



WEEK 1: THE GENEROSITY OF GOD

The short story and movie *Babette's Feast* is the story of a small, remote Norwegian fishing village in the 19th century, where a tiny and ageing Christian sect seeks to live out their faith. It's a very austere existence and life is hard.

One night a young French woman arrives seeking refuge. She has fled from danger in Paris at a time of civil war, and a friend of hers has given her the name of two sisters who live in the village. Though they possess little, the sisters take Babette in. She offers to work for them in exchange for board, and it is agreed that she will cook and help them. While the meals they eat are very basic and bland, Babette gladly prepares the food and serves her hosts, without complaint.

Many years later, Babette is still working for the two sisters when she receives word from a friend in Paris that she has won a large sum of money in a lottery. The friend has faithfully bought a lottery ticket each year on Babette's behalf.

About the same time the two sisters decide to organize a special meal to celebrate the hundredth birthday of their long deceased father – who was the founding pastor of the sect. Babette offers to cook and to pay for the celebration.

Though the sisters don't know it, in her former life Babette was one of the top Parisian chefs. She uses her former contacts to send for the very best ingredients; they are shipped all the way from France – quails and turtle, the very best wine. As the ingredients arrive in the village, the sisters begin to worry that the feast will be an act of sensual and sinful indulgence, completely out of keeping with their ascetic values. However, recognizing that Babette has gone to a lot of effort, the villagers agree amongst themselves to eat the meal, on the condition they don't enjoy or comment on it!

The feast is sumptuous and lavish, way beyond what any of the villagers have ever experienced. The only guest not part of the sect is the nephew of one of the women, who once wished to marry one of the sisters. Now a famous general, Lorens is well accustomed to fine dining. As the courses keep appearing, he provides a running commentary on the stunning food and drink – at one point noting that it reminds him of an extraordinary meal he had years earlier in a café in Paris.

As the meal progresses a remarkable transformation occurs around the table. Babette's meal slowly breaks down the long-held mistrust between the villagers. Old wrongs are forgotten and a mystical healing amongst the community takes place.

After the meal is finished and the guests have left, the sisters inquire as to what Babette's plans are, given her lottery winnings. They presume that she will return to Paris but are shocked when Babette explains that she has spent all her money on the feast and will not be leaving. (The sisters also discover that Babette was the head chef of the Parisian café the general had alluded to.)

Babette, who came as the guest many years ago, has now become the host. And the money that might have taken her back to Paris to re-establish herself, has been sacrificed in one generous act of gratitude and hospitality.

- What impacts you most from the story of Babette's Feast?
- Have you ever been treated to a fine meal that you didn't really appreciate?
- Share your favorite food. Why do you like it so much?

Hospitality

The theme for these studies is "Generous Hospitality". What do we mean by this phrase?

Discuss

- What does the word "hospitality" bring to mind for you?
- What does the word "generous" bring to mind for you?
- Why do we usually associate food or eating with the word "hospitality"?
- Who do you find it easiest to be hospitable to? Why?
- Share a memorable meal you have had (either with a handful of folk or in a larger group). What made it so good?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- Babette is a hospitality worker. What does the movie indicate to us about the nature of Babette's approach to her work? What can we learn from Babette in regard to our own attitude to work in the hospitality industry?

The root of our English word hospitality is from Latin. Other words we have from the same root are host, hospital, hospice, and hotel. All of them allude to care or welcoming of guests or strangers.

Of course, these days we are much more likely to associate hospitality either with the whole industry of restaurants and hotels (professional/paid services), or with dinner parties (like Babette's Feast) and other occasions involving food and drink. And while coffee and cookies after church on Sunday can be a form of hospitality, as we'll discover over the next few weeks, hospitality in the Bible involves so much more.

Practicing generous hospitality really has three layers to it. The first point of hospitality is the one we're generally most comfortable and familiar with – *our family and close friends or workmates*. The second layer is hospitality to *guests and newcomers*. And the third (and most challenging) is to people who are right outside our own “world” – folk who are strangers to us, not just because we don't know them, but also because their experience of life is so very different to ours. Often they are the least, the last, and the lost.

Luke 9: 10-17 Feeding of the Masses

Read through this passage twice, pausing at the end of each read for silent reflection.

**“Hospitality is not so much a task as it is a way of living our lives and sharing ourselves.”
Christine Pohl**

Setting the scene

This miracle clearly left an indelible mark in the memory of the early church. All four gospel writers have included it in their stories. It is likely that the multiplication of food would have brought to mind the provision of manna in the desert – a connection particularly developed by John in his telling of the story (John 6). The incident is often referred to as the “feeding of the 5000” – but if we read Luke's account closely, we see that is just the number of *men* present (unfortunately it's a very ancient way of counting!), suggesting that by the time women and children were taken into account, it would have been many more than 5000.

Discuss

- What is one thing that impacts you most from this story?
- Why do you think Jesus put it back on the disciples, by saying, (in verse 13) “You feed them”?
- Why do you think the miracle worker over-catered (verse 17) and what might this suggest about God's nature?
- Can you recall a time when God provided for you in a surprising or generous way? Share it with the group. What effect did this experience have on you?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- In verse 17, Luke notes that there were substantial leftovers from the meal, which serves to emphasize God's generosity of provision. However, it also raises an interesting question for those of us involved in the hospitality industry – “what do we do with the often significant levels of waste – in particular, food and drink?” Discuss this issue – specifically how big an issue it is, in your experience, and what can be done about it.

Prayer

Spend some time expressing gratitude to God for all that he has provided and blessed us with. Be specific and don't limit it to just physical needs.

Challenge for the Week!

Here are a couple of small challenges for this week:

1. Take time to observe how people are welcomed at your workplace – particularly customers, visitors, or new staff members.

- What practices and people help to make them feel welcome?
- What aspects of your work environment might be awkward for strangers?
- How do you think your workplace does in “hosting” visitors or new people?

2. Plan to take the initiative this week, by welcoming someone who is new or who you don't really know in whatever way you sense is appropriate.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

Babette's Feast (1987) 102 minutes

Summary: In a small, remote fishing village on the northern coast of Norway, live two sisters. Martine and Philippa are part of a small devout Christian sect, founded by their long-departed father. On a wet night in 1871 a French woman knocks on their door, seeking refuge from troubles in her homeland. The kindly sisters reluctantly take her in and in exchange for lodgings, Babette cooks for them. However, it is not until years later that the truth of the Frenchwoman's previous life comes to light. And in a remarkable act of generosity, the Babette hosts a meal that brings reconciliation to the small faith community.



Based on a short story by Isak Dinesen (also the author of *Out of Africa*) the movie draws on themes of hospitality, community, and gratitude.

- What impacts you most from the story of Babette's Feast?
- Have you ever been treated to a fine meal that you didn't really appreciate? Or an act of generosity you struggled to accept because of your values?
- Why do you think the faith of the two sisters (and their fellow church members) caused them to believe anything but the plainest food was sinful and extravagant? How did Babette respond to this?
- Why do you think Babette decided to stay in the village and blow her lottery winnings on an extravagant meal – when she knew this might go unappreciated as well as resulting in her having to stay?
- The small sect was ridden with old grievances and resentments. Why might a meal such as Babette's feast have caused the healing of such relational divisions? Do you think this was part of Babette's hope for the feast, or was it merely a way for her to express her gratitude for their hospitality?
- What does the movie indicate to us about the nature of Babette's approach to work? What can we learn from Babette in regard to our own attitude to work?
- Read Luke 9: 10-17 (the feeding of the masses). What impacts you most about this story? Why do you think the miracle worker over-catered (verse 17) and what might this suggest about God's nature?