

"You cannot win by making your neighbor lose."--Pres. Clinton in Ireland yesterday
A review of the 1984 film

"PLACES IN THE HEART"

Though we saw this profoundly Christian, secularly produced movie when it first came out, we experienced it again (at home) in preparation for our church film-group discussion of it last evening. (Process note: during the second viewing, I took notes in black; during the discussion, in red. "Member" references are quotes from the red notes.)

1 The storyline seems like midrash (commentary) on the **hymns**, which (to change the figure) are the warp on which the story-woof is woven. The writer must have had these hymns in his heart as well as his head, & he lets them preach the gospel—a stratagem of indirection delivering his script from sentimentality & preachiness.

2 One of the hymns **envelops** the gritty story of a small Great Depression (1935) town whose sheriff is murdered in the opening scene &, in the closing scene, takes Holy Communion with his murderer, a young African-American man who'd been lynched for the murder (yes, in the Great Southland).

Over her husband's open grave, widow Edna Spaulding (Sally Fields), who didn't even know how to write a check & had almost no money in the bank or anywhere else, moaned "What's going to happen to us [her & her two small children]?" Then the hope-giving-but-not-problem-solving hymn is sung:

There's a land that is fairer than day, And by faith we can see it afar; For the Father waits over the way, To prepare us a dwellingplace there. // We shall sing on that beautiful shore The melodious songs of the blest, And our spirits shall sorrow no more, Not a sigh for the blessings of rest. // To our bountiful Father above, We will offer our tribute of praise, For the glorious gift of His love, And the blessings that hallow our days. REFRAIN: In the sweet by and by, We shall meet on that beautiful shore; In the sweet by and by, We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

3 The enveloping? Near the film's *beginning* we hear the hymn **sung**: at its *end*, in church (Holy Communion after the reading of 1Cor.13.1-7) we see its hope **displayed**, its promise fulfilled ("we shall meet" [my underlining] become "we are meeting"). "We": black/white (in the 1935 rural South!), men/women/children, rich(particularly the banker)/poor, murderer/murderee, faithful/adulter-er, laity/clergy, employers/farmhands--in fact, the whole *dramatis personae* except for the couple (faithful/adulteress) who'd moved out of town.

4 How read that final scene, the celebration of the Lord's Supper? (a) Member: "Escatological: not how the church is but the way it will be." Jesus' words "Do this in remembrance of me *until I come*." Two deaths: the sheriff's (occasioning the singing of "we shall meet") & Jesus' (occasioning the Supper itself ["This is my body...blood...for you."]). (b) A Web review, noting that everything comes out all right, compared the film to "It's a Wonderful Life." (c) Another Web review called it "karmic" (folks getting theirs) "in spite of the final scene"--reversing the viewpoint of the film's writer, who would come (I think) closer to the closing worship as real & rock-bottom "in spite of" everything preceding it. (d) Universalism? Not quite: two are missing. But the high moral tone of what precedes the Communion signals that the last scene's meaning is not morality doesn't matter-&-have-consequences but that grace abounds through love, a doctrine we're not left to imagine: it's in the lection (1Cor.13.1-7) in the worship (with "charity" changed to "love"): "...have not **love**,...I am nothing." Without love, good deeds "profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long...is kind...envieth not...is not puffed up...seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things,...hopeth all things, endureth all things." If memory serves, the preacher ended the reading with the next clause: "Love never faileth."

That scripture was the sermon preached in the expected place, the pulpit: the preceding in the film was the same sermon preached in an unexpected place, the hard life of the common people in the Great Depression.

5 Member: "Nobody's perfect in the film, & that's a comfort to us." We could say "Nobody's an angel," but that wouldn't do it as well: some angels, remember, are fallen. Any goodygoody character would infect the film with sentimentalism, as perfectionists embitter themselves & afflict the rest of us.

Elliott
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Thinfacts

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508-275-8008
e-mail vandellott@medaone.net

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6 The church is unobtrusive, yet many of the characters say things they would not think to say were it not for the continuing influence of the church on them. Of course at funerals, the church is officially (in clergy) present. But in the broad sense, "church" fills the whole reconciliatory scene at film's end: the venue is a worship service.

7 What of prayer? Except for a few occasion-ejaculatory prayers, this dimension of piety appears mainly as grace at meals. Before he goes off & gets killed on duty, the sheriff says grace with his family around the table. When black "Moses" gets a handout plate of food from Edna (though her sister wanted her not to do it), "Mos" says grace before he eats. Blindman "Mr. Will," who lost his sight in a WWI battle, bows his head for silent grace. The widow & her children say grace. Edna asks an old-man visitor to say grace, & she's given assurance by the singing of the hymn

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. // Perfect submission, perfect delight, **Visions** of rapture now burst on my **sight**; Angels descending, bring from above Echoes of mercy, whispers of love. // Perfect submission, all is at rest; I in my Savior am happy and blest; Watching and waiting, **looking** above, Filled with his goodness, lost in His love. REFRAIN: This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long; This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long.

8 Why my boldfacing in this hymn? The blind hymnist (4,000 hymns!) Fanny Crosby, could "see," as could our film's Mr. Will when he tenderly asked Edna "What do you look like?" Her response was an objective description till she got to her teeth: "My teeth stick out" (an exaggeration). He could not see her, but he saw into her--her caring, her rocklike dedication to keeping her family together (when the banker suggested otherwise), her fiery determination to make a go of her small farm when nobody else, even Mos, thought it possible. Assumption of the writer: The audience is blind to what he wants us to "see," & he sets out to cure our blindness--an evangelical light/darkness note.

9 The film's treatment of race: African-Am. Mos is a Christ figure, rescuing Edna in her deep emotional & financial distress. For his pains, he's beaten almost to death by hooded KKK (including the banker! Mr. Will recognizes all eight voices, & names the culprits). On the KKK promise of death if he doesn't leave, Mos must push on (member: "&, like his namesake, not enter the promised land"). Earlier, a black man was lynched for doing evil: Mos would have been lynched for doing good. The writer never asks us to hate the racist whites, but by underplaying white anger he leads to feel the horror & tragedy (which Hegel defined not as good/evil struggle but as conflict between two goods--here, that America get beyond racism & that people remain free to sustain their way of life--the good/good that lay deepest in the tragedy of the Civil War).

REALISM: When at first Edna tells Mos she has no work for him, he steals her tablesilver. The police catch him & ask her to confirm the theft; but she is merciful, lying that Mos was taking the tablesilver to the home of her sister. She can pay him no money, but he goes to work for her anyway.

10 Member: "It's more about God than about church." Another: "Grace enters our lives in unexpected, simple, strange ways." Another (who survived the Dust Bowl--commenting on the storm, with the family under ground): "a cave where you are safe from the storm." Another: "a morality play with a closing similar to that of Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town'." Another: "The hymns keep suggesting something more, something deeper, something better to come: the 'foretaste' in 'Blessed assurance' (sung near the beginning & near the end)." Another, on the sheriff's talking quietly with his murderer during the Supper: The movie "got it right; it's about reconciliation; the Kingdom has already broken in."

11 Sensory analysis: (a) Sight: play of physical/spiritual (faith seeking light [*fides quaerens intellectum*]); (b) Hearing: churchbells, especially after the great storm; four times train whistles (member: "loneliness"); blind Mr. Will's wind-up record-players twice has "How shall the world we know, judge?"....Feelings analysis: greed, lust, anger, compassion, tenderness, inner trust (as in the singing of I come to the garden alone....REFRAIN: And He walks with me....And the joy we share....)