

**Behold, what manner of Love the Father has lavished upon us,
that we should be called children of God**

There's a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called *Babette's Feast*, about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine: Veuve Clicquot 1860, the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, *love one another*?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

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Not all words in the English language are created equally. Earlier this year, a psychologist at Oberlin College in Ohio conducted a study of 2500 individuals with logomisia – people who cringe at the utterance of words like moist. Each participant read a list of hundreds of words while the researchers gauged their reaction to each one. Words like Moist, yolk, phlegm, and smear trigger a reaction, the researchers discovered, because the act of forming the words in our mouths triggers the same muscles you use when you have a negative reaction to something, like frowning, choking, or spitting. You cringe when you hear it because you've created an association with that word and that feeling in your mind. The words, it seems, point beyond themselves to the unpleasant realities they represent. Isn't moist the sound a droplet of water makes as it falls into a puddle on the floor of a dark cave? (I promise that's the last time I'll mention the M-Word). But every point has its counter-point. Logomisia, meet

logophilia – words that are hard to say without smiling. Words like ineffable, pyrrhic, or talisman. But something has always drawn my imagination to the word Lavish. Six letters that perfectly evoke the idea they are meant to convey. Lavish sounds rich. You stand up a little bit straighter when you say it. It feels like a word you want to say.

To Lavish is to do so much more than merely giving. It's about the extravagance of the gift; the excess, the waste. To lavish is to give from a position of abundance, rather than a position of scarcity.

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That's the picture Isaiah paints for us this morning.

Come thirsty, come looking for water but find instead wine and milk in the same quantity and at the same price.

Come hungry, come looking for bread but find instead a table filled with rich food.

Come sinner, looking for forgiveness but find instead abundant pardon.

Come and experience the upside down economy of God; a Kingdom of excess where mercy is as ubiquitous as gravity. Hear God's invitation to a new way to be human. My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts.

A few years ago, the LA Times reported that, for the first time in its history, McDonalds wasn't in the top twenty restaurants of the tastemakers (those between the ages 20 and 35), choosing instead to eat at chains like Chipotle or Subway. McDonalds responded by increasing its offering of salads and wraps, but in August of 2014 McDonalds reported its single biggest drop in sales in more than a decade, while Wendy's with its infamous Baconator, and IN-N-Out Burger saw sales rise - because they failed to learn the lesson that a generation raised on advertising isn't going to be fooled into thinking that McDonalds is suddenly a healthy option. For years, the church in North America has tried and hoped against hope that if we could just figure out how to be more relevant, if we could have flashier worship services or more up to date languages; if we could jump on whatever the latest social cause was, then maybe we would seem relevant to a world that has left us behind. But trying to make the gospel seem normal hasn't worked. We aren't called to be relevant or flashy or normal. So what if the church tried being a little more weird? What if we put away our tendency to look after ourselves first and made our first question "What does the economy of mercy require of me in this moment?" What if we weren't governed by the dollars and cents that drive our approach to mission but instead by adopting a bold vision to see our city transformed? What if we said that on June 1st, there don't need to be any more hungry people in our city? What if we said, I don't want to settle for the things that are doable. I want to be part of the people of God speaking to mountains and saying, Move – and watching them stand up and move.

Isaiah's picture here is a challenge to the church to change the paradigm by which we understand life. A pulse and breath in your lungs isn't the Gospel definition of life any more than a driver's license is the definition of driving. They are only the tools by which you are empowered to experience life. The simple act of meeting the budget, of running our programs, of doing what we've always done – doesn't make the church alive. Isaiah calls us to more; not to do more – but to be more – to experience God's abundance in every part of your life. In your neighborhood, experience an abundance of humility. To your families, experience an abundance of kindness. In your relationships, experience an abundance of forgiveness. In your work place, experience an abundance of diligence. Martin Luther said, "The Christian shoemaker glorified God, not by putting small crosses on the shoes, but by making the best shoes he knows how to make." With your church, experience an abundance of selfless giving. Participate in Mission projects; sign up for something. Get involved. In your actions, experience an abundance of self-control. Ask before you act – does this build up, or tear down? Is this Life Giving, or something else? And in your inner life, experience an abundance of purity. These are the signs of life from Isaiah's vantage point. These are the Gospel's signs of life.

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Imagine going to the beach and splashing around in a tide pool. Imagine sitting in front of a symphony listening to an iPod. Imagine standing in the middle of the Grand Canyon and looking longingly at a Post Card. Imagine a banquet where the only thing you take to eat is bread and water. The extent of God's grace is such that you're free to make any one of those choices, in any one of those situation – but why would you? What is in front of you is so much greater than what is in your hand. That's why Isaiah reminds us that, while the economy of mercy might be infinite, the economy of time is about scarcity. Seek the Lord while he may be found, turn your ear toward him while he is near because every moment you spend playing in the puddle or staring at that post-card is a moment wasted. Because God has Lavished love on us, it is a failure on our part to do any less to those around us.

We share the Good News with our friends and loved ones, because what manner of love the father has lavished upon us. We participate in Justice, because what manner of love the father has lavished upon us. We gather to worship together, because what manner of love the father has lavished upon us. We serve our communities, because what manner of love the father has lavished upon us.

We lavish love on others because God has lavished love on us first. For Presbyterians, it is the doctrine of prevenient Grace – God Loves us whether we like it or not. Love is given freely and abundantly. It's not earned, its Lavished.

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