

October 2, 2016
Acts 2:44-47
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“A Generous Table”

Good morning! I was in a group of pastors several years ago, and one of the leaders asked us to share our favorite Bible verse or verses. Many of ours were the same as what I’d imagine many of you would say: John 3:16, Psalm 23, John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Great Commission from Matthew 28 which begins, “Go therefore and make disciple of all nations . . .” At our retreat with Fred Bernhard last month, someone mentioned Matthew 25 and the story of the sheep and the goats as a passage which has been important to their life. I’m sure you have other scriptures which have particular meaning for you.

I was surprised that one of the pastors in the group which was surveyed reeled off Acts 2 verses 46 and 47: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Now, I was familiar with this passage already: it is the end of the account of Pentecost and the birth of the church which is at the beginning of Acts, Chapter 2. I believe that all scripture is inspired by God, but that doesn’t mean that it is all equally inspiring. I had just thought of this as part of the narration of the beginning of the church -- sort of anti-climactic after the rush of wind, tongues of flame, speaking in different languages and Peter’s terrific sermon. But these verses at the end of Acts 2 are actually a wonderful example of outrageous and courageous discipleship and the results that had for the early church.

This isn’t specifically a text about communion, but as we gather in Christ’s name on this World Communion Sunday, I want to underline the generosity of Christ’s table and the ideal we are still given as the

church to praise God with glad and generous hearts. Communion is not simply a remembrance of Christ's body in the wine and the bread, it is the church's assertion that we are the body of Christ, and what has been dismembered and broken in our lives can be re-membered and restored when we share with glad and generous hearts.

I want to tell you a story. It's a fable, actually, written by 20th century Danish author Isak Dinesen. It was made into a full-length movie called "Babette's Feast" which I own and would be happy to loan out. The story is set in a small village on the remote coast of Denmark in the 19th century. Two elderly unmarried sisters live there together, and preside over the dwindling congregation that their pastor father started. He is now dead and this austere, Pietist group isn't drawing any new converts. Those who are left are aging and cantankerous as they nurse old hurts and grudges.

In their youth, the girls were beautiful and were courted by many men, including a young soldier and an opera singer, but the girls decided to remain single and stay with their father in this remote village. About 15 years ago, Babette appeared at their door. She was a refugee from a revolution in France, and was sent by the soldier, now an army officer, to find safety with the sisters and to serve as their housekeeper. They can't pay her, but for 14 years, Babette has been their housekeeper and cook, preparing the bland and simple food the congregation expects. Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her each year. One day, she gets word that she has won 10,000 francs in the lottery: a small fortune. She asks the sisters if she can prepare a special dinner for them and their congregation to recognize what would have been their father's 100th birthday. The sisters accept her offer to pay for and prepare "a real French dinner."

Babette arranges for her nephew to go to Paris and order the supplies and have them sent to Denmark. The ingredients are plentiful and exotic and cause some concern in the congregation. What kind of sensual experience might this turn out to be? Maybe it's of the Devil. What should they do? They have a hasty meeting and decide that they must eat the meal, but it would be sinful to act like they enjoy it. They agree among themselves not to say anything about the food during the dinner.

The soldier, who is now a famous general, is back to visit family in the village and is invited to the dinner. He's not aware of the agreement not to say anything about the meal, and he spent time in France and has eaten fine cuisine. He talks and talks about the delicious food and compares it to a wonderful meal that he had years ago at the Café Anglais in Paris. Although the others at the table refuse to comment on the food, they are warmed by the pleasures of the meal, and Babette's gift breaks down their distrust and suspicion of one another. Old wrongs are forgiven, ancient loves re-kindled, and a spirit of redemption settles over the table.

After the meal, the sisters ask Babette about her plans to return to Paris. She tells them that she isn't leaving; she has no money to return; she spent it all on the meal. She is the former chef at the Café Anglais in Paris, and a meal there for 12 people cost 10,000 francs. The sisters bewail that now Babette will be poor the rest of her life. But she replies, "An artist is never poor." And they tell her, "In Paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be."

Now, whatever we think of Babette and her outrageous generosity, whatever we think of those early Christians and their sharing *everything* -- their property as well as their food -- and whatever we think of Jesus Christ who died for us when we were yet sinners -- while we were still lost and shattered -- whatever we think of those things, we are invited to God's table. If you have a glad and generous heart, you are invited to come; if you are determined not to act like you enjoy it, you are invited to come. If you are healthy and strong or if you are wounded and broken, you are invited to come. But know that part of the invitation is to find healing and wholeness at this table. You are invited to leave suspicion and distrust behind. You are invited to receive this generous and unconditional gift of Christ's body and blood not only for its own sake, but so that we may more fully become the body of Christ to serve the world. We are invited to the table with the knowledge that we, too are blessed, broken, and shared. Let's prepare to come to the table with prayer. Please pray with me.

Lord Jesus, we anticipate this meal with humility and hope. We know that there are things which we have done and things which we have

left undone that have hurt our brothers and sisters or failed to honor you. In these moments of silence we confess the ways which we have fallen short of your will for us.

We pray for the grace to be honest with ourselves and to come before you with the assurance that you will hear us and forgive us. If there is anything we need to do to repair relationships with other people, we ask for the courage and humility to reach out to them, so that we do not come to your table with resentment or shame. Grant us the privilege of coming to your table with glad and generous hearts so that we might have the goodwill of all people. Amen.