

## Seeds, Trees, and Branches

One of my favorite movies, based on a short story by Isak Dinesen, is titled *Babette's Feast*. The story features two sisters, daughters of a conservative, Protestant minister in a small village on the coast of Denmark. After their father's death these unmarried sisters faithfully continue his ministry in a town that seems to be always in a state of winter. One day a woman, fleeing the French Revolution, knocks on their door. The woman, named Babette, has nowhere to go. Babette is a cook and she offers to cook and clean for these two women even though they cannot pay her.

This refugee from exotic, metropolitan Paris comes to live in this tiny, isolated village. She is instructed to make the traditional daily soup consisting of bread soaked in water and ale. For the residents in this town faithfulness consists of piety, austerity, and service to the poor. Babette steps into these rhythms although they are not her own. Years go by. Over time the residents grow quarrelsome, fighting with each other in fierce whispers during evening prayer. The sisters don't know what to do. And then a message arrives for Babette informing her that she has won an enormous sum of money from the lottery. The sisters accept her offer to cook a celebratory dinner in honor of their late father. They believe this to be her way of saying goodbye. Babette goes away to procure the ingredients she will need.

Then the trouble starts. Babette returns with a basket full of live quails, a young cow, a turtle, and crates of wine. The sisters are scandalized. They have nightmares in which Satan appears in the form of a turtle. They are deeply troubled, and they go to their friends and apologize for inviting them to a dinner where there will be wine and food that probably involves some form of

witchcraft. Collectively they agree to go through with the dinner, but they will endeavor to eat without actually tasting any of it. They will deny any pleasure to be derived from the meal and rather than comment on the food, they will use their tongues solely for words of prayer.

On the night of the dinner the nephew of one of the elderly residents joins the party. Years ago he had once been in love with one of the sisters, but feeling rejected by her, he joined the army and soothed his broken heart by rising the ranks to become a man of importance, a much-decorated General. Now an old man, he arrives plagued by the thought that he might have chosen the wrong course in life.

Meanwhile, Babette has been busy in the kitchen, preparing an astonishing multi-course meal, each dish complemented by the perfect wine. As the food comes out, the villagers remind themselves that they will direct their focus on God, not the food. They will drink, but they will not enjoy it. But their guest, the general, knows nothing of this pact. He cannot help but to exclaim with delight at each new course. He tries to draw others into praise but they will only comment on the weather. After a bite of quail cooked in pastry, he tells a story of dining at a restaurant that featured the most celebrated chef in all of France. She had invented a dish so extraordinary, so unlike anything he or anyone else had ever tasted before. It was called Cailles en Sarcophage. "This dish we are eating," he reveals, "is the very same Cailles en Sarcophage."

And then, in spite of themselves, the wine begins to work its magic, the artistry of the food begins to summon in the villagers some latent grace. They lean across the table and begin to apologize to each other for past wrongs. They

forgive old hurts. They begin to worship God not from a place of obligation, but from deep awe and gratefulness.

At the end of the meal the general pushes back his chair and raises his glass in a toast. He has assessed his life against the grace made present in the meal and proclaims, "Our choice is of no importance...mercy is infinite and we need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude." Quoting from Psalm 85 he says, "mercy and truth have gathered together; and righteousness and peace shall kiss one another." The pious villagers arise from their chairs recognizing that they have been transformed, and they walk into the street to gather hands and sing.

The two sisters return inside to find Babette quietly cleaning up after the dinner. They thank her for such an extraordinary meal and express their sorrow at having to say goodbye. "But I am not leaving," says Babette. "But the money from the lottery," they begin. Babette then reveals that she spent everything she had so that one last time she could cook the way she once had in Paris. All that she had, she poured out for those she had come to love.

The kingdom of God is like a meal made with extravagant ingredients, prepared by an exquisite chef, and laid out on a table in front of the pious and the worldly, the religious and agnostic, without regard for merit on the part of the guests. All are welcome, and the chef chooses to keep bringing food without hovering over the diners to evaluate their table manners or their palates. The chef knows the value of what is offered as well as the infinite value of those gathered at the table. The kingdom of heaven is like an extravagant meal born out of love, a meal that awakens faith that has been dormant or nonexistent or rigid. A meal that allows someone who fears they have failed at life, to discover

that mercy is infinite and can be received with gratitude. A meal that inspires the worldly to evangelize to the pious.

*Babette's Feast* functions like a parable, drawing on imagery of food and wine. In today's gospel we heard two parables about the kingdom, both using the imagery of seeds. In the first parable, seed is spread out liberally by a farmer, scattered all around, and then the farmer retreats and lets the earth and the seed do their work, trusting that a harvest will come without any fussiness on his part. There is incredible trust in the creation to become fruitful in time.

In the second parable, Jesus likens the kingdom to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a mighty shrub, with branches that birds come to for their nests. The images in this parable almost seem borrowed from the psalm and the Ezekiel text that we read today, as if Jesus reached back into time, brushed back the earth, and showed his disciples where some of the seeds of the kingdom had been planted long ago.

The psalmist imagines seeds growing and spreading like cedars, bearing fruit even in old age, remaining green and succulent. The psalmist is focusing on the flourishing of the righteous, but the imagery points to the upending of expectations: that which is old proves to be fruitful.

Ezekiel writes about God promising to take a cedar sprig and plant it on a mountain, resulting in a noble cedar where every kind of bird comes to nest. Ezekiel may have been imagining a righteous remnant, but he goes further than the psalmist and suggests that the tree does not flourish for its own sake but in the end becomes a house for birds of every kind.

And Jesus, in telling parables about seeds, points to these older texts and reveals how the seeds of a radically inclusive kingdom have always been there,

since the beginning of time. In talking about seeds Jesus reveals a kingdom planted by a generous God who insists on scattering seed everywhere with little interest in the merit of the soil but in great confidence that the kingdom will emerge and be fruitful, branching out to provide shade and homes for birds.

In *Babette's Feast*, the General spent his life fighting wars and pursuing personal glory in order to forget a lost love. And the pious villagers oriented their lives around saying no to anything that might tempt them from obedience to God. But the kingdom is like seed spread generously, entrusted to grow in all kinds of places. In the end, both the General and the villagers get to taste of the kingdom. Both are enlivened, both are transformed, both in the end bless each other – reaching out branches in which to provide each other a place to nest.

This year we are on a journey with Jesus and this summer we are exploring what it means to be the Church. Perhaps it begins with trusting that God has already planted things in such a way as to guarantee the arrival of the kingdom, even in the most unlikely places.

- If that is true, what seemingly hopeless situation might actually be a seedbed, in which the kingdom of heaven is secretly germinating?
- And what part of yourself that feels broken or stuck or afraid might be the next place from which some green shoot will spring forth?

“Mercy is infinite and we need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude.” From that place, we become fruitful.