

Abundant Provision of Grace

Last week in discussion the question was raised, "What is grace? How do we define this word that we use so often in Christian circles?"

Grace is one of those words that is better not approached with the Western tendency to dissect the thing. We're forever taking things apart, trying to understand the whole on the basis of its parts. While we can do that to some degree with a term like grace, it's more helpful for us to use the Middle Eastern way of explaining things through a story, like Jesus did, when He explained grace through the story of the Prodigal Son.

The story I want us to look at first, though, is the story that is retold at some length in Philip Yancey's book What's So Amazing About Grace?, the story of Babette's Feast. Some of you will have heard me tell this story before, others will have read the book, but bear with it again, because it does a brilliant job of helping us understand what grace is, what God's grace is.

Karen Blixen was a Danish writer - she is best known for two works in English, Out of Africa and Babette's Feast, both of which were made into movies that won Academy Awards. The film version of Babette's Feast is set in a poor fishing village on the coast of Denmark where an austere Lutheran sect was led by a white-bearded Dean. This group renounced all worldly pleasures, not that many were available in Norre Vosburg. They wore black, ate boiled cod and sang songs about the New Jerusalem.

The old Dean, a widower, had two daughters, Martine and Philippa, both of whom were courted and both of whom refused their suitors. Martine resisted the advances of a young cavalry officer and Philippa turned away the most famous operatic singer of the day, Achille Papin from France, who was enchanted by her beautiful voice.

Years go by. The old Dean passes away and his daughters do their best to keep the small group together, but things are not the same. There is bitterness and unforgiveness, relationships are strained and few attend the services.

One miserable, rainy night the two sisters hear a knock at their door and find a woman there who speaks no Danish, a woman holding a letter of introduction from none other than Achille Papin. Her name was Babette. Her husband and son had been killed during the civil war in France and she had had to flee as her life was in danger there. He added a note: "Babette can cook."

Despite some misgivings, the sisters allowed her to stay with them, taught her how to split a cod and cook the gruel of boiled bread that they served the older folks in the village. She was faithful in her duties and her willing spirit and cheerful demeanor brought new life to the group.

But, after 12 years, she received her first letter from France, a letter that notified her that her lottery number, a number that a friend had renewed for her every year, had

won and that she would be receiving 10,000 francs. The sisters tried to hide their disappointment, thinking that this would mean the end of Babette's stay with them. But Babette was not intending to leave -- her life was still in danger in France and she had come to love the people of Norre Vosburg. She asked the sisters if it would be okay with them if she cooked a meal for the remaining faithful in honour of the 100th anniversary of their father's birth. She pleaded with them, reminding them that she'd asked nothing from them during the twelve years she had spent in their home. They agreed, Babette left briefly to make the necessary arrangements and as the day for the special occasion drew near, the community witnessed the arrival of many things they had never seen before. Boats docked at the wharf and workmen pushed wheelbarrows loaded with crates of small birds, cases of champagne and wine, the entire head of a cow, fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, ham, a huge tortoise still alive and swaying his head from side to side.

The sisters were starting to panic and didn't know what to do about this predicament. After all, the tongue is meant for praise and thanksgiving, not for indulging exotic tastes. They went to the community, now old and grey and with only 11 members remaining. People sympathized with the sisters' problem, but could think of no better solution than to eat the French meal, but to not say anything about it, lest Babette get the wrong idea.

Finally the day came, December 15, and they were greeted with a light blanket of snow and the welcome news that the cavalry officer who had courted Martine all those years ago, now a general in the royal palace, would be joining his aunt and attending their dinner. Of course, he was not let in on the pledge to say nothing about the food, so, while the villagers sat in silence, looking forlorn as they tasted each successive delicacy, the general praised every aspect of the meal, repeatedly expressing wonder that such food could be found in this remote village.

Somehow, in the midst of the meal, there was a softening of the old bitterness. A man who had cheated another on a business deal confessed, two women who had long been feuding were reconciled. But the general could speak of nothing but the food: When the kitchen boy delivered the baby quail prepared '*en Sarcophage*', the general remarked that he seen such a dish in only one place in Europe, the famous *Cafe Anglais* in Paris, the restaurant once renowned for its woman chef. If you Google '*caille en sarcophage*' you'll find that it's a very expensive dish, quail in puff pastry, that is very difficult to make well and is served only rarely, by prior arrangement, at the finest restaurants.

The story ends with two scenes. Outside, the oldtimers join hands around the fountain and sing the old songs of the faith, while stars shine brightly overhead and the snow glistens on the ground below. They felt, Blitzen wrote, "as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were frolicking like little lambs."

The final scene takes place inside, in the wreck of a kitchen piled high with dirty dishes, greasy pots, shells and bones, broken crates, vegetable trimmings and

empty bottles. Babette sits amid the mess, looking as wasted as the night she arrived twelve years before. The sisters realize that none of the company have said a word to Babette about the feast she has made for them.

Martine speaks: "It was quite a nice dinner, Babette."

Babette is silent for awhile, then says, "I was once cook at the Cafe Anglais."

Martine, not seeming to hear what Babette has said, replies, "We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Babette."

Babette tells them she will not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives there have been killed or put in prison . . . and, of course, it would be expensive to return to Paris from there.

"But what about the 10,000 francs?" the sisters ask.

Then Babette tells them that the meal they have just eaten has taken every last one of the 10,000 francs she had won in the lottery. "Don't be shocked - that's what a proper dinner for 12 costs at the Cafe Anglais."

Yancey finishes his rendition of the story by going back to the dinner and to a speech delivered by the general in response to the wonderful meal he has just shared. I'll quote from Yancey:

In the general's speech, Isak Dinesen (one of several pen names that Karen Blitzen used) leaves no doubt that she wrote "Babette's Feast" not simply as a story of a fine meal but as a parable of grace: a gift that cost everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient. This is what General Loewenhielm told the grim-faced parishioners gathered around him at Babette's table:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite . . . But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my dear friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

Twelve years before, Babette had landed among the graceless ones.

Followers of Luther, they heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday and the rest of the week tried to earn God's favor with their pieties and renunciations.

Grace came to them in the form of a feast, Babette's feast, a meal of a lifetime lavished on those who had in no way earned it, who barely possessed the faculties to receive it. Grace came to Norre Vosburg as it always comes: free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.

The picture we have of grace from this story is of lavish, boundless supply. That's the picture we also get from the story of the Prodigal Son that Jesus told. The father in the story, which you can read in Luke 15, is insulted again and again by his second son. He is taken advantage of and he knows it. He loses his reputation in the community because of the way both his boys treat him. But none of that matters to him because he is so focused on, so given to, showing love and mercy to his boys.

Can you get hold of the idea that God wants to win your heart with His love? That He has boatloads of grace for you? This is the message of the Prodigal Son story and the message told in Babette's Feast.

*The moment comes when our eyes are opened,
and we see and realize that grace is infinite.*

All of which serves as an introduction to our text for today, which is found in Romans 5:17. Again, the context is very important, so let's back up to verse 12. The argument from verses 12-14 is simply that sin came into the world through Adam's disobedience and that death came with it. Even though there was no law from the time of Adam right up until the time of Moses, still there was sin in the world and death was inevitable for all people. Paul says that even though no one was disobeying a command, like Adam had when he ate the forbidden fruit in the garden, still death reigned. Then comes v. 15 and Paul opens up his contrast between Adam's sin and Jesus' redemptive work on the cross.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

It's helpful to look at all the contrasts in this passage. Adam's sin had power -- it resulted in death for everyone! How much power has Jesus' gift of His own life? Adam's sin resulted in judgment and condemnation; Jesus' gift brought justification. One person's sin brought death; God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness allows us to reign in life. There is a huge reversal going on in this passage. What was destroyed by human action in the garden of Eden is being restored in a lavish display of grace through the cross of Christ.

Notice that the word "gift" is used five times in this passage and the word "receive" is used as well.

*The gift is not like the trespass . . .
. . . the gift that came by the grace of one man . . .
The gift of God is not like the result of one man's sin
. . . the gift followed many trespasses and brought
justification
God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of
righteousness
. . . those who receive God's abundant provision . . .*

What did Babette do for the little clan of believers in Norre Vosburg? She gave them a gift. They could hardly handle it and certainly didn't appreciate it for what it was. Isn't

that a lot like the gift of grace that God pours out lavishly on us? Her gift warmed their hearts and began to change the way they saw one another. Isn't that so much like God's gift of grace to us, a gift that comes with instructions: "love one another as I have loved you," "forgive as I have forgiven you" "bear with one another and so fulfill the law of Christ"? Her gift cost her everything she had received, plus a whole lot of hard work and the pain of seeing the gift at least partially rejected by those who would refuse to express appreciation and gratitude. Isn't that so much like God's gift of grace to us? He pours out an abundance of love and mercy and so many turn away from it, not seeing it in its goodness and not appreciating what it cost Him to provide it. It cost Jesus His life, a sacrifice of great agony and profound loss in His relationship with the Father, but a gift He gladly gave for us.

The nature of the gift in Babette's Feast is extravagant and that's the point. The gift of grace that God offers us is also extravagant. Notice the words Paul uses to describe it in this passage:

. . . how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!

. . . God's abundant provision of grace . . .

And then this phrase, describing those who receive -- not those who deserve, not those who lead, not those who are outstanding or prominent, but those who receive -- how much more will those who receive "reign in life" through Jesus.

There is a connection made here that we must not miss: if we receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness, we will reign in life. I think the opposite is also true: that if we strive to earn God's love, to be worthy, to stand in our own righteousness instead of being clothed in His, we will struggle in life. It's those who receive who reign and those who can't accept this amazing gift who continue to struggle.

The younger brother in the story of the Prodigal Son gladly received his father's grace and forgiveness, while the older brother couldn't accept it because he was so focused on what he deserved, what he'd earned in life. Paul is telling us that we shouldn't want what we deserve, but should prefer the gift of God. We shouldn't be content to live in frustration or depression or under guilt or shame when the Father's love has provided us with abundant grace, forgiveness, peace and the ability to reign in life.

I want to say all this again and again and again, just because our words seem so inadequate in describing it. But maybe the best thing is to keep the stories in the forefront; the Prodigal Son, Babette's Feast, the cross. Each is a story of an extravagant gift that is wrapped up in mercy and love. Each is the story of a gift that changes the lives of those who receive it. Each is the story of people who don't deserve the gift, who haven't come close to earning what is being offered, but who receive it none the less. And the amazing thing is that the cross of Christ is not just a story -- it really happened and it really happened for us.

There are times for us to push forward, to press on towards maturity in our faith, to

embrace the disciplines that help us grow as Christians -- but there are times when we get so discouraged in the process, in the journey of faith, that we just need to be reminded of the gift that we have been given by the Father, through the Son. If we are going to reign in life we need to reign through the grace of our Lord Jesus. Let's close with the words of the general:

Grace, my dear friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.