

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

---

This afternoon, white supremacists will gather in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. on the first anniversary of the Charlottesville rally. In the year that has passed, hate crimes have gone up and, once again, the most consistently targeted religious group was the Jews.

For centuries, Christians have allowed sloppy scholarship and blinkered theology to keep anti-Jewish thinking alive and, in some churches, even thriving. The misunderstanding must be cleared up.

Jesus does not hate the Jews. The Jews do not hate Jesus.

They were both alive during an intensely passionate period of Jewish renewal. Devout Jews in the first century of the Common Era *did* disagree about what it meant to be a faithful Jew. Some had found the presence of YHWH in Babylon and never returned to Jerusalem. Others insisted that the Second Temple the Romans had destroyed must be rebuilt, while still others argued that proper devotion now belonged in the synagogues. Followers of Rabbi Hillel disagreed with the followers of Rabbi Shammai.

In our Gospel reading, “the Jews” who were complaining – “murmuring” is the more accurate rendering – were a specific group of Judeans who disagreed with Jesus’ interpretation of scripture. They voiced their concerns in typical first century Mediterranean fashion by challenging his claim to more honor than his family was

entitled to. They saw his claim as a threat to the very fabric of social order and they want to know *how* he has come to his interpretation of scripture. “Is this man not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? *How does he now say, ‘I have come down out of from heaven’?*”

Jesus tells them to stop murmuring and then loosely quotes Isaiah: “And they shall all be instructed by God.” Only *then* does Jesus go on to say that he is the bread of life. That snippet of Hebrew scripture is essential for understanding what Jesus has been trying to teach from the start of the Bread of Life discourse.

References to bread in Hebrew scripture frequently represent Divine instruction. Jesus is saying *here* that what he *teaches* about God is life-giving for those who hear and trust. His own life is a lesson about the sacredness of daily life, of *this* life.

Jesus, on the one hand, *is* just a man from an unremarkable background. On the other hand, for Christians, he is also a perfect manifestation of the Divine. His ordinary life, the life that Jesus gave, was sacramental. And the life that he *is*, the life that God gives through Christ, is sacramental.

That’s the reason that architects create beautiful worship spaces. That’s why we leave a candle burning whenever there is blessed host in the tabernacle. We handle chalices, altar vestments and fair linens with reverent care. Priests kiss the altar or the Gospel book.

These actions are reminders of the sacredness of ordinary objects and places. Sacramental objects and actions teach us to see life sacramentally. We take in the life-essence of Christ in the bread and wine to awaken us to the bread of life everywhere, even in the most ordinary of moments.

Christ and the entire communion of saints welcome us into this space as we join them in one perpetual liturgy. And they are present with us as we go out to serve God in the places where people struggle to perceive Divine love. We empty ourselves there like our brother Jesus did. And then we come back to let the Eucharist deepen and widen our sense of the sacred in the world beyond this sanctuary.

One of the best portrayals of awakening to the sacramental nature of the everyday is the flawless film adaptation of Isak Dineson's short story, "Babette's Feast." Let me give you a short version of the story. I won't spoil a thing because you really have to see this film to get the full effect.

The movie opens in a remote 19th-century Danish island village, where two sisters, Martina and Philipa, lead a devout but stark life centered around their father, the local Lutheran minister, and the church. The extreme rigidity of their faith has made the village into a drab, grey and joyless place.

In their youth, the sisters each had a chance to leave. Martina could have married a young army officer, and Philipa, a French opera singer, but their father objected. And so, the two spent their lives caring for him until he died. And then they found themselves leading a dying and dwindling congregation.

Some 35 years later, a woman comes to the village carrying a letter from the opera singer who once courted Philipa. The letter introduces Babette who is a refugee from the civil war raging in Paris in which her husband and son were both brutally killed, the letter reports, "like rats." She has lost her family, her country, her language and her livelihood. She is beaten, desolate and desperate to be taken in.

The sisters take her into their home as their maid and cook. Willing to work without pay, Babette learns to cook the bland, brown-ale stews that the villagers prefer, which she gratefully and cheerfully serves. And 14 years go by.

And then, something astonishing happens. Babette wins ten thousand francs in a Paris lottery. And rather than taking the money to go back to France, Babette offers to repay the sisters for their kindness by cooking a French feast for them and what's left of the congregation on what would have been their father's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The sisters reluctantly agree on the condition that the feast be a simple affair. The tiny congregation is splintering and arguing, and the sisters hope that a modest celebration will restore spiritual harmony. Instead, Babette resolves to create an extraordinary feast that is

entirely out of proportion to the meager hospitality that Martina and Philipa have been able to show her.

Ships and carts begin bringing the ingredients for turtle soup, buckwheat cakes with caviar, quail in puff pastry with foie gras and truffles, Belgian endive with walnuts in vinaigrette, and rum-infused cake with dried figs. Boxes come filled with sherry, burgundy, champagne and port, and a gorgeous selection of cheeses. Babette also brings in an ornate candelabra, elegant silverware and linens, and delicate table linens.

The villagers are scandalized by these extravagances and decide to refuse to go to the feast. Then, because their faith prohibits them from dishonoring Babette, even if she is preparing a “witch’s Sabbath,” they decide that they will *go*, but they will refuse to *enjoy* this food and wine that they are certain will expose them to terrible sins.

Twelve people come to the dinner. Twelve people like the twelve who shared a dinner with Jesus. And just as Jesus did when he hosted, Babette not only prepares the meal but serves her guests.

One unexpected guest arrives to Babette’s dinner table. He is Martine’s former suitor, the young army officer, now a general. As he did years before, he is visiting his aunt who has brought him to the celebration. As they begin, the other guests are still reluctant though they find the feast harder to resist with each course.

When they get to the main course, the General recognizes the signature quail dish of the superb Caf  Anglais in Paris. He recalls the Caille en Sarcophage as the invention of an exceptional chef, a woman who had the great gift of transforming a dinner into "a kind of love affair" that "made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite." Now knowing who Babette is, the General sits in silent reverence while she prepares red wine and bread in the kitchen.

Eventually, all the guests find themselves openly enjoying the feast, laughing together, forgiving old wounds and resolving old differences, and finding joy in each other once again.

At the end of Babette's dinner, the General stands and gives a toast, and for that, I prefer the book's version: "We have all of us been told," the General says, "that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason, we tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong.

"But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude."

Now, few of us have the resources to host a dinner like Babette's. And yet, every one of us can give selflessly of ourselves. Every one of us can walk through this precious and sacred life in awe and gratitude. Even in a world that seems increasingly fixated on rage, separation and fear.

Instead of murmuring or feeling threatened or scandalized, we can choose another way. We can choose to look outside ourselves; to open ourselves to God's joy. Even in the most ordinary or the most troublesome circumstances, we can seek out the flow of God's love and grace.

We gather each week at this table where Christ becomes for us an infinite feast beyond our imagination. A feast transformed into a kind of love affair that makes no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite. Here, Christ fills us with mercy, wholeness and, above all, with grace so that we can go out to share God's feast of love; to share Christ, the bread of life, with gratitude and with joy.

Grace is the only way to end violence and injustice and ignorance; attracting others to God's banquet by freely giving ourselves to all; not *forcing* others out of the world of conflict and unhappiness, but *enticing* them gracefully into communion with God and with all creation.

---

Works cited or consulted:

- Babette's Feast*. Gabriel Axel, Director. Stéphane Audran. Criterion Collection, 2013. DVD.  
Blixen, Karen, aka Isak Dinesen. *Babette's Feast and Other Stories*. New York, NY. Penguin Random House, 2015.  
Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Nicholl, Donald, and Adrian Hastings. *The Testing of Hearts: A Pilgrims Journal*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000.  
Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996.