

TOUCHING THE REIGN OF GOD

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Bringing Theological Reflection to Daily Life

MARY SHARON MOORE

With a foreword by

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When Jesus saw that [the scribe] answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:34)

The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:21)

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. (Romans 10:8)

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands ... that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

CONTENTS

Foreword / ix

Introduction / xi

List of Abbreviations / xv

- 1 Throw Open the Door of Your Heart / 1
- 2 Your Redeeming Love / 7
- 3 Your Attitude Must Be Christ's / 19
- 4 Listen for the Lord / 25
- 5 No Longer for Ourselves / 31
- 6 Coming Up Short / 39
- 7 Let Me See Your Face / 44
- 8 Meditation on Three Words / 50
- 9 These Bones / 57
- 10 Triumph of Extreme Humility / 61
- 11 True Love / 67

Table of Contents, continued

12 Let My Prayer Arise / 72

13 Reconciled in Christ / 88

Index of Scripture / 93

FOREWORD

Words are particular. The title of this engaging theological reflection by Mary Sharon Moore is *Touching the Reign of God*. One might expect the title to read “*Kingdom of God*” rather than “*Reign of God*,” for “kingdom” is by far the more popular translation of the Greek *basileia*, even though it is not necessarily the most accurate.

The choice of term, however, is deliberate and significant. Linguistically, “kingdom” is a noun that suggests a delineated territory. Yet, as these essays aptly illustrate, *basileia* in the context of Jesus’ preaching functions more like a verb than a noun. The “reign of God” is fundamentally qualitative and relational rather than quantitative and cut and dried. The reign of God invites and challenges us to be drawn into a radically new way of being and of relating to self, to others, and indeed to all of creation. Each essay reminds us that the reign of God is alive and dynamic, a catalyst operating from within—like yeast. The reign of God illuminates—like a lamp on a stand. It is attentive—like prudent bridesmaids, and persistent—like a woman seeking a lost coin. The reign of God is compassionate—like the Samaritan traveler. The reign of God brims over with forgiveness—like the prodigal father of the impudent sons.

Jesus revealed the reign of God as already present, yet still coming. This collection of essays by Mary Sharon Moore reminds us that the reign of God is both within us and all around us.

As much as Jesus emphasized *basileia* in his preaching, he carefully avoided being called “king”: He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a chariot. He wore a crown of thorns rather than of gold. His scepter was a shepherd’s staff, his throne a cross. It was not as king but as servant that Jesus celebrated his Passover.

The other key word in the title of this volume is “touching”—*Touching* the reign of God. Similar to “reign,” the word “touch” is dynamic, alive. It connotes meeting, encounter, as we experience God’s purging and transforming activity within us and all around us. Touching the reign of God means submitting to the gradual awakening within our consciousness of the imperative of divine love.

We touch God’s reign because God’s reign has first touched us and is already drawing us into an everlasting loving exchange.

Through these reflections we pray, Father, that your reign come, that your will be done on earth as in heaven. We pray, Father, that we be faithful witnesses and stewards of your reign, that we be trustworthy instruments of this transforming activity.

—Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI

Lebh Shomea House of Prayer, Sarita, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

I have always been intrigued, haunted, and challenged by a passage in St. Mark's Gospel where, following a dispute between some Sadducees and Jesus, a scribe approaches Jesus and cuts to the heart of the matter. Teacher, he asks, "which commandment is the first of all?" By what law, he seems to ask, should I order my heart, my mind, my being, my doing? What truth is deserving enough and compelling enough for the right ordering of my life?

Jesus replies, "The first is, 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

And for Jesus, that one great commandment could never be enough. As within the perfect communion of the Holy Trinity, so within the communion of human relationships. Jesus continues: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The scribe reflects on these words and speaks them back, disciple to Teacher. And we read, "When Jesus saw that he

answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’” (see Mark 12:28-34).

I am intrigued, haunted, challenged, because at the core of my being I know that Jesus’ teaching is true.

I am haunted, because Jesus spells out so clearly the very simple, yet high-threshold way of life I must live when I say that I am his. And I know that I sorely miss the mark.

And I am challenged by the searingly accurate judgment, delivered with such compassion and encouragement: *You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

I don’t want to be “not far” from the kingdom of God. I don’t even want to be *near* the kingdom of God. I want to make my home *in* the kingdom of God and live every aspect of my life *inside* the reign of God.

The “kingdom” of God offers the secure consolation of place. but the *reign* of God is more verb than noun. The reign of God offers me the invitation and the challenge of participating in a radically new way of being, a new way of relating to self, to others, and to all of creation. The reign of God is alive, active like yeast, shedding light like a bright lamp, attentive as a bridesmaid, persistent as someone searching for a lost treasure. The reign of God is just and merciful like the foreigner who stops to help; brimming over with forgiveness like the father of a runaway son.

I want to carry the reign of God within me, alive in the innermost aspect of every cell and fiber of my being.

The truth is, most stories of my life are more about touching the reign of God than carrying it deeply within my flesh, my understanding, my attitude. And even the moments of touching the reign of God come not through my willing or my doing, but through God’s grace and mercy and endless offers of a second try.

I yearn to do better than merely touch the reign of God. In a few privileged moments of prayer I believe I have glimpsed the reign of God revealed, as Jesus so ardently prayed on the night before he died. More often, I find myself merely touching the fringe of the garment of God's mercy, love, and peace.

Touching the Reign of God is one person's reflection on God's grace at work in life experience. My *being*, my *doing*, and my *reflecting* on my experience: Every one of these elements in the life of mature Christian faith is integral to the reign of God which I, like you, have been uniquely gifted and sent to reveal.

The reflections offered here present one person's imperfect but steadfast attempts to link a Christian way of *being* and a Christian way of *doing* with a Christ-mindful *reflection* on experience, in order to reveal the good news of salvation yet one more time. Like the young and pregnant Mary, my whole being is compelled to proclaim the greatness of the Lord.

These reflections reveal the ongoing search for God's fingerprints on one person's lived experience, an honest search full of wrestling and hopefulness for the grace embedded in human experience, measured to the words of Scripture.

The Christian community lives an incarnational life, divinity enfleshed within humanity. The wisdom we gain from reflecting upon our life experiences affirms again and again that the reign of God does not just appear; it comes about in very particular ways: The blind see, the lame leap; those in bondage are set free. Less dramatically in our day-to-day experience, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are sheltered, those sick or imprisoned are visited and encouraged, and the thirsty are given refreshment in Jesus' name.

As proclaimers of the living Gospel we will witness the unfolding and outspreading of the reign of God, as people in their particular poverties receive from us—anointed to humbly stand in Jesus' place—those things that they need to be healed and restored here and now. Our living and proclaiming the

Gospel is not general but particular, enfleshed and incarnational, because the people whose lives we touch are particular, enfleshed, incarnate, and precious in the eyes of God.

Being, doing, and reflecting on God's work in our lives is not some esoteric process available to the specially trained few. It is a disciplined activity with a name—theological reflection, an activity that is directed and rendered fruitful by the Holy Spirit within every baptized person. Being, doing, and reflecting on God's work in our lives is a "disciplined" activity because it effectively forms us as disciples of the Lord. As we adhere to this work of being, doing, and reflecting on God's work in our lives we will begin to actually look different, because we will begin to participate more deeply, more truly, more faithfully in our life in Christ—the only authentic life we have.

Study questions for personal or group reflection, offered at the end of each essay, provide direct entry into the process of theological reflection. Use these questions creatively to awaken your imagination, to call forth hidden insight, and to discern God's direction for your life.

Wondrously, as we adhere together to this work of being, doing, and reflecting on God's work in our lives, our world will begin to look different; those whose lives we touch will begin to look different. We can count on this, because it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, the reign of God breaking through everywhere.