

Proper 14A 2020 Sermon

1 Kings 19:9-13a

At Horeb, the mount of God, Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him...

The film *Babette's Feast* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1987; and even though I have to read the subtitles in order to understand what is being said, it *still* remains one of the most powerful and moving films I have ever seen in my life. You can rent it through Amazon's video streaming for \$4.00, and it is worth every penny. (<https://www.amazon.com/Babettes-English-Subtitled-Stephane-Audran/dp/B00A5IXCHA>)

The setting for the film is a small 19th Century Danish coastal village, where there is a congregation that belongs to a very strict, austere, and legalistic Lutheran sect called Pietism, which focuses on individual salvation through the living of a very austere and moralistic life. The village congregation is led by a pastor who has two beautiful daughters. Many suitors, who pass through the village, court these daughters; but their strict father, suspicious of any kind of fleshly indulgence, rejects them all.

The father dies, and the two aging sisters try to keep the church going. But as the years go by, the life and spirit of the community dries up like the dried codfish which form the staple of their diet. Each villager comes to see *themselves* as being right and righteous, while being quick to see the faults and failings of their fellow villagers. They criticize and grumble about each other behind their backs. Rather than being a community characterized by Christian love, they have become a factionalized group of people characterized by spitefulness and passive-aggressive backstabbing. And yet each person still believes themselves to be a righteous, "saved" Christian, who possesses the "real" truth, over and against their wrong-headed neighbors.

One day, a woman, Babette, a refugee from the counter-revolutionary bloodshed which was happening in her native city of Paris, arrives in the little Danish

village. She offers to serve the two sisters as a housekeeper, working at no cost, just room and board. “Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. One day, [14 years after she first arrived in the Danish village, Babette] wins the lottery of 10,000 francs. [But] instead of using the money to return to Paris... she decides to spend it preparing a delicious dinner for the sisters and their small congregation on the occasion of their founding pastor’s hundredth birthday.

“[Babette] arranges for her nephew to go to Paris and gather the supplies for the feast. The ingredients are... sumptuous, and exotic, and their arrival causes much discussion among the villagers... [T]he sisters begin to worry that the meal will become a sin of sensual luxury...”¹ And yet, they and the other villagers have come to love and respect Babette, and do not want to hurt her feelings by rejecting her gift. So they all decide that they will attend the feast and eat the food, but they will not allow themselves to *enjoy* the food, or to comment on it during the meal.

One of the villagers invites her nephew, a famous army general and a former suitor of one of the sisters, to attend the feast. At the dinner, he, who had travelled widely in the world, is amazed at the superb quality of the food and wine, and remarks that the only time he has ever tasted such sumptuous food was years ago at the Café Anglais in Paris. He stands up from his chair at the meal and gives a sort of speech, during which he quotes a verse from Psalm 85, our appointed psalm for today: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

Although the villagers had agreed not to enjoy the food, Babette’s gift cannot help but have a profound affect. Around the dinner table, villagers who had harbored grudges against each other for years begin to apologize, and long-standing distrust begins to dissolve. “Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table.”¹

After the meal, the sisters *assume* that Babette, with what is left of the lottery money, will now return to Paris. But Babette tells them that she has spent every bit of the 10,000 francs on the meal, and is now penniless. And then Babette reveals that she was the former head chef of the Café Anglais in Paris.

There is a scene near the end of the film which shows Babette, after the meal is over, sitting on a stool in the kitchen by herself, totally exhausted and drained. The light in the room casts a shadow of Babette on the kitchen wall – and the shadow takes the form of a cross. Babette, like Christ, had sacrificed all, out of love for the villagers.

“Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

My friends, so much of our world today seems to have become splintered and factionalized, just like that small Danish village had become. It seems that each individual or faction in our world today sees themselves as being “righteous” and having possession of the **real** truth, over and against that “other” person or faction or nation or tribe or party, who is *wrong* (or heretical or weak or fearful or stupid), and whose so-called “truth” is actually “fake.” Christian argues against Christian as to who is the *real* Christian. Before Major League Baseball games some players kneel during the national anthem because they are Christians, while other players stand during the national anthem because they are Christians. Like that small Danish village, it seems that our own nation has fractured into various kinds of splinter groups, artificial and fragile communities held together simply by political affiliation, or by our views on whether or not to wear masks, or open schools or businesses or churches, what kind of stimulus package the government should offer struggling Americans who are out of work or in danger of losing their home... and on and on.

And into the midst of the fractiousness of both that Danish village *and* our world today comes the word of the psalmist:

“Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

My friends, like those Danish villagers, we will get *nowhere* if each “side” or “faction” in our nation and our local communities today beats the other over the head with what they consider to be the only uncompromised “truth,” or the only *real* “righteousness.” Within the Kingdom of God, truth *must* meet mercy; righteousness **and** peace *must* kiss each other.

And *where* do mercy and truth meet? *Where* do righteousness and peace kiss one another? Not in the vocal and divisive arguments of the kingdoms of this world, but within the human heart, where we will find that *other* kingdom, the Kingdom of God. For I believe that Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel, which I have quoted in recent sermons and will quote again today, are words meant for **us** to hear, *now*: “The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen,” Jesus told the oppositional Pharisees. “No one will say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’; because the Kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21, TEV) The Kingdom of God is within us.

In our Old Testament lesson today, the prophet Elijah is fleeing Jezebel, the evil Queen of Israel, who has vowed to kill him. Elijah takes refuge in a cave at Mt. Horeb, and the word of the Lord says to him, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” And there is a great wind, so strong that it is splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces. But the LORD is not in the wind. And after the wind comes an earthquake, but the LORD is not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD is not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. And when Elijah

experiences that silence, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes and stands at the entrance of the cave. *Then* the word of God comes to him, out of the sound of sheer silence; or as the King James Version, and our hymn today, call it, the “still, small voice of calm.”²

My friends, I think we all have a tendency to believe that the answers to the questions and problems of our lives are to be found “out there” in the midst of the maelstroms of our world. The kingdoms of this world are certainly filled with figurative “earthquakes, winds, and fires,” the controversies and hot-button issues of our day. And because they make a lot of noise and draw attention to themselves, we tend to be swept up into these maelstroms, thinking that the present earthquakes, winds, and fires – which make so much noise and cause such upheaval – are “where it’s at;” they are of highest importance.

But what if, as with Elijah, the Lord is not found in the earthquakes, winds, and fires, but rather in the “sound of sheer silence?” What if, in our preoccupation with our individual opinions our own group or faction and its singular claims to “truth” and “righteousness,” we have lost all sense of mercy and peace?

“Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” This does not happen “out there,” in the kingdoms of our splintered world, where wind and earthquake and fire all rage, and where each faction claims sole possession of truth and righteousness. It happens, rather, in the depths of our hearts, where the kingdom of God stands ready to welcome us and shape us into the likeness of God, having the mind of Christ.

But our frenzied lives, tossed about by factional earthquakes, wind, and fire, do not often *inhabit* that kingdom of God within our hearts, where mercy and truth meet, and righteousness and peace kiss one another. For me, at least, and I suspect for many of us, it requires a regular discipline of descending into that heart-space, so that when the earthquakes, wind, and fire **do** come, I can react *from* that space within the Kingdom of God. For me, at least, it requires a regular practice of spending time in solitude, listening for God, who comes amidst the sound of sheer silence. I hope that each of you can carve out some time in each day, if only 5 minutes, to pray, meditate, read devotions or Scripture, or simply sit in silence before God. As God instructs us, through the psalmist, “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10) Our hymn today invites us into that heart-space where the Kingdom of God reigns: “Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead, find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed: clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see all the things that *really* matter, be at peace, and simply be.”³

In that quiet Center, mercy and truth meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. And we begin to realize that each one of us – with all our different perspectives and understandings of what is going on in the world and the direction in which we need to be headed – each one of us, almost surely, is trying the best

we can, doing the best we know how; and many of us are carrying burdens that the rest of us cannot see or know. And so, it is vitally important that we treat each other with grace and charity, giving one another the benefit of the doubt, loving our neighbor as ourself, seeking – as Jesus commanded – to love even our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. (Luke 6:27)

And as we spend more and more time in that heart-space where the Kingdom of God reigns, we *will* find – I am certain of it! – that, like those Danish villagers at Babette’s feast, our factionalism and divisiveness will begin to melt away. For, you see, the **real** gift that Babette gave her village was not, in the end, the delicious food alone, but the sacrificial love that poured forth from her heart-space, within which she dwelt in the Kingdom of God.

AMEN

1 Much of my description of the film is taken from Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette%27s_Feast

2 “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” John Greenleaf Whittier

3 “Come and Find the Quiet Center,” by Shirley Erena Murray, Words © 1992, 2005 Hope Publishing Company