Dear People Whom God Loves,

ENTERING THE REIGN OF GOD – CHRISTIAN MORALITY

I

For me, entering the Reign of God means we are beginning to see ourselves and other people, the rest of the world, and indeed the cosmos in a way that is similar to the way God sees it all. I see that we are called to be willing (at least to some degree) to be drawn into the vision and then to be drawn ever more deeply into it.

Of course, we are called not only to be drawn into it but also to live out that vision. This is not something we can accomplish by our will-power. It is always a gift. It is the gift of the LOVE we call GOD. This is why we call it grace. Grace is the unearned presence of LOVE (GOD) working in us. LOVE (GOD) respects our freedom. Love does not force us, but allures us with goodness. Goodness is beautiful. Beauty draws us. This is why we can freely choose it and not be forced into it.

This is why it is crucial to see LOVE (GOD) as good and beautiful and always on our side. LOVE (GOD) is always working to draw us into goodness, love and happiness.

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This is why Christian morality moves beyond being obedient to commands. We all start our moral journey as children by being obedient to commands. That is not bad, but we can’t really call it Christian morality. Commands often point to good behavior. They are usually enforced by rewards for following them and punishment for disobeying them. Our motives then are self-centered. There is no love in what we do. Obeying commands is only a beginning place. We must allow ourselves to be drawn beyond it so that love gradually becomes a deeper motive. It’s a long journey of course.

We have often used our notion of heaven as a reward from God and hell as a punishment from GOD to motivate people. I see this as blocking spiritual growth (spiritual growth is growing in love) because it makes it difficult to see God’s goodness, beauty and love, and the fact that LOVE (GOD) is always on our side and working for our goodness and happiness.

Of course rewards and punishments (not abuse) are necessary for our children. I know that they have a place in our society to keep some people from harming others. Our world is imperfect. We are all imperfect in various degrees.

However, when we make LOVE (GOD) our rewarder and punisher we hinder our growth into Christian Morality.

As we will see later, Christian morality is all inclusive. It extends to everyone and everything. It does not separate Christians from each other. It does not separate Christians from other religions. It does not separate Christians from people of no religion. It does not separate Christians from those who are skeptical about belief in God or from those who firmly deny belief in God.

Though religion is meant to bring us together, often it divides us. As we will see later, as Christians we are called to believe that all people are the beloved of LOVE (GOD). We might say that the words *entering the Reign of God* and *Christian morality* are pointing to the same mysterious reality.

II

The following scripture passages draw me to believe that LOVE (GOD) is the source of the Big Bang, is in the Big Bang, and is present and working in everything that has come from the Big Bang. That is why I believe that entering the Reign of God (Christian morality) refers to being called into and drawn into ever deepening and expanding love - love that embraces eventually everyone and everything in the cosmos. Love must be primary. God is love. We are made in the image and likeness of LOVE (GOD). To put it another way - LOVE (GOD) is drawing us to become as much like LOVE (GOD) as is possible. Science tells us that there was a Big Bang. Faith tells us that God is its source.

**Genesis 1:1-2** “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” NIV Note: we now use the words Holy Spirit to refer to the third person of the Blessed Trinity.

**John 1:1-4** “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing comes to be. What came to be through him was life and this life was the light of the human race.” NAB Note: The words Son and Word both refer to the second person of the Blessed Trinity.

**Col 1:17** “He is before all things and in him all things hold together.” NAB

**I John 3:86** “God is love.” NAB

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Furthermore, as I look into more scripture passages, I am led to believe that as we are drawn into being more and more divinized (God-like), we will embrace everyone and everything with love and respect. Again, I see this as entering the Reign of God (Christian morality).

**Isaiah 55:8-9** “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.”

**Philippians 2:5-11** “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

**Matthew 21:31b** “Amen I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the reign of God before you.”

These readings show us that letting go of the ordinary way that we humans usually think and see is essential for entering the reign of God (Christian morality). This letting go is not something we can do by our will power. Our part is to have at least a little willingness to allow LOVE (GOD) to transform us.

Letting go means letting go of our inflated ego (where it is all about or mostly about us) or our deflated ego (when we think that we are hopelessly bad and worthless). When we are not at either of these two extremes, letting go is becoming aware of how our selfishness leads us to be unaware of how our actions are harming other people. Or even more seriously, that we really don’t care that we hurt other people.

To look at it from another angle, when we’re caught in the spiritual sin of self-righteousness, we feel proud about how good we are and we look down on others who don’t live up to our standards. LOVE (GOD) who is infinite goodness is humble. “He emptied himself.” This humility is mercy wanting to heal both our spiritual sins and our fleshly sins.

God is infinite love, goodness and beauty. Therefore there is no need for pride and arrogance. When we humans are not being drawn into love, goodness and beauty, there is an emptiness deep inside, an emptiness that hurts. But, instead of facing the emptiness, we often try to avoid it by various behaviors that become addictive. In a way, these coping behaviors become our little gods. They become the goals of our life. They draw us powerfully and lessen our concern about the unfortunate consequences our behaviors may have on others and ourselves.

We may make little gods of various things. It may be money, power, prestige, or comparing ourselves to others. It may take the form of an addiction for which we now have various twelve step programs that can be so helpful. It may even be religious.

To make myself clear: Money is not evil. Scripture tells us that it is the “love of money” that is the root of all evil. Jesus also reminded us – money easily becomes dangerous.

Power is not evil. Power is the ability to do things and to make things happen. We need that. Jesus also warned his disciples of the danger of power over people. We are meant to be helpful to each other.

Prestige is not evil. It can come to us in various ways. It becomes a problem when we do things in order to enhance our prestige.

Comparing ourselves to others can be helpful when we admire something in others and realize that it is something that could help us become better people. But remember, we are all unique and our path will not be identical to another’s path.

I am reminded of the story of the Jewish Rabbi who admired Moses greatly. He kept praying and asking God to help him become more like Moses. This went on for a long time. He wasn’t becoming like Moses. Finally, God answered him and said “I already have a Moses, I need you.”

Religion is not evil. It becomes a problem when we do religious things but do not grow in love.

Instead of using all these things in a manner that is valuable to ourselves and others, we to often use them in ways that are destructive.

All that is human is good. Unfortunately we can use our humanness in ways that are hurtful and not loving.

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The following scripture passages tell me that if we want to see more concretely what the Reign of God is, we need to look at the life of Jesus.

**Luke 4: 18-19, 21** “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Jesus is reading from Isaiah) … “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

**Luke 4: 1-2a** “Filled with the holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days to be tempted by the devil.”

**Luke 11:37-46** “After he had spoken, a Pharisee invited him to dine at his home. He entered and reclined at the table to eat. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not observe the prescribed washing before the meal. The Lord said to him, ‘O you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside? But as to what is within, give alas, and behold, everything will be clean for you. Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, but you pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others. Woe to you Pharisees! You love the seat of honor in synagogues and greetings in market place. Woe to you! You are like unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk.’ Then one of the scholars of the law said to him in reply, ‘Teacher by saying this you are insulting us too.’ And he said ‘Woe to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to help them.’”

**Matthew 5:7** “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”

**Matthew 9:13** “Go and learn the meaning of the words ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

**Matthew 12:7** “If you knew what this meant, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned these innocent men.”

**Matthew 5:43-45 & 48** “You have heard that it was said ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust…So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

**Matthew 23: 23-24** “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity.”

**Luke 6:35-36** “But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as (also) you Father is merciful.”

**Matthew 7:1-5** “Stop judging, that you may not be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother ‘Let me remove that splinter from your eye’ while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first, then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from you brother’s eye.”

**Matthew 7:21** “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

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When Jesus comes to Nazareth early in his ministry under the influence of the Spirit, he lays the foundation for entering the Reign of God.

The good news to the poor is that they are just as important to God as those that society holds in esteem. They are loved by God and should not believe that they are less than others. I think that “poor” extends not only to those who are economically poor but also to all those who are deemed less in society. God embraces all those whom society puts down.

I think that we can understand “sight to the blind” not only to mean receiving physical sight but also to mean receiving the ability to see God and life in a new way.

Also I see Jesus saying not only that it is wrong to hold anyone captive, but also that God wants to heal us from our own captivity of sin, addiction and all the destructive ways of thinking that hold us back from loving each other.

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Jesus’ temptations in the desert remind us that Jesus is truly human and that temptations are part of being human. We should not think that we are bad because at times it is so hard to be good.

We are reminded that our sensual urges are strong (though not bad) and that it can sometimes be difficult to avoid using them badly. We are reminded that our understandable desire to have possessions and money of our own is not something bad but that this desire can develop into a pull to make money and possession our major goal in life. Jesus reminds us that money (though not bad) can be dangerous. We are reminded that having some power is needed to live in our world. However, it can morph into enjoying being able to make people do what we want. Jesus reminded his disciples that they are not to make their power felt as the pagans do, but rather they must use their power to serve people.

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The Scribes and Pharisees were very religious people. They were filled with the desire to carry out all the religious prescriptions to the smallest detail. Some apparently seemed to think that mercy, compassion and love were all to be put aside when there was a conflict with the religious prescriptions.

This doesn’t mean that the Scribes and Pharisees were bad people. I’m sure that like all of us, there was a mixture of good and bad. The problem that I see is that even though religious prescriptions are usually valuable, they are a means to an end. Entering the Reign of God is the end. Since entering the Reign of God means that we are being drawn into the mercy, love, goodness and compassion that God is, we must ask these questions: Is this religious prescription drawing people into the Reign of God? Is it neither helping nor hindering entering into the Reign of God? Is it making it more difficult for people to be drawn into the Reign of God? I think that this will help us discover which religious prescriptions are valuable and which are not.

At least some of the Scribes and Pharisees fell into the trap of thinking that the religious prescriptions were the goal. We also can easily fall into that trap when we forget that mercy and compassion are primary and must flow through our decisions and actions.

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Jesus tells us that we should love our enemies. This is quite contrary to much of our human impulse. There is a part of us that wants to get revenge against those who have hurt us. Sometimes we will hurt those who have injured us in a way that is more destructive than the way we were hurt. We may even want to get rid of them by killing them.

Is loving our enemies even possible? I doubt that it is just on our own, that is, just by trying hard to do it. This is another instance of the problem of the older parts of our brain that developed ages ago and are still with us. These parts of our brain were a necessary evolutionary development that favored survival. No wonder these drives are so strong.

We humans also have the newest part of our brain, the prefrontal cortex that only humans have. This part of our brain is not only influenced by the older parts but also can influence the older parts. As the influence of the newest part on the older part grows, healing takes place and gradually we become able to make choices other than choosing revenge.

Being exposed to various loving and peaceful situations and letting our mind dwell quietly on these situations, helps healing take place. When religion is working well, we are helped in this process, but this healing can also take place without any contact with religion.

Some examples:

Being loved, accepted and understood by another or others when we have done wrong. This is obviously beneficial when we are children but is not confined to that age.

Being exposed to people who exude love, acceptance and understanding.

Doing little acts of kindness and enjoying the realization that someone’s life is made a little easier.

Pondering loving situations and allowing them to enter into us. There are various types of meditation, some that involve God and some that don’t.

Allowing ourselves to be part of various beautiful and peaceful parts of nature, and just letting the experience sink in without doing much thinking about it.

These things can take place whether we believe in God or don’t believe. When we believe in God, there is the belief that the divine presence which is in us and around us is accompanying us and helping us on the journey.

A final note:

The way we image God can be helpful or destructive. When we think of God as angry and revengeful it activates the part of our brain that activates anger and revenge. When we think of God as loving, peaceful and merciful, it activates the part of our brain that activates love, peace and mercy.

This helps me to understand why religion has been the source of so much evil and destruction and also has been the source of so much goodness and value.

To return to “love your enemy,” as we move in the right direction, (I see this as coming from the gracious presence of God) we will gradually see our enemies as human beings. They will be people not enemies.

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Jesus tells us not to judge people. This sounds strange to us because it seems obvious that some people do live morally better lives than others. Again we might say that if we don’t judge, the world would be in worse chaos that it is.

First let us look at the difference between judging peoples actions and judging people. We often can make reasonably good judgments about whether actions are good or bad; at the same time, there are situations when the goodness or badness of actions is not very clear. It is valuable to keep these distinctions in mind.

We do need to judge that some actions are hurting people. These actions need to be restrained. That is why we have the legal system of police, courts, jails and prisons. Without the legal system, society would be in chaos. At the same time we must be aware that the legal system will need reform as time and situations change.

Judging a person as good or bad is not the same as judging the actions. I know that we can easily say that so-and-so is really a bad guy. But let’s look more closely.

Even when it is clear that the person’s actions are terrible, do we really know what is going on inside the person? Do we know what their brain is telling them? Trauma, especially early trauma, but also later trauma can affect what our brain is telling us.

There also can be physical damage to the brain that changes what the brain is telling us. Take the example of a soldier coming back from war with a brain damaged by the experience. The soldier may hear the brain saying over and over again, “kill them, kill them.” The continual pounding of the brain may lead to the soldier actually killing someone. Before the war, the soldier was living what we would call a good life. Was the soldier a good person before the war and a bad person after the war? I don’t see how I could make that judgment. The actions have changed dramatically, but deep down the person is the same.

Let’s take a different situation. A little boy is born. His mother was on crack. The damage has already started in the womb. He grows up in a family where there is constant hating, fighting and abuse. There is no tenderness, love nor safety. Violence is all he ever experiences. He doesn’t have any notion of what love is because he has never experienced love. He joins a gang of similarly injured kids. Here, it’s all about causing harm and killing others before they kill you.

What I’m about to say may sound strange at first. The young man does terrible, horrible things. That is true. But I submit that he cannot sin. Why is that? Sin is not an action. Sin is something internal. I think of sin as knowingly and willingly choosing to act contrary to love. It is the rejection of love. I know that there are degrees of knowing what love is and also degrees of knowing and willing the actions we choose.

In the case of this young man, there is absolutely no experience of love. He can’t reject what he doesn’t know. This means that he cannot sin. There may be other ways to express this but it helps me not to confuse bad actions with sin. While we can sin when we choose bad actions, bad actions and sin are not the same thing. We can make the judgment that someone’s actions were bad, but we cannot make a judgment that someone sinned. It may seem likely to us (because we know their background) that they sinned. I suggest that only God really knows, because only God knows the depths of a human person.

A final note about judgment. The more we are able to see our own faults, the less judgmental we will be about others. The more blind we are to our own faults the more we will be judgmental of others. Understanding this can be helpful to us. When we see ourselves being judgmental, it can be a good occasion to look at ourselves. There is an old saying that when we point our finger at someone else, there are three finders pointing back at us. This calls to mind Jesus telling us about the wooden beam and the splinter.

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While believing in Jesus as our Savior is good and can be helpful in leading us to enter the Reign of God, I don’t see it as the same as actually entering the Reign of God. It seems clear to me that Jesus is saying “follow me rather than believe in me.” Believing in Jesus can be comforting. Following Jesus is where the rubber meets the road.

The following scripture passages tell me about the Holy Spirit. I see the words Holy Spirit referring to the presence of LOVE (GOD) working in our universe from the beginning we call the Big Bang to the completion of the universe. This completion is the long, long transformation of this universe into what it is meant to become. This is the state where all creation and not just humans are in peace and harmony. For us humans, it includes the state where LOVE (GOD) is in and through all of us. LOVE (GOD) makes us one with LOVE (GOD) though we are not merged. LOVE (GOD) makes us one with each other but we are not merged.

**Genesis 1:1-2** “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God as hovering over the waters.”

LOVE (GOD) is not only the source of the universe but gives the universe the power to evolve into what we see today and to the universe that we cannot yet see. The universe is autonomous and free. The universe is free and at the same time there are boundaries that contain it.

I also see that LOVE (GOD) has not only empowered the universe but also works in the universe in ways that are subtle and mysterious. This presence cannot be explained or proved by science. (Science is not meant to explain it or prove it.) This knowledge is from faith and is knowledge that is reasonable but cannot be discovered by reason.

I see prayer as the openness that allows this presence to work more fully in us and the universe. This working of LOVE (GOD) through prayer is most valuable. At the same time it is mysterious and we cannot control it. Thank God we cannot control it. LOVE (GOD) is so much wiser and loving than we are.

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**Isaiah 61:1 “**The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”

This shows the Spirit active in people before the time of Jesus.

**Luke 4:1-2a** “Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil.”

**Luke 4:17a-19, 21** “He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord’ …. He said to them ‘Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

This shows the Spirit active in Jesus.

**John 14:16-17a** “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth.”

This shows that the Spirit is still with us and will be forever. We will never be abandoned. LOVE (GOD) is trustworthy. We need to hold fast to this because there are times when LOVE (GOD) seems absent and we feel abandoned. But LOVE (GOD) is holding us, we just don’t know it. The beautiful picture “Foot Prints” expresses this graphically.

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This is just my story that comes from my little perspective. I hope that part of it will be helpful to some of you.

Smile God Love You,

Father Clay

PS. Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible except for the quotation from Genesis which is taken from the New International Version.