

“Babette’s Feast”

4:00 PM, 2/04/17

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In 1987, thirty years ago, the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Film went to a Danish drama entitled “Babette’s Feast.” The film presents the story of the head chef of the Café Anglais in Paris. Babette’s extraordinary culinary gifts made her the delight of connoisseurs throughout France.

Suddenly, Babette became a refugee from counter-revolutionary bloodshed in Paris (1871) and she found herself marooned in a small village on the remote western coast of Denmark, where there were no restaurants of any kind, only a sparse population of austere peasants. She carried a letter of recommendation for her to serve as a housekeeper. No family could afford to hire Babette, but two sisters agreed to take her in.

Besides working as a housekeeper, Babette gradually improved upon the meager fare available in that poor region. At first, she could hardly tolerate the gruel that was the staple breakfast, a kind of paste consisting of stale rye bread, ground up and mixed with a splash of ale, called ollebrud (ale-bread). In time, she began preparing simple recipes for basic foods, available for any who were willing to accept her guidance. The paupers rejoiced in a change from the bland meals characteristic of their previous abstemious existence. Recipients applauded when she visited them and prepared something different.

Then there was a surprise. The only possession Babette had brought with her from France was an annual lottery ticket a friend had purchased before she left Paris. Her friend renew it every year. After fourteen years, she won the lottery! Not the exorbitant rewards lottery winners receive these days, but enough to stabilize her and help her return to her own country, hopefully again being able to use her outstanding culinary skills in a more productive environment.

Instead, Babette decided to provide a sumptuous meal for those who had befriended her. Hence the title, ‘Babette’s Feast.’ Through the assistance of a nephew, Babette acquisitioned all she needed for a “real French dinner,” importing plentiful, sumptuous and exotic ingredients. She paid for them with the whole of her lottery winnings, 10,000 francs. Babette acknowledged that for a sumptuous meal for twelve at the Café Anglais, the price would be 10,000 francs.

Her recipients were astounded. The two sisters who had befriended her sobbed, “Now you will be poor for the rest of your life,” to which Babette responded, “An artist is never poor.”

Today's first reading from the Prophet Isaiah proclaims: "Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on our own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your wound shall be quickly healed (Isaiah 58: 7-10)." Babette shared her bread with the hungry and her wound as a refugee was healed.

In terms of today's gospel, she was both light and salt to those who needed her help (Matthew 5: 13-16. As Jesus' disciples, we are called to be both light and salt, metaphors for helping others to savor their lives and enlighten them to discern their own dignity. Babette was both. How have you been like Babette?

Whom have you invited to dinner recently, not for a sumptuous meal, but simply to affirm their friendship and encourage them to be proud of who they are? Who has been light and salt for you? We easily get down upon ourselves, seeing only the bleak side. We need some light to see differently and some zest for living to counter the sameness of our stale routine.

Babette's powerful witness goes by various names in the Scriptures. It is the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire that John the Baptist prophesied. It is the "new life" of John's gospel. It is the salt and light of today's readings. When someone follows Christ in an active way, his or her power transforms not just the believer alone but also those with whom the believer has contact.

When we are salted with the zest for life that Christ provides and look around at the world in the light he gives us, the first glimpse can be intimidating. Many human endeavors are lacking in love. More often they are exercises in selfishness and industrious self-defeat. Even the gifts of family and community can sometimes resemble the ale-bread of the Danish village, providing enough for survival but offering nothing in which to rejoice. Into this insipid and shadowed world our Lord sends us to be salt and light. Like Babette, whose art elicited joy, the love of Christ in us elicits hope to everyone we meet. Our acts of service and self-sacrifice, of forgiveness and generosity and welcoming allow the power of Christ, which once transformed us, to reach out and transform the whole earth.

Babette's Feast can be our own.