

"COME TO THE FEAST"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
September 3, 1995

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### INTRODUCTION

The Academy Award winning movie, Babette's Feast, is based on a book by Isak Dinesen. It serves as a bit of a springboard for today's sermon.

In Babette's Feast, the author very creatively weaves the story of Phillipa and Martina...two daughters of a well-known Lutheran pastor in a village in Denmark in the late 1870s. Their father's very rigid and strict religious discipline has shaped the entire community's approach to life and to the expression of their Christian faith. The community shows a decided lack of joy and of celebration.

The father is very possessive of his daughters and prevents them from marrying. He eventually dies leaving his daughters to carry on the tradition of this rigid discipline which he has established. And the daughters do carry on just as their father would have wanted...with his same cold, austere religious piety. However, the community is growing older and many of its devoted people are dying out. And even worse, the community begins to fight among themselves which adds to their lack of joy and of celebration.

### DEVELOPMENT

One stormy night a woman who is a political refugee from Paris shows up on the sisters' doorstep and reluctantly they take her in. The woman, named Babette, is grateful to the sisters and to the community for giving her shelter...but she is curious at the lack of joy and celebration which she feels. But still, they're good folk and they're willing to provide Babette with sanctuary. In exchange for a place to stay and food to eat, Babette agrees to take care of the two aging sisters, Phillipa and Martina. Babette lives and shares in the life of this small community for many years.

One day a stroke of luck befalls Babette. A friend, back in France, has been purchasing a lottery ticket in Babette's name every year since she left her homeland as a refugee. To Babette's amazement she has won a small fortune. Babette decides to throw a great feast for the sisters and for this community that took her in and gave her a home. There's much excitement over this turn of events, but secretly...the sisters are saddened by Babette's good fortune because they feel that Babette will now be leaving them. However, Babette goes about throwing her feast...the likes of which they have never before seen!

The sisters and their little community of faith are faced with a dilemma. Such a feast is sinful according to their joyless faith. Their faith is a faith of fasting and not of feasting! They decide, however, they will go to the feast, but they will have no fun. They will be first-class "party-poopers".

What they do not know is that Babette was a renown chef in a fine French restaurant back in Paris before becoming a refugee and coming to their community. She really knows how to throw a party. She prepares for the feast by securing the finest foods available. No one in that community has ever sat before a banquet like the one she has prepared. These rather simple, austere people try hard...really hard...not to enjoy this tremendous feast, but soon laughter and joy are overwhelming all who are present.

All of them - including the two sisters - are so transformed by the feast that they open up their lives to the celebrating power of the Holy Spirit and for them it is like the Day of Pentecost. The power of joy is just bubbling over. They break into song and end up singing hymns of praise and one of the sisters is even heard to say, "The stars have moved closer tonight!"

And in this happy occasion the sisters come to experience the truth of something that Joseph Marmion once said and which we need to always remember,

"Joy is the echo of God's life and presence within us.  
Christianity stripped of joy is not Christianity at all".

Babette begins to sense that the sisters are sad because they believe she will soon be leaving them. And in order to ease their concern, Babette declares,

"I cannot leave you now....for I have no funds. I spent it all on the feast...."

#### GOD'S GUEST LIST

Now in our reading from Luke's Gospel earlier in our service, we see Jesus dining at the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees are watching Jesus carefully, closely....in all probability to "trap" Him. Right off, it makes you wonder if they are enjoying their meal at all. Certainly they are missing an opportunity to enjoy the wit and wisdom and those marvelous insights of the Man they have invited to dine with them. At this dinner, Jesus proceeds to give the Pharisees a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

For one thing, Jesus reveals to them that the "guest list" in the Kingdom is substantially different from their guest list.

For at the Kingdom feast there will be room for all the "Babettes" of this world. People who are fleeing injustice. People who have been kept on the "outside" looking in - the poor, the disabled, the overlooked, the downtrodden, the dispossessed....all will have a place in the Feast in God's Kingdom. Listen to the words of Jesus:

"When you give a feast...invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed...because they cannot repay you".  
(Luke 14: 14)

Here's a story that some of you will enjoy...I think. Some time back, Senator Bob Dole, who was then the Senate Minority Leader, got caught up in something of an embarrassing political "flap". Actually, Bob Dole took the advice of Jesus, although chances are he didn't recognize he was doing it at the time. It seems that his office sent out a 2 page letter inviting a man named Bosko Struminkovski of Memphis, "to accept membership in the Republican Senatorial Inner Circle. Dole explained to Bosko in his letter that,

"The Republican Senatorial Inner Circle is made up of individuals who....discuss national and regional topics in a comfortable mix of business and social gatherings. Our next INNER CIRCLE briefing will be held in Washington, D. C.. And we'd like to have you come..."

Well...as much as he might have enjoyed attending this gathering, Bosko was unable to accept the invitation to join Senator Dole's INNER CIRCLE in Washington for the simple reason that he was a prisoner at a Federal Penitentiary in Memphis...serving a 23 year sentence for possession of firearms, drug trafficking and bribery.

Sometimes, of course, politics do make strange bedfellows....but this invitation was in error to Senator Dole....one of those things that can happen when you're working with thousands of names on a mailing list.

Still, this political "faux pas" does remind us of how tempting it is for all of us to want to restrict our relationships to those who are members of our own little "inner circle". But at the Lord's Table we sit breaking bread with people we didn't even know existed...because they're not from our "inner circle". That's the first thing Jesus is saying to us about the feast in God's Kingdom. The Kingdom list is substantially different from one most of us might have put together....but let's move on to a second thing we need to see.

#### THE HOST'S GENEROSITY

And that has to do with the generosity of the One who throws the party. This party is only for those who cannot repay the invitation.

You know, there seems to me to be a rather subtle theme running through and present in so much of the New Testament. It's the theme about a God who throws parties. A woman finds a lost coin and throws a party. A lost boy comes home and His father throws a party. Remember how Jesus compared Himself to a bridegroom at a wedding feast. He contrasted Himself sharply with the ascetic John the Baptist who came fasting. Jesus comes across as a Man filled with life and joy and with a spirit of celebration. Never forget that. Many Christians even today have a tough time with that side of His life. So many have an easier time thinking of Him and seeing Him as "a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief...." than we do as the joyful Man the common people of His own day came to know and to love.

Fred Craddock tells of growing up during those difficult years of the nineteen thirties...depression years...and how often money was in short supply for his family. The family was forced to move to town in order to seek work. Every able family member tried to find work in order to earn money. The family, he says, kept a cigar box on the kitchen table where all funds made were kept in order that his mother could pay the rent and buy the necessary food.

However, once in a while on a Friday night Fred's father would take the money...some of it...and go to town and buy Fred's mother a box of chocolates or a beautiful rose. She would always "fuss" with him for doing so and tell him that they didn't have the funds for such extravagances. And then one day his father said something that Fred Craddock never forgot...and this was it...he said,

"When our lives are defined by what goes in and out of that little cigar box...then we will, indeed, be poor people. Life will have robbed us of our joy...."

Some present may need to hear that. The point is in all of this that joy is an essential part of the Christian life and the Pharisees whom Jesus was trying

to educate as He sat at table with them were very much like the two sisters in Babette's Feast. They were weighed down with that same joyless pietism that Judas expressed in John's Gospel when you may recall he was offended by the woman who was anointing the feet of Jesus with some expensive perfume. All that perfume, Judas thought, could be sold to provide for the poor. And indeed caring for the poor is important, but it is also important for the community of faith to celebrate....to come together and to celebrate the goodness and the generosity of God. God is a generous and a gracious God who likes to throw parties. The God who rejoices every time a sinner comes home. Remember that.

OUR NAME IS ON THAT PARTY LIST

And this brings me to the final point of this message that some one present here today may need to hear. Our name is on that party list of His. Yes, it's there....dear friend. Jesus is throwing a party...a feast...and you and I are invited.

And all we have to do is accept His invitation. Oh, some may say, "but I really don't deserve to go...not to Christ's party". And I say, "Friend...that's just the point!" Read the story....linger in the margins...reflect on the meaning between the lines. The only way a person ever comes to wholeness...to salvation...is through what God does. There's not a work of righteousness that any one of us can come up with that gets us "in the door". We are saved by God's works of righteousness...by God's mercy, by God's grace. It's there for us and all we have to do is to RECEIVE it. And the only thing that keep us out is our refusal to accept that invitation to His banquet.

Yes...it's a bit like the story of the small lad whose mother, unknown to him, had planned a surprise birthday party. After he got home, he went upstairs to his room and while he was up there, all of his friends and his classmates and some of his teachers gathered in the living room downstairs. And when his mother went to his room to get him and bring him down - he was gone.

He had climbed down a tree outside his window and was hiding in a nearby park. The rest of the boys and girls went on to enjoy a good time...but little Johnny never turned up. When he came home for supper early that evening, his mother asked him where he had been....and told him that he had missed a wonderful time, a time that was planned JUST FOR HIM. He tearfully confessed he had heard his mother call, but hid until supper because he thought she had a chore for him to do!

And how sad - for him and for us if we make the same mistake. There is a party being prepared. The guest list is all inclusive. And no matter how many parties we have missed in this world, we don't have to miss out on this party, on His party. Remember, the ONE who throws this party is all loving, all gracious and so generous. We're invited...even though there's nothing in this world we can do to repay our Host. All He asks is that we accept His invitation....and come and join His feast. And so may it be with each of us - this hour, this day...and always!

PRAYER

Move in our hearts, O God. Confirm within us the feelings of this hour in this church...the resolutions and decisions that may be forming. Yes, His guest list is long and wide and our name is there. Forgive us our sins. Create the right spirit within us...bring us into the light and love of Your presence. This we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd...who knows His sheep all by name and gently calls them to Himself. Amen.

Visit our sick with the lifting assurance of Your love. Touch with healing those whom we mention in the privacy of our thoughts in these moments...their names are known to you....

Enrich the bereaved with Thy warming, healing presence. The race is short and we would run it well...always to your glory. This we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep by name and who gently calls them to Himself and comes to them in their time of need. Amen.

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