

There Is No God

Scripture Readings: Psalm 85:10-13, Luke 10:25-37

Delivered by Joe Faló on 1/9/2022, Forest Home Chapel, Ithaca NY

I used to jokingly say "I'll never be an enlightened man". I'd tell my wife, "you didn't marry a Jesus or a Buddha". I saw myself as somewhat of a mess. I may only have the garden variety of shortcomings. And perhaps a few unique ones. I also liked to think of myself as a bit "rough around the edges".

I didn't see "enlightenment" as a possibility, and perhaps, not even desirable.

Well, something shifted over the past year or so. It relates to Jesus saying: "seek and you shall find". My perspective has changed. If there is something to find, I need to look for it.

I'm still a mess but now I'm a holy mess. I don't know if I'll ever be an enlightened man. I don't expect I'll ever walk on water. Yet now, I'm unwilling to say "I'll never be an enlightened man".

My seeking led me to a talk presented by The Philosophical Research Society about Simone Weil.

Simone was a philosopher, political activist and Christian mystic. She was an intense woman who did much in a short life.

Simone was born in 1909 in France into a secular Jewish family.

During WWI, when she was six years old, out of solidarity with French soldiers on the front, she refused to eat sugar or wear socks. The soldiers didn't have sugar or socks, why should she?

At the age of 10, she proclaimed herself a Bolshevik. Reading Marx at 10? Later in her life, she became an intense critic of the communist movement realizing that they too can oppress the poor.

At the age of 12, she became proficient in Ancient Greek. As Plato was an important influence on Simone's thinking, one can speculate that she was reading Plato in the original Greek.

As a teenager, she discovered the Hindu sacred text, the Bhagavad Gita. Given Simone's precocious nature, she learned Sanskrit to read it in the original language.

Friends from her university years described her as friendly but she was always pestering them to sign a petition for one cause or another.

After graduating from university, she became a teacher.

She took a sabbatical to work at the Renault car factory wanting to identify with the workers. She had the unrealistic idea that she could teach Plato to fellow auto workers. Instead, she discovered that this kind of work was dehumanizing... there was little room for Plato.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, she identified with the Loyalist cause and went to join the fighting. She was near sighted and physically weak. Her foray ended when she tripped over a cooking pot and was horribly burned.

During WWII, while working for the French Resistance in England, she devised and tried to promote a perilous plan to parachute nurses, including herself, into the front lines. This was meant to demoralize the inhumane Nazi machine with a pacifist act of deep courage. The plan was rejected by De Gaulle who said she was insane. It is interesting that a similar plan was implemented by the Americans and it was a great comfort to frontline soldiers.

There is more I can say about Simone. There are stories of how she wept when hearing of the famine in China and the suffering there. How she wouldn't heat her apartment because others nearby had no heat. How, when her parents hosted the Communist leader, Trotsky, she'd argue with him for hours. Something that few dared to do.

Simone was moved by the suffering of others. She jumped in with both feet though not always with grace and she was not always appreciated.

Though relatively unknown, her life and writing influenced a number of Popes and writers such as T.S. Eliot and Albert Camus. Camus, the great existentialist thinker said "she was the only great spirit of our time".

So how did this secular Jewish, compassionately political woman get involved with Christianity?

Though Simone identified with Christian ideals, she was not actively religious. Pivotal experiences changed that.

The first, while on holiday in a small village in Portugal, she was deeply moved by the wives of fishermen singing hymns in a procession.

Then, almost two years later while at the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels in Assisi, she felt a force compelling her to kneel. This was the same church where St. Francis once prayed.

The following year while listening to Gregorian chant during liturgical Easter week services in Solesmes, France, she had the following experience:

"I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration, I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered my being once and for all."

Around the same time, she was introduced to George Herbert's poem, Love (III) which became a prayer for her:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":

 Love said, "You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

 I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame

Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

Simone would recite this poem during extreme headaches. After one such recitation she had a visitation:

"... Christ himself came down and took possession of me."

Additionally, she said:

"... I felt, without in any way being prepared for it, because I had not read any Christian writers especially mystical ones, a presence more certain, more real than that of a human being though inaccessible to the senses and imagination."

She also reflected that Christ's presence was like "the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face."

Still Simone had a fierce intellect. She resisted:

"Yet I still half refused, not my love but my intelligence. For it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."

I'm moved by these words. There is a place for both doubt and rigor if one is sincere: "one will not go far before falling into his arms". Beautiful.

Now we will look at the source of my sermon title: There Is No God.

From Simone Weil:

"A case of contradictions, both of them true: there is a God, there is no God. Where's the problem? I'm quite sure that there is a God in the sense I am sure my love is no illusion. I'm quite sure that there is no God in the sense that I am sure that there is nothing which resembles what I conceive when I say the word God."

Simone is saying that our thinking mind can't possibly be big enough to know God. God is inconceivable. Whatever you can possibly imagine, conjure, reason... it's wrong.

How does one know that there is a God?

The Jews viewed the Samaritans as heathens.... they were bitter enemies.

Reverend Laura Felleman, a pastor at this church some years ago, preached a sermon on the Good Samaritan. I was impressed by her insistence that the word "compassion" (or "took pity on him") wasn't strong enough to describe what the Samaritan felt. It was more urgent, more driven, more overwhelming, a deep compassion. It was not rational. It was not careful or smart. To my eye, the Samaritan experienced love and let go into that love, and allowed himself to be moved by it.

Simone often thought and acted with her heart. I could easily see her as the Good Samaritan.

Before the parable, Jesus confirmed the lawyer's response: "love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind". This is to love God with every fiber of your being. It's more than your mind. Another way to say it might be to love God completely.

My intuition is, as Simone's, that Christ is waiting at the door of our soul. We need only consent.

So how does one know that there is a God?

In Simone's words again: "I'm quite sure that there is a God in the sense I am sure my love is no illusion."

Simone is not talking about belief. It is the knowing of God through love.

When you look into your own life, you get a glimpse of the divine anytime you are in the experience of love with your partner, your child, a friend, or perhaps especially, the stranger in trouble.

I will propose an axiom: the more fully you can let go into love, the more certain you will be of God's existence.

So, I leave you with a question: Is there a God?

You know the answer.

This is the good news of the Gospel

Source material:

Waiting For God by Simone Weil (book)

"[Simone Weil, Waiting For God](#)" a talk by The Philosophical Research Society

"[Simone Weil](#)" podcast of BBC Radio "In Our Time"

"[Parachute Woman: Simone Weil's Front-Line Nurses Proposal](#)" from Epoché online magazine.