

Dear People Whom God Loves,

WHAT JESUS TOLD US ABOUT LOVE

Let us first look at Jesus' thoughts about love that are expressed in the Gospel of John and the first letter of John. I encourage us to read them slowly so that they sink into our souls and are not to be just information. That means that we are willing to be open for Love (God) to transform us inside.

Second, let us see if we can put this process towards loving into a picture that can help us to see what is happening.

Jesus' words:

A. I John 4:7-8 "Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love."

I John 4:11 "Beloved, if God so loved us, we must also love one another."

The big picture:

A. Reflecting on "God is love". This helps me to let go of the image of God as a supreme being up there. I don't think of love as a being. Love is real but is not a being. We can't grab hold of it. We can't see it. We can't hear it. We can express love in ways that we hold, see and hear, but the love itself is deeper than its expressions. Love is a deeper way of knowing. Love is an energy. Love (God) is even more subtle than that.

Physical expressions of love are most valuable for us but they are not the love. These physical actions can be done without love being present. This becomes clear to us when we think of hugs or other intimate connections that we have given or received that we really didn't like. That is also why we don't confuse rape with making love.

Because God is a subtle energy, it is difficult to picture God in our mind. There can be pictures, however, that draw us into the love we cannot picture. The best picture that I know is people who are full of love.

We might find it helpful, with all its limitations, to image Love (God) as the air that surrounds us, that we breathe into us and allows us to live. At some point we may be able to be in contact with Love (God) without any images.

I believe that when we think of God as love rather than a being, it becomes somewhat easier to understand the workings of God.

Jesus' words:

- B. John 14:28b "...for the Father is greater than I."
- John 10:30 "The Father and I are one."
- John 1:14a "And the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

The big picture:

- B. Reflecting on "for the Father is greater than I" and "the Father and I are one" and "the word became flesh". We believe that Jesus is human and divine. Jesus is human like us and at the same time the infinite fullness of Love (God) is in Jesus. Please excuse my frail words. Even the best of words cannot describe the mystery. They can only point to the mystery. That is extremely valuable because that can help us to allow the mystery to transform us. We speak of Jesus as Son of God. At the same time we must not forget that Jesus is human. We might say, God (Love) loves us so much that Love wants to share the life we live. That "Love" is beyond comprehension. God has lived among us.

Jesus' words:

- C. John 15:9-10 "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love."

The big picture:

- C. Reflecting on "as the Father loves me, so I also love you-". We have seen that infinite Love (God) flows into Jesus. This transforms Jesus. He is loving everyone and everything with the Love that is the Father's love. Like the Father, Jesus' love is inclusive. He does not exclude people like so many of the religious leaders did. It is good for us to ponder this mystery that Jesus is truly human and truly divine.

Jesus' words

- D. John 13:34-35 "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The big picture:

- D. Reflecting on "as I have loved you, so you also should love one another... this is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". The love that is in Jesus does not stay within him. He allows it to flow out of him into others so that they will be transformed into loving, compassionate, merciful, forgiving and understanding people and thus be his disciples. It is important to remember that this transformation cannot be done by willpower. It is only possible when we are willing (by the grace of God) to allow that transformation to take place.

We resist that transformation when we seek to satisfy our egocentric needs such as power, prestige, fame and wealth. Distortions of these areas can cause spiritual sins that I think are more damaging to spiritual growth than sins of the flesh. It was power and money and judging others that Jesus was concerned about. The Love that is God is in us (The indwelling of the Holy Spirit). That presence is real ~ though not in us in the same way as in Jesus. That Love in us wants nothing more than to transform us and bear fruit.

Jesus' words:

- E. I John 3:18 "Children, let us love not in word or speech but indeed and truth."

The big picture:

- E. Reflecting on "children let us love not in word or speech but indeed and truth".

Jesus is reminding us that love is deeper than feelings and emotions-though they can be of great help to us in being loving in action. If loving deeds and actions are not present (at least within our ability to do them) we are not loving at all. We should not confuse loving with following all the religious rules and rituals. Following the religious rules and rituals can be results of loving but it also can be done without loving.

Look back at the Pharisees. At least some of them. They tried to block Jesus and sabotage his message on many occasions. They obeyed every religious rule down to the smallest detail. They thought that this made them holy and pleasing to God.

At the same time they laid heavy burdens on people and lifted not one finger to help them. They thought of themselves as religiously superior to those who didn't live like they did. They were proud and self-righteous. Jesus saw through their external façade. No wonder they didn't like him.

Jesus said "Woe to you scribes (those learned in the law) and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth". Following Jesus requires internal transformation. We must be willing to allow Love to heal our selfishness and inflated egos. We don't like that because it means letting go of things that we cling to. Fortunately Love is so great that Love will even help us to be willing.

Jesus' words:

- F. I John 3:16 "The way we have come to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our life for our brothers."
John 15:13 "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend."

The big picture:

- F. Reflecting on "so we ought to lay down our life for our brothers".
That is effective love for those in need. Those needs can be physical, spiritual, mental or emotional. They include the harm done by prejudices. Any group of people who are put on the margins and are discriminated against. Matthew's Gospel mentions some things that Jesus says are contrary to Love. In chapter 25 he mentions them and considers helping them or not helping them as done or not done to Jesus himself.
- Those who are hungry
 - Those who are thirsty
 - Those who are strangers
 - Those who are naked
 - Those who are ill
 - Those in prison
- Following Jesus means to be a servant.

Jesus' words:

G. John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower."

John 15:4-5a "Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches."

The big picture:

G. Reflecting on "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower". "I am the vine, you are the branches."

- This can help us to see how Love (love) is the central energy that flows through the whole process of spirituality.
- God is the spirit, the loving energy from where everything comes. Without being born from the Love (love) there would be no universe. Everything exists and is sustained in existence by Love.
- Love is continually drawing everything to the thrilling active state of total love and harmony that we name heaven. It is theoretically possible for someone to refuse to be drawn into that state. However, I have the suspicion that Love is so big and good that Love will win over the most recalcitrant of us. I think that this is what Fr. Karl Rahner meant when he said: "We have to believe in hell but we don't have to believe that anyone goes there".
- This infinite Loving Energy flows into Jesus. I understand this to mean "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower".
- This Loving Energy that transformed Jesus in his humanity flows into us to transform us. As Christians we believe this transformation in both Jesus and in us is real. We do not however equate them.
- We bear fruit - that is the transformation into loving, compassionate, merciful, forgiving and understanding

people-only by being connected to the vine. We need to be willing but the transformation can't be accomplished by our own power.

This is my understanding of "I am the vine, you are the branches".

In conclusion, since God is love, it seems to me that if we are to follow Jesus, love must be the theme of our lives as individuals and as the people of God. For me the primary question (though not the only question) is: "Is this truly loving?" I must also be aware that my selfishness and my ego needs will incline me to see my words and action as loving when they really aren't. It is imperative that I keep a healthy "self-doubt" always before me. Also, I want to be willing to allow Love to change and transform in me anything I say, do, think or believe, ~ especially what I cling to most tenaciously.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay

P.S. Since I am not a professional theologian, all that I write will not have the precision of a theologian. It does, however, reflect that way I see it. I hope it will be helpful to some of you.

Epilogue: Who am I?

Only if I give myself to Love am I being who I am. Why is that? I am the image of Love (God). I am love. Without Love I could not be me because without Love I could not love (give of myself).

When we give of ourselves to others, we are being who we are.

When we are both giving and receiving we are in communion. There is both you, me and communion. You, me and communion make three. We are not only three but one.

For me this is a pointer to three persons, one God – the total giving and receiving in communion. The circle and dance of Love.

This helps me to ponder what is meant by "God is love". And to ponder what each one of us is (already but not yet). And to ponder that Love is drawing us to become who we already are.

Some points to remember:

1. We are individuals. We are individuals whose essence is to love.
2. We are individuals who are in community. Both aspects must be honored. They complement each other but sometimes the community absorbs the individual and sometimes the individual neglects community. When love is present both are honored. When there is no community there is no one to love.
3. Our growth in love varies greatly among us. We have to be loved into love. How deeply we are loved, especially in our formative years greatly influences our growth in love.
4. This is why we can't judge people. We can judge peoples' actions to some reasonable degree but we can't judge the person.
5. If religion doesn't put our inside transformation into love as primary, it easily becomes mostly external and misses the point.