

# A Eucharistic Pedagogy: Gospel Parables and Teachings in Simone Weil’s “On the Right Use of School Studies”

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*This article examines biblical allusions in Simone Weil’s “On the Right Use of School Studies,” in which she argues that study can train our attention to God and neighbor. Focusing on Weil’s use of Jesus’ teachings that mention bread, meals, and table service, this article reveals an underlying theme of Eucharist (communion) in Weil’s essay on study. Together with Weil’s comment that studies are “like a sacrament,” this analysis suggests that Weil offers a “eucharistic pedagogy” shaped by her mystical theology of Eucharist, a theology itself shaped by George Herbert’s English-language poem “Love.” Throughout, the article compares Weil’s original French with its English translation, noting where the translation obscures her use of the Bible or her theology, and it also examines the Greek biblical text, since Weil read the New Testament in its Greek original. The article concludes with a critique of Weil’s educational vision, which relies on a dyadic vision of eucharist, and suggests that a communal vision of eucharist can support a social vision of education.*

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## Hidden Parables

**Y**EARS ago, my spouse, then a student at a theological seminary, took a graduate art history course at a nearby university. The course involved a visit to the university’s art museum. Standing before a Renaissance painting, students suggested possible metaphorical meanings for the characters in it, while others wondered whether it referred to a Greek myth. Finally, my spouse voiced what was obvious to him as a seminarian: “It’s depicting a Bible story.”

I have had a similar experience in teaching philosopher Simone Weil’s 1942 essay “On the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” which she sent to her friend Fr. Perrin, describing it as an attempt at

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articulating a “Christian conception” of study. The New Testament figures frequently in the essay—specifically, Matthew 6, 7, 13, and 25; Luke 11, 12, and 17; and John 14. Yet students often struggle to recognize Weil’s frequent allusions to Christian Scripture, which leaves them puzzling over or ignoring key portions of the essay. (Weil does not help here; she never names the gospels, likely assuming her reader’s familiarity with the Bible.)<sup>1</sup>

Nor are students alone in ignoring Weil’s scriptural references. Though philosophers and educators have frequently made use of her essay<sup>2</sup> and college professors like myself often assign this text to their students,<sup>3</sup> scholarly discussions of this essay seldom acknowledge Weil’s reliance on the New Testament,<sup>4</sup> and none to my knowledge have considered how these references enrich her description of attention and study.<sup>5</sup> This is unfortunate

<sup>1</sup> When citing “On the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in English, I use the version that appears in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2009). When citing her essay in French, I use the version that appears in Simone Weil, *Premiers Écrits Philosophiques*, French ed., vol. 1, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Roberts, “Attention, Asceticism, and Grace: Simone Weil and Higher Education,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 315–28; Johannes Rytzler, “Turning the Gaze to the Self and Away from the Self: Foucault and Weil on the Matter of Education as Attention Formation,” *Ethics and Education* 14, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 285–97; Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> See Kent Eilers, “Simone Weil on Study, Prayer, and Love,” *Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion* blog, August 8, 2018, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/08/simone-weil-on-study-prayer-and-love/>; Jessica Hooten Wilson, “Simone Weil’s Christian Approach to Education,” *The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal* blog, February 1, 2019, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2019/02/simone-weils-christian-approach-to-study-and-education/>.

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, Christine Ann Evans offers the only sustained discussion of Weil’s use of biblical parable in Christine Ann Evans, “The Power of Parabolic Reversal: The Example in Simone Weil’s Notebooks,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 19, no. 3 (1996): 313–24. Thomas Nevin briefly discusses Weil’s use of Scripture, noting her preference for the Gospel of John (Thomas Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 274–75.) Endre J. Nagy describes Weil’s preference for the New Testament, arguing that her prejudice against the Old Testament limited her understanding of Jewish religious resources for political action; Endre J. Nagy, “Simone Weil: The Mystical Ascetic,” *European Journal of Mental Health* 5, no. 2 (2010): 181–82. Robert Chenavier also discusses Weil’s dismissal of the Old Testament, seeing in it a “distortion in Weil’s method,” a refusal to bring her usual “intelligence and love” to Judaism; Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil: Attention to the Real*, trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 53–54, 56–59.

<sup>5</sup> See Simone Kotva, “Gilles Deleuze, Simone Weil and the Stoic Apprenticeship: Education as a Violent Training,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 7–8 (2015): 101–21; Yvana Mols, “Weil, Truth, and Life: Simone Weil’s Pedagogy as Auto-Philosophical Therapy of the

given that Weil's writings show an "intricate dance of form and content" and must therefore be "encountered with an eye not only to *what* she says, but to *how* she says it."<sup>6</sup> One of the frequent forms Weil uses is "exposition by myth,"<sup>7</sup> and she compared the gospel parables to "the great symbols of mythology and folklore."<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, Weil uses parables and images to communicate her personal spiritual experience without explicit self-reference. In her "spiritual autobiography," she describes how she felt mediocre as a young student, but came to the "everlasting conviction" that "any human being ... can penetrate to the kingdom of truth ... if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment."<sup>9</sup> This conviction set her on a decade-long journey of "concentrated attention that was practically unsupported by any hope of results."<sup>10</sup> She reports that during a violent headache, she was reciting George Herbert's eucharistic poem, "Love," when "Christ

Soul" (master's thesis, Institute for Christian Studies, 2007); Kazuaki Yoda, "Simone Weil on Attention and Education: Can Love Be Taught?" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014); Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, "Theology as an Intellectual Vocation: Some Thoughts on the Theo-Logical Vision of Simone Weil," *International Journal of Public Theology* 6, no. 1 (January 2012): 37-55; Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006); Rytzler, "Turning the Gaze to the Self and Away from the Self." The scholarly commentary on her essay in the French *Oeuvres Complètes* simply notes her references to the gospels in several places, without explication; Simone Weil, *Premiers Écrits Philosophiques*, French ed., vol. 1, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 255-62, 548-49.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Hollingsworth, "Simone Weil and the Theo-Poetics of Compassion," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 3 (July 2013): 203.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, introduction to *Waiting for God* by Simone Weil (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2009), xviii. Fiedler explains that Weil's use of myth reflects her apprenticeship to Plato, as well as "her conviction that the archetypal poetries of people everywhere restate the same truths in different metaphoric languages," and "her sense of myth as the special gospel of the poor" (xxix). Marie Chabaud Meaney has elucidated Weil's Christological interpretations of ancient Greek myths; Marie Chabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretation of Classic Greek Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008). Cristina Mazzoni has explored Weil's use of folklore and myth, noting that Weil believed these stories function like scriptural parables. See Cristina Mazzoni, "The Beauty of the Beast: Fairy Tales as Mystical Texts in Simone Weil and Cristina Campo," *Spiritus* 11 (2011): 157-75. Simone Kotva sees this assumption as a reflection of Weil's occultism. See Simone Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil," *Philosophical Investigations* 43, no. 1-2 (December 2019): 122-41.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2009), 127.

<sup>9</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23.

himself came down and took possession of [her].”<sup>11</sup> Yet in her project of “de-creation,” Weil is self-effacing; her “one concern with fame was how to avoid it”;<sup>12</sup> she “assiduously ... removed herself from” her works;<sup>13</sup> she transformed her own “embodied experiences” into “images of spiritual stances.”<sup>14</sup> Using parables and images allows Weil to obscure the autobiographical sources of her insights, even as they help her make claims to universality.

But Weil uses parables and images in her writing to do more than convey her own experience: she uses them to “blast the reader into another reality,”<sup>15</sup> to say more than is at first apparent. This is the case in her essay on study, in which her New Testament allusions, oblique though they may be, support her claim that she is describing a “Christian conception of studies.” For Weil, Christianity was “centred on the figure and teachings of Jesus.”<sup>16</sup> As Ann Loades points out, “three elements of Christianity ... retained their redemptive power” for Weil: the Lord’s Prayer, the sacraments, and the text of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, each of these three appears in some form in her essay on study. Indeed, she is drawn to eucharistic, eschatological passages of the gospels, particularly Jesus’ parables.

Attending to her use of the New Testament allows us to see not only that Weil was a reader of the Bible, but that her pedagogical ideas are thoroughly infused with a particular theology of Eucharist—though one that requires critical assessment. In what follows, I first exegete Weil’s biblical references in the order in which they appear in the essay, showing how they point to a eucharistic, mystically eschatological vision of study. I give special attention to the language of the difficult master–slave section of her essay to show how she weaves together the Greek New Testament, her personal experience, and the eucharistic theology of Herbert’s English-language poem “Love.” I end

<sup>11</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Borisz De Balla, “Simone Weil, Witness of the Absolute,” *Catholic World* 179, no. 1070 (1954): 101.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Van Herik, “Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil,” in *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Anti-Theology of Simone Weil*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Josephine Zadofsky Knopp (Johnson City, TN: Institute of Social Sciences and the Arts, 1984), 59.

<sup>14</sup> Van Herik, “Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil,” 59.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, “The Power of Parabolic Reversal,” 324.

<sup>16</sup> John Hellman, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought*. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 78. Hellman writes, “With her strong feelings about the wisdom and virtue of the Greeks and the perverseness of the Romans, she could not wholly embrace the writings of the Fathers of the Church, or even of Paul, with the same rapture with which she encountered the word of Christ” (78–79).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Loades, “Eucharistic Sacrifice: Simone Weil’s Use of a Liturgical Metaphor,” *Religion & Literature* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 46.

with a brief critique of Weil's educational vision, which relies on a dyadic (God-soul) vision of Eucharist and eschatological waiting and thus results in an asocial concept of learning. I suggest that a more social vision of Eucharist might result in a more appropriately social vision of education. My primary audience is those who teach Weil's essay, that it might enrich their understanding of her educational vision while clarifying her use of Christian Scripture, and likewise help their students make sense of the opaque sections of her essay. I also hope it will be of interest to Weil scholars and scholars of reception history of the Bible.<sup>18</sup>

### Hints of Eucharist

Although the eucharistic theme of the essay is not immediately clear, the opening lines of Weil's essay clarify that she is outlining a theological vision of pedagogy. She writes of a "Christian conception of study" and claims that "prayer consists of attention." Her core argument then is that school studies can develop a "lower kind of attention," thus "increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer."<sup>19</sup> This claim catapults Weil into a discussion of faith, for she knows her claim cannot be proven in advance. She writes:

Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience that leads to such certainties.<sup>20</sup>

In pursuit of spiritual progress, we must therefore "regulate our conduct by [the experimental certainty] before having proved it." In pursuit of truth and light, we must "hold on ... for a long time by faith alone, a faith at first stormy and without light."<sup>21</sup> Attention over the long term depends upon faith, which Weil calls "the indispensable condition."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> I offer sincere thanks to Marie Meaney for personally verifying how little research discusses Weil's use of the New Testament and for her encouragement in this project.

<sup>19</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Already we can hear echoes of the New Testament. The apostle Paul claims that Christians are saved "by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8-9)—an idea developed by Protestant Reformers into "sola fide," or "faith alone." Weil's image of a "stormy faith" also echoes Jesus' description of the life built on his teachings as a house built on rock that stands amid torrents (Luke 7:24-25).

<sup>22</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58.

To show what such faith looks like, she offers an image that she also uses in her spiritual autobiography: “The best support for faith is the guarantee that if we ask our Father for bread, he does not give us a stone.”<sup>23</sup> The source of this line is a Jesus-saying appearing in an early Jesus discourse in Matthew 7:7-11 and Luke 11:9-13. Matthew 7:7-11 reads:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.  
Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? So if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!<sup>24</sup>

(The Lukan parallel is almost identical, except for the fact that the child asks for fish and egg rather than bread and fish.)

In both Matthew and Luke, this teaching on “bread” comes soon after the Lord’s Prayer, in which Jesus teaches his disciples to ask their heavenly “Father” for their “daily bread.” Weil notes in her spiritual autobiography that she learned the Lord’s Prayer in Greek and “made a practice of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention,” and she also wrote commentary on the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>25</sup> As noted above, the Lord’s Prayer was one of the main elements of Christianity that held power for Weil. A teaching that follows on the Lord’s Prayer would be of special interest to her.

In this Jesus-saying, a hungry child asks for bread and must wait for it from his father—a reference that already has eucharistic overtones.<sup>26</sup> Weil

<sup>23</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 24, 58–59.

<sup>24</sup> All English Bible translations from here forward are from the New International Version, chosen because it renders the Greek New Testament verb *γρηγορέω* as “keeping watch” rather than being “alert.”

<sup>25</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 29. In the section of her commentary on “daily bread,” she writes, “Christ is our bread. We can only ask to have him now. Actually he is always there at the door of our souls, wanting to enter in, though he does not force our consent” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 146). She interprets “bread” as signifying all “sources of energy” that come to us from outside ourselves and comments, “There is a transcendent energy whose source is in heaven, and this flows into us as soon as we wish for it ... We should ask for this food. At the moment of asking, and by the very fact that we ask for it, we know that God will give it to us” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 147). In saying, “We know that God will give it to us,” Weil links the Lord’s Prayer to Jesus’ saying about fathers giving bread instead of stones.

<sup>26</sup> Weil’s fascination with food and eating is well established, including her concern for others’ lack of food, her habit of eating very little, and her distinction between “looking” and “eating.” See Alec Irwin, “Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil,” *CrossCurrents* 51, no. 2 (2001): 257–72; Van Herik,

mentions only bread, but in both Matthew and Luke, the child also asks for fish. Bread and fish invoke the gospel story of the multiplication of the loaves in John 6, and they became an early eucharistic symbol in Christian mosaics and paintings.<sup>27</sup> For the reader immersed in this web of associations, Weil's reference to the image of asking the Father for bread points to the idea that waiting for truth to dawn is akin to eucharistic waiting.

Here it is essential to say something of Weil's understanding of the sacrament of Eucharist. Weil wrote elsewhere, "A Christian sacrament is a contact with God through a sensible symbol, employed by the Church and whose meaning derives from a teaching of Christ's."<sup>28</sup> Eucharist in particular was not simply about Christ's teaching, but contemplation of the perfect Christ in his suffering. As Claire Wolfeich notes, Weil regarded the sacrament of Eucharist with longing, and she believed the proper stance toward it, at least for herself, was to contemplate its purity and goodness—and through it, to contemplate Christ—without eating.<sup>29</sup> Such contemplative waiting, she believed, opened one to the possibility of communion with God, who promised to descend. For Weil, always a religious outsider, Eucharist meant desired, promised communion with God, but not necessarily communion with other humans. Eucharist for Weil was almost entirely distilled to contemplative prayer, which she believed yielded spiritual fruits.<sup>30</sup> The solitary nature of contemplative prayer and eucharistic longing is further clarified in Weil's other images for faith in her essay on school studies: an Inuit folktale about Crow hungering in the dark<sup>31</sup> and the life of Jean Vianney, the Curé

"Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil"; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 297; Fiedler, "Introduction," in Alec Irwin, "Le Chrétien Comestible. Nourriture et Transformation Spirituelle Chez Simone Weil," *Autres Temps* 62 (1999): 40–50.

<sup>27</sup> Graydon F. Snyder, "Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome," in *The Interaction with Jews and Non-Jews in Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 69–90.

<sup>28</sup> Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. R. Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 289.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Wolfeich, "Attention or Destruction: Simone Weil and the Paradox of the Eucharist," *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 3 (July 2001): 363.

<sup>30</sup> See Loades, "Eucharistic Sacrifice" for a further exploration of Weil's view of the Eucharist as contemplation of suffering and sacrifice.

<sup>31</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59. The commentary in the *Oeuvres Complètes* indicates that Weil took the tale from Knud Rasmussen's 1929 *Du Greenland au Pacifique*. See Weil, *Premiers Écrits Philosophiques*, I:548. Like the son asking his parent for bread, here is another figure who is hungry, now not only for food, but also for the light that would allow him to find food. In Weil's telling, Crow has not seen light, but he longs for it. As he desires it, it appears. This same tale of Crow appears in Weil's notebooks,

d'Ars,<sup>32</sup> both of whom intensely pursue their desire for light and truth, but who strike the reader as lonely figures.

Though Weil has not specified Eucharist in the essay, hints of her concern with the sacrament continue. Having described the role of faith and desire, Weil seeks to instruct her reader in “how to set about” paying attention.<sup>33</sup> Weil denies that attention is a “muscular effort” or “will power” that declares “I have worked well!” (possibly a reference to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14). In her oft-quoted definition, Weil writes, “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.”<sup>34</sup> That is, the “object” becomes subject, revealing itself to our understanding as we await it. The primary agent is truth, not the truth-seeker: “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers.”<sup>35</sup> Weil thus calls attention a “negative effort” that is not evidenced by tiredness but is instead drawn by desire.<sup>36</sup>

where she records quotations about Eskimo culture and refers to Crow as the “most intelligent” of creatures; Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 589-92. French intellectual Georges Bataille met Weil in her twenties and described her “always black, black clothes, raven’s wing hair, pallid skin ...”; Francine du Plessix Gray, “At Large and At Small: Loving and Hating Simone Weil,” *The American Scholar* 70, no. 3 (2001): 6.

Biographer Palle Yourgrau likewise calls her “the raven, with her black cape covering her body from head to toe,” who “kept apart from” others; Palle Yourgrau, *Simone Weil* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 88.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Vianney (1786-1859) was a French parish priest known for the transformative effects of his ministry, now the patron saint of parish priests. As a youth, he had to practice his Catholic faith secretly amid the French Revolution. Desiring to be a priest, Vianney struggled through his early years to finish his studies, which were constantly interrupted by the Napoleonic wars and illness. In his persistence, Vianney modeled attentive study and longing for God, developing remarkable spiritual discernment; George Rutler, *The Curé d’Ars Today: St. John Vianney* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988). See also Abbé Francois Trochu and Dom Ernest Graf, *The Curé d’Ars: St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2013). In his sense of personal mediocrity, his secret faith, his experience of war and physical weakness, and his mystical powers of discernment, he serves as a cipher for Weil herself. Vianney allows her to offer a human—and Christian—model for the journey she commends, without referring to herself.

<sup>33</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> When insight comes, it is a “fragment” of the “unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared, ‘I am the Truth’” (a reference to Christ’s claim in John 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”).



Weil sees this “negative effort” in terms of the sacraments. She writes, “Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament,” adding, there is “a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it.”<sup>37</sup> This comment, though brief, offers an explicit theological frame for the biblical allusions that follow. In St. Augustine’s famous definition, a sacrament is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” Although Roman Catholic tradition has recognized a number of sacraments, baptism and Eucharist remain the central sacraments, with “the sacrament” referring to the consecrated elements of the eucharistic meal.

The question of effort is central to discussions of sacraments. Because humans must perform the rituals of the sacraments, debates around sacraments have often centered on divine and human agency. What makes a sacrament efficacious? Divine grace? Correct performance? Human purity? Weil appears to agree with theologians who say that in the sacraments, human persons take postures to receive grace, to wait for “contact with God.” Although we cannot contrive or control contact with God, we can trust that the sacraments are one of God’s promised means of grace. In this light, the proper attitude of the person receiving a sacrament is to wait, attentively and humbly, in faith, to receive God. This sacramental waiting might be called a “negative effort.” Weil is, I propose, suggesting that students may approach school exercises as Christians wait for the descent of divine grace in sacraments—desiring, patient, and confident in God’s promise to arrive.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate the “negative effort” of such waiting, Weil then offers images from several of Jesus’ eschatological parables, all of which involve waiting and meals.

### **Parables of Watchfulness**

Although most of Weil’s advice is for the student, she urges teachers to focus on helping students understand the crucial role of attentive

<sup>37</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> A parallel to this section of her essay appears in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” where she writes, “In the parables of the Gospel, it is God who seeks man”; Weil, *Waiting for God*, 2009, 127. She offers examples: “The role of the future wife is to wait. The slave waits and watches while his master is at a festival. The passer-by does not invite himself to the marriage feast, he does not ask for an invitation; he is brought in almost by surprise; his part is only to put on the appropriate garment. The man who has found a pearl in a field sells all his goods to buy the field; he does not need to dig up the whole field with a spade in order to unearth the pearl; it is enough for him to sell all he possesses” (128).

(sacramental) waiting. She writes that teachers ought “to bring out in a brilliantly clear light the correspondence between the attitude of the intelligence in each one of these [school] exercises and the position of the soul, which, with its lamp well filled with oil, awaits the Bridegroom’s coming with confidence and desire.”<sup>39</sup> This is a clear reference to Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Virgins, also referred to as the Parable of the Bridesmaids or the Parable of the Bridegroom.<sup>40</sup>

The Parable of the Virgins appears only in Matthew and is the fifth and last of the “Matthean discourses,” in which Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple (Matt 24:1-2) and counsels his followers to “keep watch” (Matt 24:42) for the coming of the Son of Man. As Ulrich Luz points out, this section of Matthew is dominated by “comparisons, similitudes, and parables.”<sup>41</sup> It is both eschatological—concerned with ultimate things and end times—and apocalyptic—seeking to make sense of human suffering by taking a divine perspective.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, according to Luz, the parables in this section “are interrupted—or introduced—with imperatives that deal with perceiving rightly ... and with watching”<sup>43</sup>—exactly Weil’s concerns.

In the Parable of the Virgins, which has a long history of mystical and eschatological interpretation in Christian tradition,<sup>44</sup> ten young women (literally, “virgins”) await a long-delayed bridegroom, presumably as bridesmaids. Although all bring lamps (or torches),<sup>45</sup> only five of them bring oil for their lamps. While awaiting the bridegroom, they all fall asleep. When the bridegroom finally arrives, only those who can light their lamps are admitted to the wedding banquet—a symbol of Eucharist—while the others are shockingly left out.<sup>46</sup> The parable’s coda reads: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

The Greek word here for keeping watch is *γρηγορέω* (*gregoréo*). In the pre-Christian Greek world, the term meant to stay awake or to keep watch for something or someone. Yet as Luz notes, early Christians adapted the verb, using it to signal an attitude of alertness or vigilance, which Luz suggests

<sup>39</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> The English translation makes the reference clearer by capitalizing “Bridegroom.” The French reads: “la lampe bien garnie d’huile, attend son époux avec confiance et désir.”

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 178.

<sup>42</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 184.

<sup>43</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 184.

<sup>44</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 235ff.

<sup>45</sup> Luz argues for “torches,” but Weil seems to have understood it as “lamps” (Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 229).

<sup>46</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 232.

arose out of an original practice of a “prayer watch.” The verb “later became the term for a more general attitude of life,” one that associated “watching” with “praying.”<sup>47</sup> Thus in Christian Scripture, *ρηρηγορέω* is used “in an absolute sense without an object” and as “a metaphorical designation of a basic ethical-religious attitude.”<sup>48</sup> It is an expression of eschatological hope, of waiting for God, of waiting for the heavenly banquet of communion with God.

Though Weil does not mention the coda’s instruction to keep watch, her image of the student as awaiting the bridegroom “with confidence and desire” points to the centrality of the idea of keeping watch. Indeed, “keeping watch” in this eschatological sense mirrors Weil’s use of the French “attente”—a watching and waiting that does not predetermine its object, that is like praying, that becomes an ethical-religious attitude of life. Thus, to be attentive in study is “Christian” because this is the attitude Jesus teaches his disciples in the face of the expected *parousia*—the arrival of God and the heavenly banquet. It is, moreover, the same attitude Christians ought to adopt in waiting to participate in Eucharist, that foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Through her mention of details from this eschatological parable, Weil hints that students can bring the attitude of eschatological longing, of eucharistic contemplation, to the act of study.

Weil then deepens her theme of watchful waiting, and, as we will see, of eucharistic longing, by turning to another eschatological parable, this one even more focused on a meal. Emma Craufurd’s English translation reads:

May each loving adolescent, as he works at his Latin prose, hope through this prose to come a little nearer to the instant when he will really be the slave—faithfully waiting while the master is absent, watching and listening—ready to open the door to him as soon as he knocks. The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat.<sup>49</sup>

In my experience of teaching, students find this wish that they will “really be the slave” baffling and repugnant. Though the imagery does not cease to trouble us, it helps to set it in its biblical context.

Weil refers to the slave who opens the door to the master. The English translation unfortunately says the master is “absent,” but Weil’s French reads, “pendant que son maître est à une fête”: the master is at a *party*. This detail confirms that Weil is drawing on Luke 12:35–38, the Parable of the Faithful Servants, which, notably, follows on the Luke 11 “bread” sequence noted early in section two above:

<sup>47</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 232.

<sup>48</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 219.

<sup>49</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63.

Be dressed for service and keep your lamps burning. Then you will be like servants waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can open the door<sup>50</sup> for him at once. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds on watch when he returns.<sup>51</sup> Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve and will have them recline at the table, and he himself will come and wait on them. Even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night and finds them alert, those servants will be blessed!

Two details draw Weil's attention in this parable: the attitude of the slave and the response of the master. In the Greek text, the same verb reappears: the servants are "keeping watch" (γρηγορούντας); they are vigilant, attentive, waiting. Weil refers again to this parable in her essay "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," where she describes "the attitude that brings about salvation." She writes:

The Greek word which expresses it is ὑπομονή, and *patientia* is rather an inadequate translation of it. It is the waiting or attentive and faithful immobility that lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken. The slave, who waits near the door so as to open it immediately when the master knocks, is the best image of it.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, the one "keeping watch" in hope (γρηγορούντας) expresses ὑπομονή, enduring attentiveness, which Weil sees as essential to spiritual progress—and also to study. This is the sort of "slave" she hopes students will become—those who can keep attentive watch, patiently awaiting the arrival of truth. (Indeed, she feels she has herself become this sort of slave. In her letter, "Spiritual Autobiography," Weil writes of her year working in a factory, where she says she "received forever the mark of a slave," adding, "Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave." She also remarks there that she came to the insight that "Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.")<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The image of the someone knocking on a door also appears in Matthew 24:33, James 5:9, and Revelation 3:20.

<sup>51</sup> The New Testament includes other passages where servants await masters. In Matthew 24:45-47, a wicked servant takes advantage of his master's long absence, beats his fellow servants, and "begins ... to eat and drink with drunkards" (verse 49). That is, in contrast to the servant who faithfully served and was then served by the master, the wicked servant serves himself. When the master returns, the servant is punished. Another master-servant scene appears in Matthew 25:14-30, the Parable of the Talents, and in slightly different form in Luke 19:11-27.

<sup>52</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 25-26.

The eucharistic overtones grow louder as Weil turns to the parable's master. As cited above, Craufurd's translation reads, "The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat."<sup>54</sup> It is important to note to the English-language reader that there is no "meat" in Weil's original French. Rather, there is a grammatical ambiguity: "Le maître alors installe l'esclave à table et lui sert lui-même à manger." Weil's French might be better rendered, "The master will then make his slave sit down and feed him himself."<sup>55</sup> In this English translation, we can better hear the ambiguity: the master may be serving dinner, or he may be serving *himself* as dinner, presenting his own body as food.

Weil's linguistic and theological brilliance is on full display here. In my view, Weil intends a double meaning ("he himself will serve" or "he will serve himself [as food]"). Note that George Herbert's seventeenth-century mystical poem "Love," the occasion of Weil's first spiritual experience of Christ, contains the same intentional ambiguity.<sup>56</sup> Herbert's poem begins, "Love bade me welcome."<sup>57</sup> The guest refuses, confessing he is unworthy. "Love" continues to assure the hesitant guest of his welcome, reminding him of Love's sacrifice, implicitly on the cross of Christ: "And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?" The guest agrees to enter on the condition that he, the guest, will serve at table. Herbert then depicts a drama of grace, in which unworthy guests may only *receive*. The poem ends: "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:/So I did sit and eat."

Herbert's poem, like Weil's essay, is clearly informed by Luke's gospel, in which one of superior status bids one of lesser status to sit and eat a meal.<sup>58</sup> But Herbert's poem, which so influenced Weil, also expresses eucharistic theology, in which "host" has a double meaning: Christ is the welcoming host of the dinner and the presence in the consecrated host eaten by those who partake.<sup>59</sup> In Herbert's poem, the "host," Love, does more than serve

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> I thank Etienne Achille for offering this wording, as well as Rachel Smith and Brett Grainger for weighing in on this question of French translation.

<sup>56</sup> In her papers, Weil writes a little story of a stranger, presumably Christ, who invited her to follow, "bade me be seated," and who gave her bread and wine; Simone Weil, *The Notebooks* (London: Routledge, 1976), 638. Ann Loades ponders whether this is Weil's "attempt in prose to re-express Herbert's poem "Love." See Loades, "Eucharistic Sacrifice," 47.

<sup>57</sup> George Herbert, *The Temple* (Westminster, MD: Penguin Classic, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Diogenes Allen notes, Herbert's poem is "an allusion to the final banquet in heaven, as found in Luke 12.37, in which there is much rejoicing." See Diogenes Allen, "George Herbert and Simone Weil," *Religion & Literature* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 28.

<sup>59</sup> This is symbolically the case even in Protestant traditions that do not confess transubstantiation.

dinner. Love says the guest must sit down and “taste my meat.” “My meat” can refer both to the meat Love offers as host and to Love’s own flesh. That is, Love serves the guest *with himself*. Love is the meal.

With her rendering of Luke 12:37 as “Le maître alors installe l’esclave à table et lui sert lui-même à manger,” Weil captures Herbert’s English-language ambiguity. The master will himself serve, and he will serve himself as food. Thus, Weil’s reference to slaves and masters extends her prior claim that school exercises are like a “sacrament.” Studies are like the Eucharist, in which the host upon whom we wait shocks us by waiting on us, in which the host offers himself as food. We might imagine, for example, that a geometry problem to which we give our full attention will suddenly open itself to us and become not just a cognitive task but a source of nourishment or delight. The student who practices this sort of attentive study is practicing eucharistic waiting: this is a “Christian conception of study.”

Weil then offers another image of slaves and masters at the table: “When the slave has worn himself out in the fields, his master says on his return, ‘Prepare my meal, and wait upon me.’ And he considers the servant who only does what he is told to do to be unprofitable.”<sup>60</sup> She is drawing on Luke 17:7-10, in which Jesus offers another master-servant image:

Which of you whose servant comes in from plowing or shepherding in the field will say to him, “Come at once and sit down to eat”? Instead, won’t he tell him, “Prepare my meal and dress yourself to serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink”? Does he thank the servant because he did what he was told? So you also, when you have done everything commanded of you, should say, “We are unworthy [or unprofitable] servants; we have only done our duty.”

As Bovon points out, the vocabulary of servants, shepherding, table service, eating, and drinking is reminiscent of pastoral ministry and Eucharist.<sup>61</sup>

Weil uses this second master-servant image to distinguish between what Robert Chenavier describes as “two forms of obedience to necessity,” that is, “obedience without consent or obedience with consent.”<sup>62</sup> Weil explains that when we “do all that is demanded of us,” we do right, like a student checking off assignments to get a good grade. The student does what is required. But

<sup>60</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63.

<sup>61</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 497.

<sup>62</sup> Chenavier, *Simone Weil*, 64.

the master only “loves” us<sup>63</sup> and becomes our servant when we go beyond such demands by keeping watch and desiring.<sup>64</sup> This reversal is so profound that Weil coins a new beatitude: “Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Eucharistic Contemplation of Suffering**

Near the end of the essay, Weil turns to the theme of love for the neighbor: “Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance.”<sup>66</sup> She has in mind especially the suffering neighbor, and she writes of the “miracle” of giving attention to those who are suffering. To illustrate this “miracle,” Weil turns to what she calls the “first legend of the Grail.” Obviously, this is not a scriptural reference, but it continues the eucharistic theme and so is worth notice.

The grail legend has many forms, the most influential being *Parzival*, the epic written by Wolfram von Eschenbach (ca. 1170–ca. 1220 CE), which tells of a knight’s quest toward spiritual awakening and in which the “grail” is a stone or jewel “that provides the choicest foods one could wish for in abundance.”<sup>67</sup> Though the English translation of Weil’s essay refers to a “miraculous vessel,” the French reads, “pierre miraculeuse qui par la vertu de l’hostie consacrée

<sup>63</sup> Weil’s reference to a master who loves his servants invokes other New Testament passages of reversal. In Luke 22:26-27, Jesus urges his disciples to serve one another, saying, “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” In John 13, Jesus dresses himself as a servant and washes their feet. After doing so, he mentions servants and masters and asks his disciples to wash one another’s feet. In John 15:12-17, Jesus speaks of himself as changed from his disciples’ master into their friend who loves them and tells them they will “bear fruit.” In Philippians 2, Paul writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.” The hymn then refers to Christ, who “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God highly exalted him to the highest place.”

<sup>64</sup> This is deeply problematic in the context of actual oppressive situations. As Van Herik notes, Weil’s work tends to glorify “the situation which contemporary feminists find so cruelly limiting to living women”; Van Herik, “Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil,” 80. Weil’s larger project can frame such statements with her conviction that slavery is a crime.

<sup>65</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Joshua J. Mark, “Grail Legend,” in *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, April 16, 2019, [https://www.ancient.eu/Grail\\_Legend/](https://www.ancient.eu/Grail_Legend/).

rassasie toute faim.” That is, the grail is a “miraculous stone” that gets its nourishing power from the consecrated host—the bread—that satisfies all hunger.

An interesting reversal happens here. Weil earlier cited the “guarantee” of faith that if we ask our Father for bread, we will not receive a stone. But in the Parzival epic, the stone itself is a treasure we seek, capable of giving us the bread for which we hunger. As Weil points out, in the *Parzival* story, the grail (the miraculous stone) goes to the one who asks a wounded king, “What is your torment?”<sup>68</sup> That is, the stone that gives bread goes to the one who has learned to gaze upon suffering. This is, however oblique, an image of eucharistic contemplation, in which Christians gaze upon the suffering of the afflicted one. Eucharistic contemplation of Christ’s suffering is meant to facilitate love for any suffering neighbor.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, a practiced attitude of expectant waiting on that which does not immediately appeal to us or serve us—such as a difficult geometry exercise—can prepare us to love human persons who repulse us.

### **Parable of Divine Grace: The Pearl in a Field**

Weil concludes the essay with yet another biblical allusion: “Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worthwhile to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it.”<sup>70</sup> In addition to invoking the rich young ruler whom Jesus told to sell all his possessions (Luke 18, Matt 19, Mark 10), this is a conflation of two of Jesus’ sayings, which appear in sequence in Matthew 13:44-46:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

<sup>68</sup> The translation “What are you going through?” is poignant but not sufficiently strong.

<sup>69</sup> Weil’s adaptation of *Parzival* resonates with Jesus’ depiction of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. The parable tells of a judgment scene in which a king declares that whatever the faithful did for “the least of these,” they did to the king. Food and drink appear here also: the faithful fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty, without knowing whom they served. Suffering ones are mysteriously the king in disguise or his representatives. Like the Grail-seeker who receives the grail by attending to the wounded king, the faithful in Jesus’ parable are rewarded for serving a God they did not know was there. Likewise, in study, we may cultivate a capacity for love without knowing it, simply by desiring and waiting on truth.

<sup>70</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 65.



In the two images, two versions of agency are on display. Jesus first speaks of a treasure found unexpectedly in a field that does not yet belong to the finder. That is, the kingdom comes to one who was not seeking it, provoking a response of desiring, joy, sacrifice. The second image is of a pearl merchant seeking fine pearls, who comes across a great pearl, presumably in a market. In this image, the one who seeks, finds.

Weil combines the images into an unusual vision: a pearl in a field.<sup>71</sup> Weil's adaptation at first appears absurd: pearls do not grow in fields, but in water. If someone sought to hide a single pearl, they would not bury it in a field, where it would be so easily lost. If someone found a pearl in a field, she could simply pick it up and take it home without the bother of selling all her possessions. But this absurdity is really an image of Weil's paradoxical—and sacramental—vision of human attention and divine grace: a great pearl is lying in a field, and we can do nothing to acquire it, except watch for it, and when it comes, sacrifice everything for it. It is a "negative effort." When truth comes to us through study, it is, as the sacrament is, entirely a divine gift.

### **Assessing Weil's Educational Vision**

Through her implicit references to gospel parables and images, Weil paints a picture of attentive study as akin to eucharistic contemplation infused with eschatological longing. Study done with such attentiveness opens the way for God's descent; it is a training in compassion. Weil offers a rich description of study that sets the search for truth into a theological frame, asking students to undertake the spiritual exercise of patiently acknowledging the truth of things outside themselves—whether mathematical truths or the truth of others' suffering. These contributions make Weil's vision of study a gift for teachers who understand the enterprise of education as more than simply pragmatic preparation for careers or financial gain.

Yet while inspiring, Weil's educational vision is also problematic. In her view, learning seems to be a process of the individual waiting upon truth and does not appear to involve other students or a rich dialogue between student and teacher. Truth seems to descend out of silence, not out of conversation between teacher and students, or in the potentially noisy exchange of peer learners. The teacher is responsible for impressing upon students how important patience and openness is; one wonders what else the teacher is expected to do for the student who is struggling or unmotivated. Herself

<sup>71</sup> This seems to be the way she recalled the gospel text because it appears again in "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 128).

profoundly introverted, Weil neglects the social element of education. Yet human persons learn not only through contemplation and introspection, but also through processes of social interaction. Weil seems to think a lack of attention or motivation is simply the result of impatience or resistance to truth, when these can also be signs of an overly individualized education.

This deficit in her educational vision is due, I would argue, to a problematically individualized theology, particularly her theology of Eucharist. As we have seen, her biblical references reveal a eucharistic vision of study marked by eschatological longing, but it must be admitted that her idea of Eucharist is mystical and dyadic, in that the soul contemplates the purity of the host and God descends to the soul. This is, as in Herbert's poem, an intimate meal for two, set in the privacy of the soul. This vision of Eucharist converts the eschatological into the mystical; the waiting that Christians are to do together in anticipation of God's coming reign becomes almost entirely the contemplation of the individual soul awaiting God's presence. Although such contemplation is meant to result in concern for the suffering neighbor, Weil makes no mention of the fellow student in the process of study. What might it look like to await the coming of truth *with* others, to search for it with a friend?

The problem is not that Christian sacramental theology has nothing to offer education; indeed, Weil brilliantly perceives the potential of eucharistic and eschatological parables to inform an educational vision. The problem is Weil's dyadic, spiritualized theology of Eucharist, which she distills almost entirely to (rigorous) contemplative prayer. Perhaps to put it too simply, if for Weil prayer consists of attention, Eucharist consists of contemplative prayer. This reduction allows her to ignore both the community as copartner in spiritual practice and the human bodily process of eating together.

Rather than a solo spiritual exercise, Eucharist originated in a communal meal, and the eucharistic table was a place of gathering before it was a sacrificial altar. In Jesus' parables, after all, the meal is often a banquet attended by many, and even the master serves multiple slaves at once. In contrast to Weil's vision of Eucharist as a moment of individual mystical contemplation and contact with God, many contemporary theologians—who admittedly post-date Weil's writings—emphasize the communal and bodily aspects of Eucharist. For example, Catholic theologian Kenan Osborne argues that the meaning and practice of Eucharist and eucharistic spirituality is dependent on a prior Christian community, so any call to renew the sacrament must include a call for renewed community.<sup>72</sup> Reformed Protestant theologians Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass write that in Holy Communion, “worshippers

<sup>72</sup> Kenan Osborne, *Community, Eucharist, and Spirituality* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 2007).

experience the extravagant hospitality of God's welcome to others; they collectively say no to what is harmful and yes to what is good; they keep the Sabbath holy in a joyful celebration of Christ's resurrection."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Christian environmental ethicist Larry Rasmussen sees "table fellowship" in Eucharist as a "reliable map" of larger community patterns and governance and urges us to "think outward from the Eucharist" about shaping communities.<sup>74</sup> Feminist theologians Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff argue for the central role of bodies and food in Eucharist, so that "the Eucharistic life is about the real stuff: bread and hunger, food and pleasure, eating disorders and global food politics, private property and the common good."<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Mary McGrann describes Eucharist as "the meal that reconnects" and that helps Christians intervene in the global food crisis.<sup>76</sup> The point is, Eucharist can be interpreted as a multi-dimensional *communion* with God, others, and creation. In this theological view, the sacrament is not simply about individual contemplation and reception of grace, but community. Obviously, these visions of Eucharist are a far cry from Weil's understanding of the sacrament, originating in a quite different theological framework.

What happens if this communal vision of Eucharist grounds education? A few reflective educators of Christian faith have linked their work in teaching to a communal theology of Eucharist. In her *Teaching as Eucharist*, Joanmarie Smith describes the movements of Eucharist ("take, thank, bless, break, give") as the "source and sustenance" of the teaching ministry.<sup>77</sup> Michael James, Thomas Masters, and Amy Uelman use the "spirituality of communion" central to the Focolare movement to reimagine education as an enterprise of fostering wholeness in community.<sup>78</sup> More concretely, in a chapter aptly titled "Eat This Class," Julie A. P. Walton and Matthew Walters describe the historic Christian practice of Eucharist primarily as a "shared meal," and they describe how integrating shared meals into the practice of teaching a

<sup>73</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 8–9.

<sup>74</sup> Larry Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 128.

<sup>75</sup> Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 127.

<sup>76</sup> Mary E. McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis* (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict, 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Joanmarie Smith, *Teaching as Eucharist: Take, Thank, Bless, Break, Give* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Corporation, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Amy Uelman, Thomas Masters, and Michael James, *Education's Highest Aim: Teaching and Learning through a Spirituality of Communion* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010).

college nutrition class fosters student interdependence.<sup>79</sup> Although these experiments in teaching move in different directions, each offers a social vision of education grounded in a more communal theology of Eucharist. Each of them seems to remember that there is more than one servant at the table, more than one guest at the wedding feast.

### **Conclusion**

Weil's famous essay is often said to be about attention, prayer, and study. But prayer is not the only religious practice she appears to have in mind. Her multiple references to gospel images of bread, hunger, table service, and watchfulness elaborate her claim that study is like a sacrament, specifically the sacrament of Eucharist. For Weil, Eucharist was primarily a contemplative exercise of "negative effort" in which we ardently gaze upon and desire something perfect without claiming it for ourselves. This vision of study as contemplative, eucharistic, and eschatological, while theologically and thematically rich, is also problematic in that it presents learning in overly individualized terms. Yet we may still take Weil's insight that education is eucharistic if we claim a more communal eucharistic theology. A communal vision of Eucharist might lead us to emphasize a different form of attention than that which Weil describes: joint attention, when together we attend to another, when we open ourselves to the truth that happens between us.

<sup>79</sup> Julie A. P. Walton and Matthew Walters, "Eat This Class: Breaking Bread in the Undergraduate Classroom," in *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 80–101.