

# *Babette's Feast* as Sacramental: The Eternal and the Mundane Meet

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The literary discussion surrounding *Babette's Feast* focuses on whether the feast was transformational due to it being either symbolic of a Eucharistic feast, a work of art produced by Babette, or a combination of both elements making it transcendental. I have found, however, that through applying the theological lens of Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World*, it is evident that the feast need not be anything beyond food to instigate a sacramental experience; God chooses to inhabit the mundane in order that we might experience his transformational presence, and we can access his presence by giving thanks for the food before us. By gaining a deeper understanding of the sacramental worldview as presented in *Babette's Feast*, the actions of the everyday, such as eating a meal with others, can become for us opportunities to encounter the Lord's presence.

*Babette's Feast* (1950) by Isak Dinesen tells the story of a French woman named Babette, a refugee who comes to live with two Danish sisters and serves as their cook. The story culminates with a meal prepared by Babette for the sisters' pietistic community. As the elaborate meal begins, the guests, who initially refused aesthetic enjoyment, begin to experience reconciliation, both over past grievances with each other and past regrets within themselves. The transformation caused by the meal, as well as Babette's role in it, has inspired much critical scholarship, most of which falls into two camps: critics who argue that the feast is simply a product of Babette's artistic expression, and critics who claim that the feast is both an artistic expression and is symbolic of a Eucharistic feast. For example, Stephanie Branson argues that the power of the feast lies mainly in it being art. She notes that inside the

house where the meal is served "due not to religion but to art all is warm and light" (Branson 52). On the other hand, critics Ervin Beck, Laurie Brands Gagne, Alice Grossman, and Diane Tolomeo Edwards present a nuanced reading of the text that names the feast both as Babette's work of art and a type of Eucharistic meal. Beck points out that while "Babette unwittingly creates a sacramental experience," the meal "brings atonement (at-one-ment) to its participants" as occurs in the Catholic Eucharistic mass (Beck 212). Beck also acknowledges that Babette is able to give herself completely to creating the "sensory marvels of her culinary art" and that this artistic sacrifice brings the community in contact with "spiritually saving grace" through "partaking of her food" (Beck 212).

I agree with Beck, Gagne, Edwards, and Grossman that the meal is Babette's ultimate artistic expression, and also that the meal appears to be

symbolic of a Eucharistic feast. However, while Grossman and Gagne both name the meal as sacramental, they do not provide the crucial context and understanding of the sacramental worldview. What does it mean that the meal is sacramental and how did the villagers access it as such? Through Alexander Schmemmann's theological work on the importance of the world's matter, we can gain a fuller understanding of the intersection of the divine and the mundane in earthly things. In Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* (1963), he presents the case that in embracing the entire world as a sacrament we can find true meaning in the world and access God's presence. Through this lens, Babette's feast need not be labeled as an artistic work or as a symbolic Eucharistic meal in order to be powerful; the power of the meal resides in the fact that the *whole world* is sacramental and material things are conduits through which we can experience the transforming presence of God. Babette's feast was more than symbolic: it was a manifestation of and connection with the divine in an ordinary meal. The feast ultimately reflects the transformation that occurs from the community's engagement with the "cosmic sacrament," Schmemmann's term that names the whole world as a means by which we can access the divine (Schmemmann 15).

One might question whether appropriating Schmemmann's theological worldview to *Babette's Feast* is pertinent. Schmemmann and Dinesen were not contemporaries, and therefore Dinesen could not have been aware of Schmemmann's work. At the time that Dinesen wrote *Babette's Feast*, however, she "had an enormous interest in Christian theology" (Lane 21). In fact, Dinesen conducted a few "theological dinners" at which she conversed with "a Catholic priest, a Lutheran pastor, and several other Christian church authorities" (Lane 21). It appears she never came to embrace the Christian faith, but she was seeking to understand it more fully and had certainly been exposed to Christian theology. This interest of Dinesen's in Christianity and theology opens the door to including Schmemmann's theological perspective in a discussion of *Babette's Feast*. We can see, throughout the text, that Dinesen is exploring these questions of the importance of matter. Additionally, she was eating with Christian leaders, some of whom would have

had a sacramental worldview.

Let us begin the analysis of *Babette's Feast* by considering a perspective Schmemmann presents: giving thanks for our food is a fundamental practice as humans. We, with all of humanity, have a unique opportunity to thank God for the food he gives us. In so thanking him, we acknowledge the gift that food is and live out an integral aspect of our humanness. Schmemmann writes that just as Adam was called to name things in creation, so we are called to "name a thing [a meal]" and to "bless God for it and in it" (Schmemmann 15). He further clarifies that "in the Bible to bless God is not a 'religious' or a 'cultic' act, but the very *way of life*" (Schmemmann 15). Giving thanks for food is not merely something that occurs in the church setting in the Eucharistic liturgy; it is a practice that can permeate our mundane lives. We can embrace this "*way of life*," this act of thanksgiving, as something more integrated in our everyday lives than scheduled church practices (Schmemmann 15). In *Babette's Feast*, the community begins the meal by singing a song of thanks to the Lord: "May my food my body maintain...may my soul in deed and word / give thanks for all things to the Lord" (Dinesen 48). The community is engaging with this practice of thanksgiving and in so doing is already interacting with the "cosmic sacrament" of this world (Schmemmann 15). Edwards writes that Babette transforms "everyday elements into what signifies the presence of the transcendent for others to perceive" (Edwards 426). But Schmemmann expresses that a meal can be named and given thanks for *in order* for it to become transcendent—a vehicle by which we can experience God's presence. There need not be a *transformation* of "everyday elements;" there need only be a *thanksgiving* for them (Edwards 426). The mundane things themselves can gain transcendence through our attitude towards them. Grossman almost portrays an understanding of this feast as sacramental apart from a "religious' a 'cultic' act" (Schmemmann 15). What is missing from her comment about the feast as sacramental is a discussion of *what* makes the feast sacramental. Grossman writes that "Puritans are transformed by the sacrament of food and wine" (Grossman 325). It is unclear to what Grossman attributes her view of the feast as a sacrament. While the feast can certainly be sacramental, naming it as a

sacrament oversteps the bounds of the terminology; the sacraments themselves are limited to the literal bread and wine of Eucharist. This aside, even if Grossman meant that the “food and wine” eaten by the Puritans was sacramental (not a sacrament), it still remains that she gave no insight into *how* the meal became such (Grossman 325). Is the sacramental nature of the meal a matter of chance, some mystical occurrence? In light of Schmemmann’s work, the sacramental nature of the meal was not one mystical instance. Instead, Babette’s feast serves as an example of the sacramental state at which food arrives when thanks is given for it to God.

In addition to the fact that we can access the transcendence of a meal through thanksgiving for it, the mere practice of dining with others draws us into deeper relationship and fellowship with them. Schmemmann comments that “secularism...[has] failed to transform eating into something strictly utilitarian. Food is still treated with reverence. A meal is still a rite—the last ‘natural sacrament’ of family and of friendship, of life that is more than ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’” (Schmemmann 16). Schmemmann observed that although eating is a necessary and integral part of our secular lives as humans, “To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions” (Schmemmann 16). The very institution of breaking bread with others has a unique bearing in our lives. Indeed, “People may not understand what that ‘something more’ is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life” (Schmemmann 16). His label of the meal as a “natural sacrament” appears to refer to its intrinsic identity as a means by which we connect to something beyond ourselves. A meal binds up in reality the things of another world—peace, grace, and true connection with others. The sacramental worldview of the meal acknowledges that matter matters and that the divine can intersect with the mundane things of our world. A meal is, if I may, a type of primitive rite. While meals are certainly not limited to a church practice, they are indeed a timeless ritual of sorts that serve to bind people together.

This idea of a meal as “the last ‘natural sacrament’ of family and of friendship” is certainly displayed in the meal Babette makes (Schmemmann 16). Through

the eating of the meal together, there is a removal of old grievances among the guests and a renewal of the bonds of friendship. Two of the women present at the meal “who had once slandered each other” returned “to those days of their early girlhood” when they had been lovely friends (Dinesen 53). They are not the only ones who experience renewal of friendship, however. Two Brothers resolved an unsettled dispute over whether the one Brother had cheated the other on timber; the one admitting to cheating his friend: “Yes, I did so, beloved Brother...I did so” (Dinesen 53). These two Brothers were, in the course of the meal, drawn back into friendship and family fellowship with one another. In this way, the meal and its sacramental nature made way for the guests to have a transcendent experience of transformation and renewal amidst their relationships with each other. “Time itself had merged into eternity” as a result of engaging in a meal that is “something more” than ordinary food (Dinesen 53, Schmemmann 16); it was ordinary food for which they gave thanks and that became for them a means by which to engage the grace of God. The guests experienced the transforming power of the “sacramental life” that enables us to interact with eternal realities that are bound up in the most mundane realities, such as a meal shared with other human beings (Schmemmann 16).

Some critics have named the reconciliation of family and friendship as evidence that the meal is Eucharistic. As previously mentioned, Ervin Beck holds that the meal “brings atonement (at-one-ment) to its participants” due to the fact that “Babette unwittingly creates a sacramental experience” that mirrors the Catholic Eucharistic mass (Beck 212). Indeed, the meal serves as a means of transformation for the characters; as they engage with the sacramental meal, they are certainly brought into greater unity with each other. I find Beck’s perspective on the nature of the meal to be too narrow, however. He argues that “Many details contribute to seeing Babette’s feast as a commemoration of the Last Supper” and that the “Berlevaag food becomes the actual body (wafer) and blood (wine of Christ), according to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation” (Beck 212). While the feast is certainly a sacramental meal that restores wholeness,

the reason it is such is because the *entire world*—and therefore food itself—is “the ‘sacrament’ of God’s presence” (Schmemmann 15). Likening the meal to a Last Supper communion meal, and even going so far as to argue that transubstantiation occurs at the meal, presents a forced sacramental understanding. Food need not be literal transubstantiated bread and wine to have transcendent import. In addition, the meal need not even be purely religious in order to be sacramental. According to Schmemmann, our world, and the things of this world, gain their meaning when we view them as the “‘sacrament’ of God’s presence,” a conduit through which we can experience the presence of God (Schmemmann 15). While a connection can certainly be drawn between the feast Babette makes and the Last Supper, so can a connection be drawn between every meal and the Last Supper. Meals represent engagement both with the world as a “cosmic sacrament” and as “the ‘matter’” and “material of one all-embracing eucharist” (Schmemmann 15). If the world is indeed composed of the “material of one all-embracing eucharist,” then we have access to the presence of God whenever we engage in anything earthly (Schmemmann 15). The food needn’t be transubstantiated for God to use it to transform the villagers. The power of the specific sacrament of communion should assuredly not be diminished—in the bread and wine of communion God’s real presence dwells in a unique way—but Schmemmann extends this bridging of the eternal and the mundane to all the ordinary food we eat. This what the villagers experienced at Babette’s feast. In the story, the guests remarked that at the Wedding at Cana “grace had chosen to manifest itself there, in the very wine” (Dinesen 48); perhaps unbeknownst to them, this appearance of grace also occurred at the meal in which they were partaking.

As outlined above, Babette’s feast becomes a sacramental reality for the villagers when they give thanks to God for it, and the feast has transformational power due to the eternal bound up in the mundane food. But what role did Babette play in this transformation? Did she draw the guests into this sacramental experience through some action of her own? Edwards asserts that Babette “functions as artist and priest, transforming everyday elements into

what signifies the presence of the transcendent for others” (Edwards 426). Within this understanding, it is the “creativity and grace that operate together” to “renew those who sit at the table” (Edwards 426). I would argue that while Babette is drawing the people into a transcendent experience by making the meal, she does not transform the elements of the meal (as was addressed earlier on) and it is not the “creativity and grace” that bring about the transformation of the participants. Rather it is in experiencing the *very presence of God* bound up in the earthly realities of the food Babette makes that the villagers are renewed.

Just as Schmemmann makes a case for the entire world “created as the ‘matter,’ the material of one all-embracing eucharist” he also asserts that therefore “man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament” (Schmemmann 15). All of humanity—indeed, perhaps, the “priesthood of all believers”—has access to the presence of God through Christ, access enabled by the Great High Priest’s sacrifice once and for all (*English Standard Version Bible*, 1 Peter 2.9). All of humanity can emulate Christ’s mediation between us and God as we draw people into the presence of God, where we now have full access. We can act as mediators of the “cosmic sacrament” to those who do not know God (Schmemmann 15). In this way, Babette does act as a sort of priest, but only in that she serves to draw the villagers into the presence of God by making the food through which they can experience the sacramental. She acts as a priest in the way that Schmemmann names: as a minister of the presence of God by her impartation of a piece of the “cosmic sacrament”—the food she makes for them (Schmemmann 15). According to Schmemmann, each one of us has potential to draw people into an experience of the sacramental. Thus Babette, who had been known to turn a “dinner...into a kind of love affair...in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety,” can draw people into experiencing the sacramental in an ordinary meal. The story of *Babette’s Feast* shows that God chooses to make himself accessible to us in the mundane and that someone like Babette can be a minister of this reality to others—even if unintentionally.

I would concur with Edwards, as well as Gagne, Gossman, and Branson, that Babette is an artist



who produces a magnum opus in her creation of the meal. Gagne is also right in naming the feast as “one of those events which...transcend the artist’s intention” (Gagne 232). Branson argues that the grace present at the meal “is the generosity of the artist Babette, not an abstract principle of religion,” which attributes the entirety of the transformation to Babette’s art (Branson 51). The fact that the meal is a work of art does not adequately explain the influence of it, however. The true power of the art form, however, is in the fact that when Babette creates she is modeling the Creator God. She is living out an intrinsic part of our human nature—the act of creating. In fulfilling her vocation as a creator, an artist, Babette creates something that bridges our world and eternity. Through Babette’s creation of beautiful, delectable food, she draws the community into the presence of God at the meal, and to a place of greater connection to the eternal. I do concur with Grossman when she writes that “Babette triumphs in the exercise of her art and enables her guests to achieve communion with each other,” but Grossman leaves her comment entirely unresolved (Grossman 326). Attributing the renewal of the guests’ friendships to Babette’s “exercise of her art” and to the guests “eating and drinking in what they regard as the proper spirit” leaves the event as an unclear and miraculous occurrence, as does Branson’s argument for art’s power (Grossman 326). How does such a transformation occur merely in response to a work of art? While it certainly could have been miraculous, it need not be entirely mysterious. We can assuredly claim that what the guests experienced in the art of the feast, produced by Babette, was the actual presence of God in their midst. It was the presence of God that brought about the transformation and the binding together of their community. Babette’s culinary artwork of the feast tapped into an otherworldly reality beyond her intention or ability, and became a conduit through which transformation was experienced by the dinner guests. This transcendent element must be in part attributed to the fact that, in creating the meal, Babette emulated her Creator God.

In the same way that Babette modelled her Creator God by working in her art medium—food—so Dinesen herself modelled her Creator by

working in her art medium—the written word. By employing words, Dinesen did exactly what Babette did when she made the feast: she created something beautiful through which the presence of God could be experienced by others. In Dinesen’s case, she did not, to our knowledge, do so wittingly. But such is the power unleashed when God uses the beautiful things of this world! God, seeking to connect with us, makes himself present in these works of art and uses them as a conduit through which to reach his people. Dinesen provided us with this text, this art piece, that serves to bridge for us the eternal and the mundane. She draws us into, as Babette did the dinner guests, a transcendental experience through which we can come closer to the presence of God. So may we, in our various forms of creating, strive to create conduits through which others can experience the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

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