When Love sits down to the banquet

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> *On this mountain*
> *the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples*
> *a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,*
> *of rich food filled with marrow,*
> *of well-aged wines strained clear.*
> *And he will destroy on this mountain*
> *the shroud that is cast over all peoples,*
> *the sheet that is spread over all nations;*
> *he will swallow up death forever.*
> *Then the LORD GOD will wipe away the tears*
> *from all faces,*
> *and the disgrace of his people*
> *he will take away from all the earth,*
> *for the LORD has spoken.*
> *It will be said on that day,*
> *Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,*
> *so that he might save us.*
> *This is the LORD for whom we have waited;*
> *let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*
> *For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.*
> *(Isa. 25:6–10)*

Imagine, if you will, a banquet. A feast. And you're invited. At first you think it must be some kind of mistake. But no, there's your name in black and white: *cordially invited…honor of your presence…tie optional* (hmm, excellent!).… *Be There Or Be Square.* Yes indeed.

Ah, I love a good banquet. No more feeding at the trough at the local all-you-can-eat. Quality food. Quality drink. Quality people, no doubt. And the service? Divine! Just close your eyes

and smell that aroma as you get close, before you can even see the table setting. What is that, ham? Does Moses know about this? Mashed potatoes and gravy. Green bean casserole. And fresh bread—crusty bread that's never seen plastic wrap or a grocery shelf! Not worthy. Not worthy! And just look at those bottles of well-aged sparkling grape juice. I need to clear my palate and my goblet's almost empty. The view from this mountain is spectacular. You can see the people winding their way up the path to the table. Taking their places. Sampling the dishes. Tipping the cups.

When I was a kid I heard bishop John Steiner preach about a time when he went with his dad to town to get some supplies at the hardware, and the man behind the counter gave them each a glass of homemade dandelion wine. At 11:30 on Sunday morning our beloved bishop was describing in vivid detail the sensation of that liquid flowing like fiery silk down his throat and warming organs he didn't know he had. In the sanctuary the sound of growling stomachs rose to a low rumble. I felt my tongue go limp, and I lifted my eyes to the pulpit. Brother Steiner went on to describe the evil power of that insidious ecstasy, and his firm conviction that had he ever allowed another drop to pass his lips he would have ended up in the gutters of Kansas City. As I listened, I could not imagine one thing I wanted more than a sip of that homemade dandelion wine. The feeling stayed with me through the closing hymn and the doxology, and lingered as I stumbled out of church, back into the real world. I had learned something about the spirituality of the body. The dualism I would later be trained to describe in philosophical terms, and defend as gospel truth, didn't stand a chance against John Steiner's homemade dandelion wine.

To this day, I haven't tasted dandelion wine. But it's being served at this banquet. My family and all my friends are here, of course. Over there's our congregation's section. We're used to this. All those potlucks. Oh! Reserved seating for Mennonite Church USA. Hey, there's that guy who tried to get us kicked out of conference. How'd he get in here? Can't say I mind, though. I see liberals and fundamentalists, invitations in hand, dancing up the path toward the summit arm in arm!

Wait a minute, isn't that one of the Taliban on the other side of the table? Look at him! Noodles in his beard. A self-righteous

smirk on his face. I'd like to go right over there and… Oops, he just caught me looking at him. Whoa, those soft eyes. And that's not a smirk at all. It's more like a gentle smile, tinged with sadness, regret, forgiven-ness.

My adversary's face has ceased to put me on my guard; it no longer fills me with fear and loathing. Its lines have softened, its features have become as familiar as my own. People are lifting their glasses to each other.

Who are your worst enemies, the people you never want to sit down beside and share a meal with? In your mind's eye, you can see them here. But the hurt and anger you usually feel in their presence has evaporated. *The shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations is lifted and destroyed* (Isa. 25:7). My adversary's face has ceased to put me on my guard; it no longer fills me with fear and loathing. Its lines have softened, its features have become as familiar as my own. People are lifting their glasses to each other. Did you know that the Hebrew word for feast comes from the verb meaning *to drink?* People are engaged in conversation across the table. They're saying, *This is Yahweh, for whom we've waited. Look, this is our God, for whom we've waited* (Isa. 25:9).

A nineteenth-century short story from the Jewish shtetels of Russia begins: "Another pogrom had broken out, and God was silent as only God can be silent." This is Yahweh, for whom we've waited. Patiently waited. Ours is not a culture that likes to wait. We're in a hurry. Things to do. Places to go. People to see…in passing. Can't wait. Gotta go. See you later. Wait. Wait. What are you waiting for? Ah, nothin'. Can't really say. Whatever it is, it's not here yet. Just wait. Hurry up and wait.

Well, the waiting is over. This is our God, come to save us. This is Yahweh, for whom we have served, and suffered, and denied ourselves, and emigrated, and worn strange clothes, and talked German, and worked rocky fields, and protested wars and poverty and killing and racism and abuse, and helped to rebuild and develop. Yahweh has come to save us from all that, too. And God sits us down at the banquet table and fills our glasses, waiting on us—hand and foot.

This image reminds me of *Babette's Feast,* a film directed by Gabriel Axel and based on a short story by Isak Dineson. In his recent book, *Faith and Film,* Bryan Stone provides a theological

interpretation of this compelling tale that I use here to evoke our reading of Isaiah's transformative banquet.[1] It tells the story of a French chef who flees the violence of the 1871 Communard uprising in her native Paris and takes refuge in an isolated village on the coast of Danish Jutland. Babette is given lodging in the home of two pious sisters in exchange for service as their cook and housekeeper. They are ignorant of her exceptional culinary gifts, as is the rest of their village.

The sisters are leaders of a small puritanical sect begun by their austere and deeply religious father. The other members of the community are likewise ascetic, strict, and exclusive. The two sisters have devoted their lives to continuing the work of their now dead father, giving up careers and suitors along the way. They see to the needs of the congregation and attempt to maintain the spiritual integrity of the community. Over the years, however, the small community has become engulfed in bitterness, jealousy, and guilt. People hold grudges against each other and harbor resentments that just seem to fester.

For fourteen years, Babette graciously serves the two sisters and their ever-diminishing flock, never asking for a thing. She readily accepts the task of preparing meals for the community's weekly services, and she continues the sisters' tradition of delivering food to the needy of the community. In keeping with the puritanical lifestyle of the community, Babette is allowed to make only the blandest of foods—boiled fish and a staple known as ale bread, bread soaked in ale and water and cooked into a gruel. She makes no complaint.

One day Babette receives word that she has won 10,000 francs in a lottery. She decides to prepare an extravagant French meal for the entire community on the hundredth birthday of the deceased pastor. The sisters are reluctant, but Babette begs them to allow her this one privilege. Of course, many of the foods are far too exquisite, even sinful, in the eyes of the aging and sensually challenged congregation. They fear for their own spiritual well-being. Not wishing to hurt Babette's feelings or reject her good intentions, however, they agree among themselves to eat the meal, but determine not to allow themselves to enjoy it. The food may pass their lips, but their spirits will be elsewhere. Such is their resolve.

Babette pulls out all the stops. Imported into her kitchen are all sorts of sumptuous food and exquisite drink: turtle soup, blinis demidoff, quail stuffed with truffles and foie gras, baba au rhum, Veuve Clicquot. The table is elegantly prepared and the dinner guests are summoned to begin. By coincidence, the decorated General Lowenhielm, accompanying his aged aunt, is also a dinner guest for the occasion. He had once vied for the hand of one of the sisters and been rebuffed. Having spent time in the fanciest restaurants in Paris, he alone recognizes Babette's virtuoso artistry, and his praise and admiration overflow.

Though the general is the only one fully able to appreciate the grace and beauty of this seven-course meal, the congregation gathered around the banquet table gradually becomes aware that they are being treated to something extraordinary. More is going on during the meal than the mere satisfaction of appetite and the effect of the champagne's heady effusiveness. In spite of their pious disclaimers, the guests bit by bit overcome their apprehensions about the feast and start to experience joy and communion. They extend acceptance to one another and begin to forgive each other for sins committed long before. Even sins hidden or forgotten. Their resistance is broken down by this exquisite spiritual assault on their physical senses. As the film draws to a close, the villagers file out of the house rejoicing and join hands to form a circle as they sing a hymn of praise. They nod and smile together, affirming each other and the world God has allowed them to enjoy. They have experienced spontaneous, sacrificial, extravagant love, and they cannot help but respond with joy and acceptance. The feast becomes an occasion of radical transformation.

Babette is a Christ-figure.... She has so willingly emptied herself into this meal that the feast takes on eucharistic significance. As her own substance is consumed by those around the table, the entire community is transformed.

In this wonderful representation of the eschatological banquet, Babette is a Christ-figure—or, in Isaianic terms, a Yahweh-figure. For this former refugee who has been dependent entirely on the mercy of others, a servant who takes her meals alone in the kitchen, the feast is her last hurrah. Through her total and unselfish sacrifice she paves the way to reconciliation and

salvation for a community rife with bitterness and fear. Babette has so willingly emptied herself into this meal that the feast takes on eucharistic significance. As her own substance is consumed by those around the table, the entire community is transformed.

> *The wine of Love is music,*
> *And the feast of Love is song.*
> *And when Love sits down to the banquet,*
> *Love sits long.*
>
> *James Thomson (1834–1882)*

And then Yahweh will wipe away the tears from all faces. And the disgrace from this and every people Yahweh will take away from all the earth (Isa. 25:8). Amen.

Note

[1] Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice Pr., 2000).

About the author

Paul Keim is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Goshen College. He enjoys studying languages, ancient and modern. He may also be found, often against the advice of significant others, playing basketball, making music, and engaging in vigorous debate with his two daughters and one son, who range in age from 21 to 3 years old.