

"SONS OF ENCOURAGEMENT"

INTRODUCTION

The movie "Alice's Restaurant" begins with a worship service in a small New England town church. Four or five aged people stand in the sanctuary while two priests in the chancel read the liturgy of the deconsecration of a church. They pronounce the church officially dead, and the building secularized for some other use. As the priests go out of the building, they give the keys into the hands of a handsome young couple named Ray and Alice, who are eagerly waiting for the deconsecration to take place so they can run in and look over their new home, because it is going to be their house.

So in the days and weeks that follow, all their kooky friends seem to keep coming in from all parts of the country, and as each one arrives, there are whoops of joy -- they haven't seen each other for some time. They all gather for the decoration, the painting, the putting up of the banners, colors, designs and symbols - all the things that say, "This is the house of Ray and Alice". It's a kind of open house, welcoming everybody, including the local chief of police who just doesn't know how to respond to the warmth and friendliness of these people. Ray and Alice begin a restaurant to make enough money to survive, but the old church building - the new house - is the place where they really live. There they live and love, eat and sleep - they and all their friends.

As Thanksgiving draws near, they decide to have a feast. The word goes out and the people begin arriving by train, bus, car, motorcycle. Everybody is overjoyed to see his old friends back once again. Someone discovers that one of their number is getting out of the hospital that day, so Ray drives to New York City, meets him as he comes out of the hospital and brings him back to join the celebration. So they sit down at a large table, marvelous assortments of food, people of every kind, size, color - all sorts of people.

Someone says that they ought to say grace, so Ray stands up and says, "Grace to you for coming out of the hospital; grace to you for coming where you came from; grace to us for all being here -- amazing grace". And the camera shifts from this bright, loving, living, family life; and as the camera shifts, you hear them beginning to sing, "Amazing grace, amazing grace that saved a wretch like me". And the camera shifts one by one to the other churches of the town. This is Thanksgiving Day. Each of them, as the camera lights on it, is dark, dead and cold. No one is there - no life; then it switches back to the house of Ray and Alice; a family caring and sharing all they are, and all they have, with each other. Brightness, warmth, singing, joy - a family celebrating together in their house.

AQUILA AND PRISCA

We switch the scene now to a house in the Greek city of Ephesus in about the year 60 A. D.. It is a house belonging to a couple by the name of Aquila and Prisca. Aquila was a tent-maker. He had set up a tent-making trade to make enough money to survive. The main thing that he and Prisca did was to start a church - a church which began to meet in their house. Paul made his home with them for a while, and it was from this house church in Ephesus that Paul wrote a letter back to some friends in Corinth in which he offered this greeting:

"Aquila and Prisca, together with the church that is meeting in their house, send you warm greetings. All brothers here send greetings; greet one another with a holy kiss".

One may wonder what kind of life those early house Christians shared together, these beginning little groups of Christians centuries ago. I suppose that some in the very beginning were not unlike the communal life shared by Ray and Alice. But

the early Christian communals didn't last very long (as experiments in communal living seldom do), and soon the typical style was people living in a common area but meeting at someone's house to celebrate their faith in life.

Their house celebrations were informal in nature - 20 or 30 people perhaps. With the pressure of an alien environment, they felt their fellowship deeply and sharply, so they were able to share their lives, their joys, their sorrows, and what had happened that week. They would sing in a very informal kind of way. There would be teaching, with a lot of discussion and preaching, though not of the prepared, highly-honed kind to which we are accustomed. Always they began and ended their meetings with a holy kiss, evidently feeling that the physical embrace was the most adequate symbolic gesture to express their affection for each other. Always they shared a meal together, which was the full meal, and the depth of it was the bread and the wine of the communion, celebrating the spirit of Christ in their fellowship. A family of people caring for one another, sharing all that they were, and had, and celebrating communion together in someone's house.

BARNABAS There was another man back there at the time of Aquila and Prisca who was also very much a part of that early Christian church. His name was Barnabas. That wasn't his real name. Actually his given name was Joseph, but because of a certain quality in him, because of a certain graciousness about him, his friends made up a name to fit him - Barnabas. It means "son of encouragement". Barnabas was a man who encouraged people. He believed in people. He made it his business to seek out those who were failing and faltering to encourage them. He was the champion of all the doubtful cases. He was the first to give the right hand of fellowship to the newly-converted Saul of Tarsus. He was the first to believe in the sincerity of the Gentiles. He had a consistent record of encouragement in that first century church and seemed to embody much of the spirit of those early Christians.

HIS TYPE NEEDED TODAY I wonder how many Barnabases we have in our congregation - how many "sons of encouragement". How desperately the churches now-a-days need the ministry of the encouragers -- men and women like Barnabas whose passion and concern it is to keep the fellowship together, to gather the stragglers who otherwise might be lost in the fellowship.

How do people become stragglers within the fellowship - "drop-outs"? There are some, I suppose, who drop out and are lost to the church simply through the loneliness of detachment. ~~This has become in recent years an almost major problem for the church. These great migratory movements going on in America - so many people moving from place to place, and the aspect of uprootedness which these shifting trends have caused.~~

Millions of our church people in the last decade have moved, for one reason or another, left the old homestead where they had a feeling of belonging, so essential in the experience of life. And living in a new, unaccustomed world, they have - some of them - dropped out of contact with community institutions which they sorely need for balanced living.

There is a certain freedom in it for awhile - a feeling of privacy, no community responsibility, no social demands placed upon them. Then one day that innate need to belong, that protest against loneliness, that need to be part of something turns them to some church. They go to one church, then another, expecting to find there the same friendliness which they left behind. And it isn't like the old church back home. It never quite is. Little by little they become drifters - lonely stragglers - detached and separated. ~~The loneliness and social detachment in America today is greater than ever before.~~

The need for the Barnabases today is so great. Where are the people in our churches with the warm and gracious touch, with the imagination to put themselves in the place of the other person, to know how it feels to be lonely, detached, and uprooted. It would seem that the church would be the friendliest spot on earth. More than any other place in the city the church should possess the atmosphere of warmth and of welcome. But unfortunately, it is not always so. How we need warm-hearted men and women with imagination to lure people out of their hidden corners and to care enough about the Kingdom of God to help the lonely belong.

ANOTHER FORM OF DROP-OUT . There is another class of stragglers somewhat further out than the lonely people. They are the people who drop out through lost beliefs, changed attitudes, diminishing interest. We continually come across people who somewhere in their lives had high Christian ideals, were warm in their devotion to Christ and active somewhere in the Church. "Out" now - indifferent - and to all outward appearances, not disturbed.

A few months ago a high-minded newspaper editor had this to say on the spiritual state of America:

"Nowhere yet in this country have people reached the point where they want to live without churches. But an alarming percentage of them have reached the point where they no longer attend churches. There is no outbreak of atheism, no open assault on Christianity, except in the mode of life many are living. But their indifference to Christian values in national life is the most subtle assault of all."

And then he went on in a nostalgic mood to talk of something lost out of America that is vital to its life. And what disheartened him most, he said, was that not even the churches seemed greatly distressed in the loss.

If this is true, then it's disheartening. We don't act this way about other things we've lost - markets, for example, or money. When we lose out of our national life that which touches our prosperity or property, or even prestige, we are disturbed. Let others get ahead of us in scientific know-how, and we are disturbed. "What's wrong with us?" we ask - "We must recover this. We must get back the prestige we've lost!"

"What man of you" said Jesus, "having a hundred sheep, if he lose one, doth not leave the ninety and nine and go hunting until he findeth". He knew they would understand him if he talked about sheep. We all do - that's a normal, human reaction. You know how it is when you lose something. You miss it. The thought of that lost thing torments you. You can't sleep. You advertise, you search. The furniture gets re-arranged; the desk gets an unexpected cleaning. When you lose something of intrinsic value, you are disturbed.

Here are some of the items listed in the Lost and Found column of a recent paper: LOST; a wallet containing \$50 and discharge papers. Return and reward. LOST: a brown shepherd dog nine years old, teeth missing, answers to name of Peter. LOST: a platinum ring, wedding ring, inside band inscription, "Love is eternal". There was a heart-throb, a human concern and yearning back of all those lost things.

Here is a lost notice you'll not find in the paper. LOST: somewhere in the last ten years - my faith, my interest in the things of God, my membership in the Christian community, the ideals and devotion of my early years - lost, gone. Finder please return to a disillusioned and empty owner.

How can we make indifferent people care again for what they ought to want and ought to miss more than all else besides? ~~That's quite a problem.~~ I think it's being answered in some measure, for life itself is the great evangelist. There is quite a difference in the religious climate today and even five years ago. ~~The~~ ^{Some} "indifference" is not nearly as deep. Things have happened in recent years to make us more aware of lostness, the inner loneliness of modern man, the hunger for meaning, ~~the yearning for inner peace.~~ Much of the search is going on outside of the institutional church - and it reflects a valid yearning for authenticity, for real friendships, and relationships. These stragglers - perhaps "pilgrims" is a better word - want an open, honest, loving kind of community where they can find out who they are and give the gift of themselves to other people and receive the gifts of other peoples' lives. It seems in some ways they are turning again to the qualities of that first century church.

I can't get too uptight about the so-called "underground" church because I see it as an opportunity for "the church of the living God" - not a threat, as some view it, a challenge, a chance. After all, whatever the church is, at its heart is a community, a community whose center is Jesus Christ, a community where we belong to each other as we belong to Him. If we have missed that, then the rest is husk. The hunger is all around us and our response depends upon something deep within the church itself - how much of the spirit of Barnabas is there.

CLOSING Perhaps the most inspiring lost and found column ever published is in the Bible - the 15th chapter of Luke. There you have three lost things: a sheep, a coin, and a boy. All three were found. All three were restored, as Jesus pointed out, because someone cared - because someone missed them and suffered in the loss of them. And therein is the answer. That's the ingredient we so desperately need in our churches today. ~~Not~~ Many people are ~~not~~ ^{not} argued into the fellowship of the committed, nor are they frightened into it. But rather they are lured into it by people who care enough about them to make them care.

Here in our church - you will understand me when I say that our primary concern is not the expansion of our membership or the population of the pews. Yes - it would be inspiring to have a full congregation present every Sunday, but wouldn't it be awful if because our church were full of people, our hearts were empty of compassion.

The movie, "Alice's Restaurant" closes with the wedding of Ray and Alice, which interestingly enough destroys the communal, but all their friends are there for the wedding - all their square friends and all their swinging friends, too. The house church is fantastically decorated with banners and billboards, signs - they've made them all, they and their friends. There are many instruments. People laugh and sing; there's music. There's celebration. And then someone ascends to the pulpit and asks Ray and Alice if they will love each other - no matter how bad it gets or how good, in a kind of glorious translation of the ancient liturgy. Ray and Alice say yes to it all and to each other, and then everybody roars a kind of "amen" and the balloons are let loose and the people begin to sing and to dance, and as the whole house rocks with this exuberance, someone rolls down over the old communion table which everybody has forgotten, a tapestry with the words on it: "Holy, Holy, Holy".

The church has come to live in the house of Ray and Alice, as it once did in the first century in the house of Aquila and Prisca, and in other places, too, touching lives of people like Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement". May the church come to life in your house, too, and in my house, and in this place - our common home.

PRAYER

We thank thee, O God, for the joy and peace that have come into our lives through Christ Jesus.

May we never forget that religion without that joy is not his religion; and as we live and grow in it, may we not forget that ours is the privilege of taking that joy into the lives of other people. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.