Faith Review of Film
Erin Brooke Woodall Mills

Film Title: Babette’s Feast (Babettes gæstebud)

Year: 1988 (won Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film- Denmark)

Director(s): Gabriel Axel

Original release form/venue: Originally released for viewing in theaters

Current availability and formats: DVD, Netflix, Amazon Video on Demand

Language: Danish with English subtitles

Genre: Drama/Romance/Comedy

Story elements: In Babette’s Feast, the story is the star. Though the acting is wonderful and the characters interesting, it is the story that draws us in. Babette’s Feast is a tale set in 19th century Denmark where two adult sisters live in an isolated village which their father, the pastor of a small Protestant church, founded. The village is small and the members of the church pride themselves on their simplistic lifestyles. We are given a brief look at their young lives and discover that both sisters had the opportunity to leave the village, but chose to stay with their father and serve him, the church, and the people of the community. On a rainy, cold night, a French woman, Babette, appears at their door with a letter from an old friend. The letter explains that Babette is a refugee, whose husband and son were killed in Paris, and asks the sisters if they would take her into their home and allow her to work for them. Babette knows the sisters cannot pay her but commits herself to work for them as maid/housekeeper/cook. Instantly, the food the sisters serve to the old and disabled members of the community improves- clearly, Babette is a gifted cook. The sisters decide, many years after their father’s death, to hold a dinner to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth. Babette receives a letter telling her she has won the lottery in France and asks the sisters if they would allow her to plan, pay for, and prepare the meal for the celebration. As food and drink begin to arrive in town, the sisters grow very concerned about what Babette, a Catholic and a foreigner, might be preparing for them. The members of the church agree that they will eat the meal, but will not comment on it or appear to enjoy it in anyway. Babette then prepares the feast of a lifetime for the members of the tiny church and the commitment they have made starts to crumble.

The tale is fairly simple but beautiful. Some viewers will find the pacing to be a little slow but it suits the development of the story perfectly. It is a story of kindness, self-sacrifice, and the redemptive power of food and true fellowship. The atmosphere, created by the characters and the setting, is both mysterious and fairy-tale like.

Film language elements: What is so refreshing about Babette’s Feast is that nothing blows up, no one is killed, and I didn’t find myself constantly turning the volume down. There is no fancy camera work and there are no special effects. The story sells itself and doesn’t have to be dressed up in anyway. In fact, it almost appears as though the filmmakers were deliberately working not to distract the audience from the story. The colors, with few exceptions, are drab-characters (even Babette) dress in gray and black, the town is a muted brown, and even the food
that is served (until the end) looks like sludge. There is a constant fog hanging over the village and we never once see a tree or bird (except when Babette cooks them). The music used throughout the film is beautiful, but quiet and subtle. Framing is effective, when used, as it focuses the viewer on the faces of the characters or on the incredible food Babette is preparing. There is a stark contrast created by a church member, no makeup on, black dress, gray hair pulled back in a knot, drinking a rich red wine or eating a bright purple plum. It would be easy to miss these details without deliberate framing.

The food in Babette’s Feast has a sacramental quality. Through it, the sisters and Babette sustain the villagers- those who are old, disabled, or ill. By the end of the film, the church members are quarreling and relationships are in trouble, but the elaborate, artful meal Babette prepares brings them together. They experience joy again and are reminded of the good all around them and their love for one another. They clearly feel as though they have been given a gift, an opportunity they will likely never have again. Babette spends her fortune to create this experience for them, but it is also clearly something she needs to do for herself. It reconnects her to the good part of her past life, and makes her remember how much she loved to cook when she was a chef in Paris.

Audience/cultural context elements: The story presented in Babette’s Feast has a long history- it was first written in English as a short story and was originally published in 1953 in the Ladies Home Journal. It was then translated into Danish by author Karen Blixen as part of a collection of five short stories entitled Anecdotes of Destiny which appeared in 1958. The director of the film, Gabriel Axel, also wrote the screenplay for Babette’s Feast and the movie was completed in 1987. Thus, from start to finish, this story has likely had a number of intended audiences, all of which would be vastly different from a modern day American audience. The latter would likely have a hard time relating to the story or characters in the film, though many, like myself, might find it refreshingly simple. It certainly presents themes that are counter to a lot of what we hear and are inundated with in popular culture (i.e. the ‘what’s in it for me’ mentality, preoccupation with outward beauty, and the importance of luxury).

Theology is found/Theological themes for conversation: The Arts and Faith blog lists Babette’s Feast as one of the Top 100 Spiritually Significant Films and includes the following review, which I thought important to include here, “Babette’s Feast is a feast in itself, for the heart, the senses, and above all the spirit. At the same time, unlike many food-themed films (cf. Like Water for Chocolate; Tortilla Soup), it isn’t a voluptuous or sensual affair. It’s sensitive, funny, hopeful, and ultimately joyous; but there’s a restrained, almost ascetical quality to it, especially in the first half. Even in the climactic feast, there is no collapse into epicurian dissolution or “food pornography.” Elevation, not mere gratification, is the goal of Babette’s Feast.” I could not agree more.

There are numerous theological themes evident throughout the film: the sacred versus the profane, the importance of self-sacrifice and loyalty, unshakable faith, simplicity versus luxury and the ultimate question of life’s purpose. The opposing forces at play in some of these themes become less distinct as the film progresses as evidenced by the speech of the General at dinner, in which he remembers the words of the Pastor, “Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together, Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” Babette, who has basically been in exile for nearly two decades, has once again expressed her creative genius and has spent all of her money doing so.
The climactic scene of *Babette’s Feast* clearly parallels the event of the Last Supper. The dinner scene in the film is solemn and memorable, and the relationship between worldliness and godliness is explored.

This film is a wonderful conversation starter. Below are some recommended questions for generating conversation:

- Describe the small village in Jutland on the west coast of Norway where the story takes place? Is this a place you would want to live? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the two sisters when you first meet them? Do you admire them? Feel sorry for them?
- Achille Papin, director of the Paris Opera, asks the Pastor for Phillipa’s hand in marriage. He responds that his daughters serve at his right and left hand and questions how Papin could take one of them away from him? What do you think about this?
- Each daughter has the opportunity to leave the village but chooses not to? Why?
- Each of the men from outside the village who encounter the sisters is changed forever. How so? Why?
- Describe the members of the Protestant church- what is their worship service like? How do they act toward one another? What has happened in this community?
- When Babette arrives, the sisters must adjust to having someone serve them, which is not something they are accustomed to- why is this so difficult for them? Babette works for them without pay- why?
- Why does Babette want to make the celebratory meal for the villagers? Is this a totally selfless act?
- Why do the villagers start to worry about the meal they will be served? What is their solution to this dilemma? Do you think it matters that they don’t speak about the meal? What difference does this make?
- What is the role of the General in the dinner scene? Think not only about his history with Martine, but also with his position as the only “outsider” in the group, what he wears, where he has been, etc.
- What happens over the course of the meal? Think about the individual people as well as their relationships to one another. What role does food play in this scene- for the villagers and for Babette?
- At the end of the meal, the General gives a speech in which he remembers the words of the Pastor, “Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together, Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” Why are these words significant?
- At the end of the film, Phillipa assures Babette that her food will one day delight the angels in heaven just as her own voice will ring out in eternity. Martine knows that she will live forever in the heart of the General. Thus, both women’s lives are resolved- they understand their destinies. Is this a satisfying resolution for you? Can you imagine an alternate ending to each story? How would this ending have changed the impact of the film or shifted its message?

**Suggested types of conversation:** This film can be used for a variety of conversations. It could be very interesting to view the dinner scene in concert with a study of texts describing the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-23; John 13:21-26). Though I would like to think that a youth audience could view and appreciate this film, I think it would be more
appropriate for a young adult to adult audience. It might be fun to view the film in a “dinner and a movie” type setting in which discussion could take place over dinner after the movie.

Small group discussion could also work well with this film- it might be interesting to assign each member of a small group to a different character in the film and then have the groups view the film from that character’s perspective. You could also have each group come up with a different ending for the film and then allow the larger group to discuss how these endings would change the themes they saw play out in the original ending.

**Recommended ways to view and engage the film:** I would highly recommend that any group discussing *Babette’s Feast* see the film in its entirety. The story itself is critically important to the development of key themes. However, the dinner scene (Chapter 14) can be viewed in isolation with the proper background and set up.