knowing that it's hard and all the way through this book, "Fierce Love", I'm coming back to these practices, this idea of harvesting, excavating, our stories for our superpowers, Laura, that actually might be our weaknesses.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well, that's why you say truth is the important thing.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Truth is important.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So telling the truth about what actually did happen to you and to people like you in history and your personal life, that's part of that cycle.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Stop worshiping Thomas Jefferson, my people, right? Let's stop idealizing the beginnings of this nation in which you women, you white women, you white women did not matter either. You didn't.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Yeah, but we could own slaves and we could inherit slaves and we could retain slaves in a separation from our husbands. We could do very little else in the early colonial period, in the period of slavery in this country, white women could do those things. We could own people. And I think none of that history has been fully absorbed, addressed, confronted, and as white people, we, barely, as white women, I don't think we're barely conscious of needing to consider that history and to heal it and to work with that legacy that is specifically ours and which, I think, puts a very big crevasse and series of cracks in our relations with women of color, right?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Laura, yeah. And honestly, what goes along with that, then, is kind of shame and embarrassment, and again, I think the truth will make us free from that as well. Like, okay, I was a part of that. Yes, yes, you were. Your ancestors were, yes, you were.

Which could bring you and I to the conversation about critical race theory and how these nice, white people don't want their nice, white children to look truthfully at white folks' role in shaping a nation of oppression. Because if we can look truthfully at it, we can work together on making a new way. We can make a new story together if we claim the story. Let me talk a little bit about a Ubuntu though, if you don't mind.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Sure.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Because there's these world religions with love neighbor, love self, but predating that, and I hope this makes everybody laugh, y'all are all from Africa. Say it with me, I am an African.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We are all from Africa.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** You are all from Africa, and what predates any of the world's religions is the origins of humankind in the cradle of civilization and this Zulu idea, this ancient idea, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. I learned that for you, Laura, how to say it right.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** And that's Zulu for a human is human through other humans. When we began to stand up and walk out of the cave and into the light, before we decided in prosperity gospels, before we decided we had to compete with each other, we were a tribe of people needing to live together. Who's going to hunt? Who's going to gather? Who's going to raise the kids? Who's going to raise the wheat? We understood that our destinies were tied together and this philosophy survives. It's why Mandela was able to work with those crazy Afrikaners, right, to free his people to make a new democracy. It's absolutely in the bedrock of my personal theology and the work at Middle Church. I am who I am because you are who you are. My destiny is tied to Edna, my Latinx friend who's married to Heidi. My destiny is tied to Daryl, my queer Black man who works in that program. It's tied to Joy, who's Chinese. It's tied to you, Laura. My destiny is tied to humankind and if we can own that, then the white ladies voting for Trump pretty soon have to say, "How does that affect the children in Detroit who don't have clean drinking water?"

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So can I add to that one other thing that we've been thinking a lot about on this program this year? That's the Indigenous, Native American spiritual tradition. It's almost as if, if out of Africa came the notion that we humans are human through other humans, out of those Indigenous traditions comes the idea that we as humans are physically, spiritually and morally connected to other living beings and to place and to this planet, and that this moment is simply the moment where the past and the future connect in us, right?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Absolutely. That's right. Imagine if those spiritualities hadn't been scrubbed out of our national culture, philosophy, you know. Indigenous children kidnapped from their homes and sent to boarding schools to have the Indian, you know, raped, beaten, molested, trained out of them. There's such richness in that, the way our Indigenous family think about time, that it is not linear, right? Which gives me hope that today, we can fix what happened yesterday and think about it as tomorrow.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So for people who only ever see you preaching from the pulpit in your church, in all your glory, or maybe know you through your virtual work in social media or online, you can stream the services online, I want you to share a little bit of what's in the book that they might not know, that might come as a surprise, namely, the part about young Jacqui, who wasn't always the shining, effervescent, performative person that you are now, but rather was someone who was super good, but super concerned not to be too widely seen, who did her best to hide parts of herself. And I think that's an experience a lot of us can relate to, a lot of people, especially female people, but not only us. Can you talk about that?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** I can, Laura, I'm going to make you laugh. I recorded my audio book, right? And I was reading the book going, what? Why did you feel like you had to be that honest, miss thing? What's wrong with you? Hearing my words come back, but honestly, I've shared some of these stories with my siblings. We've had a great talk with my dad about some of the stories I told and he's proud. People are proud of me for telling the truth.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We all, as a community, lose something when people hide, when people aren't able to be everything that they can be. We almost lost you.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** I tell a bad touch story in the book. Someone that I trusted, a person in our family, my family knows that story now. They didn't know when I was younger until I got brave enough to tell. And the person that touched me and was inappropriate with me, kind of in a one moment event, but it stayed alive, Laura, is what I write as candidly as I can, stayed alive and it wounded me, Laura. As a pastor and as a counselor, I've talked to women and men who were literally penetrated by people they love, you know. That's not what happened to me, but what did happen to me was the sense that just being myself could be dangerous. Therefore, I feel like my body almost refused to grow breasts, you know, refused to mature. So it took a long time to get well adjusted around my body, around — sex is a beautiful gift from God and not only for marriage and procreation, you know, and that, you know, good girls actually do have orgasms and have a great life. Thank you, God. And also, that I could make mistakes and survive. I had a broken relationship that made me think, wow, this divorce is so devastating that if I can't put this relationship back together, maybe I don't deserve to be on the planet. So I think also, Laura, about all the kids who get messages from the world. You are ugly. You are stupid.

You are queer. You are bad. You are trans. All those young people who get that message from the world of their clergy and their parents and their folks. They are walking around wounded. They are almost dead people walking, Laura, their egos, their sorrow, sometimes overwhelming them, and we understand how many young people killed themselves because they miss the mark of perfection. And so I'm wanting to say to parents, guys, your job is to love your little ones, to make a safe container for them so they can show you who they are and be that. It is devastating to think of how many young people won't survive because the folks in charge of loving them attached too much to their expectations of what they should be. Let's have more freedom and more kind of grace to let our young people be who they are. And if by chance, a young person is listening to this amazing show, 'cause Laura's show is amazing, baby, you are awesome just exactly as you are and you might not know it today, but I want to invite you to hang in there 'cause I hung in there and I'm here and I'm fierce and I'm feeling like there's a fierce you inside to be loved and to love. So I'm sending you fierce love today.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** All you fierce youse out there. Thank you for that, Jacqui. So in this program, we often end by asking our guests to describe a moment in which they felt that change, the kind of macro, systemic, personal, fierce change that we're talking about, isn't just possible, but is actually happening, a moment in which it was palpable or a person that gave them the feeling that it was. I'm imagining you have many of those experiences but would you care to share some or one?

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Yes, I will. I was in Chicago for my dad's 87th birthday and the book was just coming out and it was dad's 87th birthday and I had a bunch of meetings and a bunch of stuff to do in the media, so I went to his house to do a media event and I said, "Daddy, I'm gonna run in here, do it, and I'm going to come back out and spend some time with you." When I came out, my dad, my 87 year old dad, has prepared a table for me, Laura, my favorite fried chicken – not breasts, thighs, 'cause that's what I like — and potato salad and coleslaw and a glass of rosé. And he sits with me and just listens to me and holds that space with me like the same daddy who taught me how to cut hair, who taught me how to change a tire, who taught me how to make a B, I had trouble making cursive Bs. My dad is my proof text of fierce love. Our relationship is my proof text of transformation and change. We went through the terrible twos, but I don't remember them. But definitely went through the traumatic teens. We definitely went through the transformative twenties and we went through fierce forties, where I pushed and shoved and claimed my adulthood and claimed my voice. And that relationship that is now full of love and joy and forgiveness and peace is what we can do, not only in our families, but what we can do at the workplace, what we can do in our schools, what we can do in our neighborhoods, Laura, and what we can do in the public square. We can tell the truth. We can wrestle our way to a new way to be. We can create a new story together. My daddy is my hero and shows me that it can happen.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well you're one of my heroes. And thank you, Jacqui, for writing so much of your story down to share with us. We will put information about the book at our website for those who are interested and you should know, people out there, that Jacqui includes nine daily practices for cultivating the sort of fierce love and courage that can change the world, and we'll list those practices too. Have a wonderful holiday season. We will see you on the other side and Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis, I hope we'll see much more of you next year.

**REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS:** Happy new year to you, Laura. Blessings.

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