

TEXT: Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21  
THEME: "I am in you, and you are in me"  
SUBJECT: God  
TITLE: Capable Flesh

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
17May 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Under the transparent water color  
    which is me,  
I see in part the penciled black line  
    of eternity.  
The ever guide - the design of the complexity,  
    The circular unwashable infinity.

Roberta wrote these lines, she says, "from her gut" when she was seventeen. In her late fifties, she still wondered where the knowledge that informs this short poem came from.

She remembers with astonishment something that took place the winter when she was eighteen, married and living in corrugated-iron graduate student barracks apartments. Her husband was a graduate student in chemistry at Iowa State University, and she had transferred there for her second year of college.

She was walking home alone from some event that had taken place on campus. It was deep night, and it was a long way. New snow lay on the ground so thick that it threatened and sucked at her freezing toes in their skimpy boots. In her thin black and white coat left over from high school and a warmer clime, she felt like a bewildered child, shivering and blowing out her breath into her gloved hands as she stamped along on the unshoveled sidewalk, pretending that the steam she made was real steam which could warm her.

About half a mile from home, walking past the great silent barns of the agricultural college, she looked up and saw the stars, and immediately she was carried out of her late childhood miseries into another place of wonder and power. The stars were stars as she had never seen them before. In that clear dark night, they were alive with a nonhuman presence. They shown equally in that deepest blue sky on the white snow and the black trees, and they shown such light, with such passionate intensity that they seemed to hum and vibrate at the very place where light became indistinguishable from music.

The cold and her inadequate winter clothes completely forgotten, she stopped and stood still under those stars, her face to the sky, listening and wondering with her whole being as she tried to absorb the sounds that so thoroughly coincided with this heavenly light. (I hear echoes of the nativity story, of angels singing from the realms of glory.)

Then, suddenly, she moved from the place of what she saw and heard to a place right through it: she sensed, seeing and feeling in her mind, her fingers, and her bones the strong and delicate lines

of energy connecting stars with each other and with our world, the construction and the movement of atoms within molecules, the patterns of the hibernation of animals, the austere and shining life of numbers within their formulas.

In short, the skinny, freezing, demoralized girl she was, standing there on the middle of that frozen path, jaw dropped, was given a glimpse of the structures of all things, all things which are good and beautiful because they are an expression of God.

Three years later in seminary she recognized with astonishment what she had known as a child and what she had seen in that winter sky in Iowa. The writers of the early church, writers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen, gave language to her experience. These writers spoke of a God we are able to know and experience in the human and the nonhuman natural world around us, the God who is revealed in all things, the God in whose image our very minds are made, as God the Word.

The one of whom they spoke and the one she knew already in her deepest experience were one and the same. God the Word, spoke out of silence; God the Word, whose silent image, whose image darkened by silence she was! She came to understand that she was as a woman, as a human being, an expression of the Word who is God.

Paul proclaims to the scrupulously religious Athenians gathered in front of the Areopagus, “The God who made the world and everything in it, who gives life and breath to all things, set the times and boundaries of our existence so that we would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though in fact he is not far from each one of us. For in God we live and move and have our being.”

We cannot know God as long as we seek to “solve the problem of God.” God seeks, Thomas Merton writes, himself in us. The aridity and sorrow of our heart is the sorrow of God who is not known in us. God cannot find himself in us because we do not dare to believe or trust the incredible truth that God could live in us, and live there out of choice, out of preference. We exist solely for this, to be the place God has chosen to dwell.

In the reading from John, we hear Jesus say: “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” We find this hard to believe, Merton says, because we despair of ourselves. If we once began to recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God in our being, the signature of God upon our being.

Fortunately, the love of others is given to us as a way of recognizing this. It is the love of my lover, my sisters/brothers, my children, that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my children, my sisters/brothers that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty. Or, again, as Jesus says in the reading from John: “I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Love is the medium of revelation, of knowing the reality of God within ourselves and in our neighbors.

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The more we love the more we sense - seeing and feeling in our minds, in our bones - the strong  
and delicate penciled black line of eternity within us.

Saint Irenaeus, one of the writers Roberta read, lived c. 125 - c. 210 CE. His polemical writings  
laid the foundations of much Christian theology. He was liberally educated in both the Scriptures  
and Greek philosophy and poetry. "Capable Flesh" (translated by Scott Cairns) says in poetic  
form what the sermon attempts in prose.

The tender flesh itself  
    will be found one day  
— quite surprisingly —  
    to be capable of embracing  
the searing energies of God.  
    Go figure. Fear not.  
For even at its beginning  
    the humble clay received  
God's art, whereby  
    one part became the eye,  
another the ear, and yet  
    another the impetuous hand.  
Therefore, the flesh  
    is not to be excluded  
from the wisdom and the power  
    that now and ever animates  
all things. His life-giving  
    agency is made perfect,  
we are told, in weakness —  
    made perfect in the flesh.