

A Lenten Parable: Babette's Feast

Colleagues, "Friday Night at the Movies," is what they called it here last weekend at OMSC, the Overseas Ministries Study Center. The film was "Babette's Feast." Our international/ecumenical community here—from Ghana, Niger, Congo, Myanmar, Indonesia, Korea, China, Japan plus Europe, Canada, USA—from Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonite and a wide spectrum of Evangelical church heritages—watched attentively. With the English subtitles most of us understood most of the time what was being said in the Danish and French dialogue happening above.

Many of you may have seen the film, I imagine. It's a classic. For Marie and me this was the third time. And then there was another time a few years ago when we were invited to participate—live—in a repeat performance of Babette's banquet. For the 65th birthday of one of our Crossings colleagues in Belleville IL his kids gave him a "Babette's Feast," replicating ingeniously everything that was on Babette's table—well, mostly. They also engineered Danish General Lowenhielm's banquet speech on "Mercy and Truth," this time delivered by a Roman priest friend of the family who brilliantly wove into the General's rhetoric a theological reading of Babette's original feast.

In the OMSC discussion after our Friday evening viewing I resurrected from my own memory what the priest had said (plus a few Lutheran nuances that he forgot) and passed it on to the group—and now to you too.

The story takes place in a fishing village on the harsh and lonely coast of Jutland in Denmark (the world where Kierkegaard came from) in the late 1800s. It may even have been the

birthplace of Karen Blixen, Danish author of the original story—I don't know. No surprise, it's a Lutheran community, whose social fabric is shaped by the pastor. Not tyrannical, but clearly in charge, this pastor and his brand of Lutheran pietism dominate the community ethos. Most evident is this control in the lives of his two lovely daughters—Martina and Philippa—named, as you may have guessed, after two notable Lutheran reformers from the 16th century.

Their mother apparently died early and in the flashback to those early years, we only get to know the family trio. Papa's way of ruling the roost, not tyrannically, but yet powerfully, frustrates every suitor for the hands of his daughters—more or less with their consent. They are, says papa in those flashback scenes “the left and right hands of my ministry.” Years later when Babette arrives on the scene, they are ageing maiden ladies . Though impoverished themselves, they continue their lifelong practice of care for the really destitute in the village.

During a horrendous nighttime coastal storm, Babette stumbles into their doorway with a letter of introduction. It comes from Achille Papin, now a burned-out opera singer in Paris. Long ago he had come to the seaside village for some R & R—and fallen in love with Phillipa and her marvelous singing voice. All in vain, of course. In his letter he now pleads on Babette's behalf. She is fleeing Paris after a revolution that has killed her husband and son. Homeless and penniless and speaking no Danish (the sisters know French) she is welcomed and takes over household chores—especially the kitchen. What we learn later is that she had been the creme-de-la-creme chef at a 5-star Parisian restaurant. So even with the sisters' steady diet of lutefisk and common gruel the cuisine improves. Especially do the many homebound villagers notice, for whom the sisters have for years been bringing daily meals.

In all the shots of Babette we see her wearing a crucifix necklace, since she is “papiste.”

After 14 years of Babette’s service the day approaches which marks Papa’s 100th birthday. Though he’s been dead for a generation, the sisters encourage the pious faithful remnant to celebrate the event—but with nothing special since their piety precludes any genuine festivity. The plan is to mark the day at one of the prayer meetings still being held around the parsonage table, a practice Papa initiated many years ago.

And then Babette gets a letter from Paris. Old Papin has for the intervening years been buying a lottery ticket in her name—and (you guessed it) she’s won. 10,000 francs. A fortune. The sisters prepare for her to leave after receiving such largesse. But Babette walks the dunes to meditate and finally concludes by asking the sisters if she can put on a French dinner for the 100th birthday celebration and do so with her own money. They object, of course, but she convinces them. It takes a while for her to stock the pantry for such a party, but finally a boat docks and the incredible wagon-load from her shopping list (e.g., a huge live turtle) comes to the house. And she goes to work.

When the day arrives, the goldie-oldies from the prayer-circle enter the room—whispering to one another that they will indeed eat and drink the marvels Babette sets before them, but will not enjoy them, lest their souls suffer damage. But once Babette, who stays in the kitchen all the time, begins sending the young server out with course after course of incredible delicacies (was it seven, or even ten courses?)—and wine (Oh no! It’s a teetotaler town!) after wine appropriate for each course, things begin to change. First to change – and it’s very funny – is the guests’ commitment not to enjoy the feast. Present to interpret to them what they’re really receiving is visiting General

Lowenhielm, who knows the signature of the cuisine from a stint he once did as Danish military attache in Paris. Only at Cafe Anglais did he ever savor such delights, especially the piece de resistance of the feast, cailles en sarcophage [quail in a (pastry) sarcophagus]. Yes indeed, Cafe Anglais was Babette's place.

Most notable is the change in personal conversation, as lifelong pietists shed their veneers and begin to confess their sins to one another and be forgiven by the victims. Hatred, adultery, theft, false witness, to name a few. Toward the end comes the General's oration recalling the pastor's favorite Bible passage from Psalm 85: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." He crosses it subtly, but very patently, into the fading lives of those around the table. Including his own, as his and Martina's faces acknowledge their frustrated love from days gone by.

The "mercy and truth" text always reminds me of something Elert taught us fifty years ago. In the language of St. John, "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Grace (a.k.a.mercy) and truth MEET in Jesus—the grace or Christ's forgiveness alongside the "truth" about ourselves—first of all the truth about ourselves, the truth to fess up, as did the penitents at Babette's feast, and then the New Truth of being and living as forgiven sinners.

But you may ask: where was Christ in the movie? Good question. You've heard me holler more than once about Christ not being necessary in large slices of theology and preaching today. Well, how about this? Remember, I called it a parable. Think Babette = the Christ figure. She's the only one wearing a crucifix. She's the prime agent for the (Lenten?) transformation of these pietistic Lutherans into "graced and truthed" Christians. Yes, a papiste! She puts on the feast all by herself. Who does that

sound like?

Think eucharistic feast when you think Babette's feast. Wine there is aplenty and those quail in a breaded pastry—what might that all signal? And the name of the entree “in a sarcophagus.” Is that Good Friday or what?

We never see Babette out at the table, but she's the one who creates it all. The only visible agent is the teenage waiter (deacon? minister?) who brings the goodies from the kitchen and sets them before the guests. He doesn't confect them, Babette does. And they work wonders. This banquet, as Luther's catechism says about another feast, “works forgiveness of sins . . . and brings life and salvation” to all who partake. Whose supper is it that “really” does such things?

As the guests leave, old enemies now arm in arm, snow is falling—white flakes from heaven. Manna? They've already consumed the quail. Again in John's gospel (chapter 6) Jesus appropriates that piece of Israel's wilderness history and then trumps it with his own “I am the Bread of Life.” John 6, we need to recall, is the eucharist chapter in John's Gospel. He has no Maundy Thursday passover meal in his passion narrative.

The day after the feast the sisters expect to say farewell to Babette, convinced that she will now return to France. Thinking that a fair share of the lottery winnings is still in her box they sadly move toward closure. “No,” Babette says, “I'll stay here. I have no money left.” The sisters are smitten. She continues: “The cost for such a banquet for 12 at Cafe Anglais in Paris is 10,000 francs.”

She gave her all. For these people! She was modelling the one attached to her necklace.

May your and my 40 days of Lent work penitential wonders for us

too as we move to The Feast.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder