

"ON BEING APPROACHABLE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street, NYC, NY  
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### INTRODUCTION

Every so often out of the scores of words that rain down upon us, one word gets through and sticks...a word that captures the attention and triggers the imagination. The word "approach" recently struck me in this fashion. In the world of bridges and buildings, tunnels, telephones and thruways, the approaches are very important.

### DEVELOPMENT

There must be a way of getting to the bridge or into the building or on to the highway. Safe and convenient access is essential. What does it profit a driver if he saves time by taking the thruway only to lose it all in a game of gridlock once he leaves the expressway! This is why in recent years we have come to think of cloverleaf as something white and made of concrete rather than something green that grows in the ground. Access is a key factor.

But approaches are more than functional. They have a psychological character as well. They prepare one for an experience. For instance, if in approaching a restaurant you find a canopy out front and a doorman standing watch, be prepared for high prices and hopefully good food. Approaches have a way of conditioning our expectations; they hint at what is coming.

Take this matter of the messages we put on our telephone answering machines. Here I better be careful...I don't want to offend any of you. I love those zippy messages. On the other hand there are some that tend to be a bit boring. I have a friend who has a great imitation of Humphrey Bogart. He says,

"Leave a message. If you don't, you'll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon and for the rest of your life".

Church answering phones leave a lot to be desired. We've got to change our approach and come up with something new. The message of instruction is sometimes longer than the message one wants to give. While at Conference this week I gave some thought as I sat there in those sessions to some new messages. Here's one:

"The minister is really out. At his desk he should be praying. Leave your word - without a doubt we'll find him soon - and stop his time of playing."

And here's one for the week before our next Rummage Sale:

"The Rummage Sale is Saturday. Your stuff should now be on the way. But if you've called about your spirit, Then we will be glad to hear it."

Or still another for the Church:

"If you really want the Pastor then you've got the correct station. But if you're after God Almighty then you must dial information."

I even thought up one for Randy Day, our District Superintendent. Try this one:

"You may be a preacher and you may be deep, but keep it short

when you hear the beep".

Approaches can create images. In the old days, banks were known for their massive pillars and heavy doors with gleaming brass. The impression conveyed was one of safety. Today the emphasis is more on warmth and cordiality. Bank exteriors are not nearly so imposing; more glass is being used. The image of your friendly banker begins with the approach. One thinks of Dorothy Scardino playing the piano down here at Manhattan Savings Bank. Whenever I walk in and she spots me, she plays my favorite song on the piano.

Approaches can be negative. A friend went to see a friend who had been transferred to a facility in Philadelphia. As she neared the location, she was somewhat appalled by a cold looking sign mounted on a plain iron fence. It read, "The Philadelphia Home for Incurables". Not much there to lift one's spirit.

#### APPROACHABILITY AS HUMAN BEINGS

What about our approachability as human beings. In a sense we each have an "approachability" rating. It's not on file somewhere, like a credit rating, or an IQ rating, but it's there nevertheless. We rate others on approachability, and they rate us.

A group forms in a church or in the community and there's a job to be done. Someone says, "I know who should head this up for us...let's ask Sylvia...I'd be glad to approach her". Or, a fund drive is about to be launched. Of vital importance in such a campaign is the way in which the canvassers and the potential givers are matched up. This is not an exact science, but moves rather by hunch, by intuition, by feeling. How's your approachability rating - at work, at home, in the Church?

To me, one of the most endearing and admirable traits of Jesus was his approachability. "Then drew near unto Him the multitudes and He opened His mouth and taught them". Or again, "Then drew near unto Him the Publicans and the sinners and He opened His mouth and spake unto them". And remember the time when the disciples thought they should protect Jesus from the intrusion of children. The Master replied in those well-known words, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not for of such is the Kingdom of God". Jesus was easily accessible to people and to children. When He did retreat it was only to enlarge and deepen the self that He would make available to others. And I believe that Jesus would have us like Himself in this regard.

#### HARBOROUS DISPOSITION

The 12th chapter of Romans, part of which Lillian read earlier in the service, is a chapter that gathers up a collection of exhortations. Tucked away among those exhortations is this gem, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; practice hospitality".

Back in the 16th century, William Tyndale, gave us an arresting translation of the last phrase. He put it this way, "Be ye of an harbourous disposition". Think about that phrase. People seldom come knocking on our door at midnight in need of food or lodging, but in the course of our daily round there are people...if we have eyes to see them...who are begging us to let them "in" out of a rough, troubled sea. Little boats in peril are all around us - caught in a violent storm, rudder broken, compass gone, sails torn, tattered and tossed.

In this city, multitudes stand in need of a listening and caring friend. We dare not become so involved in our concerns and programs of the Church and the theological under-pinnings and points of our Faith as to forget this basic requirement of the Christian life. We owe others the hospitality of our love.

The distress signals are out, clearly visible to those who stop to look. We are rightly concerned about the advance of the Gospel in formal ways - worship and education and program thrusts - but it is time that we looked to those informal ways by which truth is shared - person to person, resource to need.

As we examine our approachability, it might be helpful to consider what are some of the attitudes or characteristics that put people off. Think for a moment. Who are the people that you would never turn to if your mast were cracked, or your compass lost, your sail torn. And why wouldn't you?

#### SELF-IMPORTANCE

First, there are those who are those persons who are possessed with feelings of their self-importance. They tend to swagger with a sense of their own magnificence. Arrogant. Proud. Overbearing. They lack a touch of humility. One thinks of the businessman who called in his secretary and said to her, "Take a letter. 'Dear Mrs. Jones'. No. Change that. Let's make it 'Dear Mother'". It's tough to pull into that person's harbor. Some people war those signs that say "Keep Out". "Do Not Enter" or "Enter at Your Own Risk". Some powerful and obnoxious waves of unfiltered ego emanate from their presence making listing relationships almost impossible.

This is the week for a golf story what with the US Open being played in our backyard. You may have heard the story of the golfer on the PGA Tour who was very high-strung. He was having a bad round in the tournament. He shanked a shot toward the end of the match and his wrath exploded. Turning to his caddy he said, "You are without a doubt the worst caddy in the world". The caddy calmly held his ground and quietly said, "It couldn't be. That would be too much of a coincidence."

#### SELF-PROMOTION

Second, there are some who put us off because they are simply too preoccupied with their own goals. They can be tough to deal with, too. Such people tend to be highly selective as to which boats will be admitted to their harbor. Usually only those who can do them some good will get in. The "right" phone calls will get through. The "right" conferences will be set up. But anyone who will be a drain on them or divert them from their goals will not get in.

Martin Buber was approached one night by a student with a heavy problem. But by his own admission Buber let the student in, but was not really present for him. His mind was else where. It was constantly on his work that he would go back to as soon as the student left. Later that night this student took his own life. It was this experience that edged the brilliant Jewish mystic closer to his understanding of the primacy of the "I - Thou" relationship.

Even preoccupation with religious goals can keep others out. Even as we devote time to a deepening of our personal religious life and commitment to Christ, we need to remember that however devout the self may become, and however disciplined, it must always be a "self for others" that is being cultivated.

### SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

The other group that might come in for a word of caution are those who are given to what we call "hard righteousness". If there is such a thing as "easy virtue", there is also such a thing as hard righteousness. We have in mind those persons who have been described as "good people in the worst sense of the word". A soul in need who tries to make it into your harbor already has a sense of failure. Such persons do not need a lecture or a sermon; they need to be heard, received and restored.

A number of years ago a young lady in her early twenties came into my study and shared with me the fact that she was expecting and not married. This was back in the mid-sixties, the days before legalized abortion. "I can't go home" she cried, "Because I know my father will never understand". Her father, she told me, was a counsellor, a man who wrote articles telling others how to bring up children in an atmosphere of love and understanding. Giving her father the benefit of the doubt and assuming that he was a virtuous man, it was a kind of "hard" righteousness he possessed else his daughter would have felt that she could freely go home and share the problem. "I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men". The only one who could have prayed that prayer did not.

I have a friend Eli who works down the street at the Merrit Farms. A bit of a philosopher, he waits on the customers and always has a warm word for them. Some time ago he shared this one with me. "How's this for a definition of right"? "When everything goes your way". Hello Somebody. Unfortunately, that's the definition of "right" for a lot of people. "When everything goes your way". We all know people like that! Yes, "Let's compromise and say I'm right" is their suggestion.

### BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Self-importance. Self-promotion. Self-righteousness. Such traits lower our "approachability" quota. And the way to overcome such tendencies is not to start with yourself but with God. It is in the final analysis our relationship to God that enables us to be harborous toward others, even toward those who have done us wrong. Paul has reminded us that we reap what we sow. And if you wish to reap friends, then you have to sow friendliness. Love begets love; kindness receives kindness in return. And the person who would have friends must himself be friendly.

How approachable are You? One of the most moving experiences involving children in the White House took place during the Eisenhower years. A young girl who had been blind since birth was brought in by a national organization to meet Mrs. Eisenhower and to start off a national fund drive. The first lady was never enthusiastic about public appearances, but this was a good cause. "Are we ready?" asked Mrs. Eisenhower, as the entourage walked into the garden. As the President's wife appeared the blind girl's mother bent over her daughter and explained to her that the President's wife was approaching. "Oh, mamma" asked the excited child, "Am I smiling?"

We do not always know how to judge our approachability. Sometimes help is needed from the outside. "O God, am I approachable?" Let that be a question for you to bring into your prayers this week.

PRAYER        We remember Jesus and His great example...and how He was always  
                  "open" to receive others...that His approachability quota was  
one hundred per-cent.

We remember how He came among us and cared for all sorts and conditions of people. Lead each of us to examine our approachability. Lead us further along the path of compassion and forgive us for our insensitivity to others. Take us in hand when we grow callous and indifferent to others and their needs....O Thou who didst reach out to all people with the great love of God, our Father. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.

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In the world of bridges and buildings, tunnels and thruways, the approaches are important.

DEVELOPMENT To begin with, there must be a way of getting to the bridge or into the building or on to the highway. Safe and convenient access is essential. This is why in recent years we have come to think of a cloverleaf as something white and made of concrete rather than something green that grows in the ground. Access is a key factor.

But approaches are more than functional. They have a psychological character as well. They prepare one for an experience. For instance, if in approaching a restaurant you find a canopy out front and a doorman standing watch, be prepared for high prices and hopefully good food. Approaches have a way of conditioning our expectations; they hint at what is coming.

Approaches can create images. In the old days, banks were known for their massive pillars and heavy doors with gleaming brass. The impression conveyed was one of safety. Today the emphasis is more on warmth and cordiality. Bank exteriors are not nearly so imposing; more glass is being used. The image of your friendly banker begins with the approach.

Approaches can be negative. A friend went to see a friend who had been transferred to a facility in Philadelphia. As she neared the location, she was somewhat appalled by a cold looking sign mounted on a plain iron fence. The sign said: "The Philadelphia Home for Incurables". Such an approach would tend to do little to lift one's spirit.

APPROACHABILITY AS HUMAN BEINGS But enough musings on "approaches" as the engineers or the architects or others might use the term. Our main business is not bridges or buildings, but people, and our concern today has to do with our approachability as human beings.

In a sense, each person present has an "approachability" rating. It's not on file somewhere - like a credit rating, or an IQ rating, but it's there, nevertheless. We rate others on approachability, and they rate us.

A group forms in a church or in the community and decides that a certain job needs to be done. Someone says, "I know who should head this up for us... let's ask Sylvia". And then comes the question of who should approach Sylvia. Some are more likely to get through to her than others.

Or, a fund drive is about to be launched. Of vital importance in such a campaign is the way in which the canvassers and the potential givers are matched up. Most prospects are not equally approachable to everyone. This is not an exact science, but moves rather by hunch, by intuition, by feeling. But it's, real, a very real concern nonetheless.

How's your approachability rating - at home, at work, in the Church. Think about it.

RELATED TO OUR FAITH

There is a correlation between our approachability and our commitment to Jesus Christ. Granted, approachability to a degree is a matter of temperament, but it's more. It is also a matter of faith.

To me, one of the most endearing and admirable traits of Jesus was his approachability. "Then drew near unto Him the multitudes and He opened His mouth and taught them." Or again, "Then drew near unto Him the Publicans and the sinners and He opened His mouth and spake unto them". Jesus was easily accessible to people who wanted to be with Him.

Remember the time when the disciples thought they should protect Jesus from the intrusion of children. The Master replied in those well-known words, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not for of such is the Kingdom of God". Even children who could not grasp His thoughts felt at ease in His presence.

At times, of course, Jesus did retreat, but only to enlarge and deepen the self that He would make available to others. And I believe that Jesus would have us like Himself in this regard.

A HARBOROUS DISPOSITION

The 12th chapter of Romans, part of which was read earlier in the service, is a chapter that gathers up a collection of exhortations. Tucked away among those exhortations is this gem,

"Contribute to the needs of the saints;  
practice hospitality."

Back in the 16th century, William Tyndale, gave us an arresting translation of the last phrase. He put it this way, "Be ye of an harborous disposition". Think about that phrase. The early Church, of course, learned to practice hospitality out of sheer necessity. As the Jesus movement took possession of more and more people, they became uprooted. Many were persecuted. The missionary vision created much moving around. It was inconceivable that the Gospel could have gone through what it did and where it did unless Christians everywhere kept "open house".

But I suggest that while physical hospitality is still very much in order - although we have delegated much of it to agencies and institutions - there is a sense in which it is a fair extension of Paul's thought to widen "hospitality" to include "soul shelter".

"Be ye of an harborous disposition". People seldom come knocking on our door at midnight in need of food or lodging, but in the course of our daily round there are people...if we have eyes to see them...who are begging us to let them "in" out of a rough, troubled sea. Little boats in peril are all around us - caught in a violent storm, rudder broken, compass gone, sails torn, tattered.

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SELF-IMPORTANCE First, there are those who are those persons who are possessed with feelings of their self-importance. They tend to swagger with a sense of their own magnificence. Arrogant. Proud. Overbearing. They lack humility. I think of the businessman who called in his secretary and said, "Take a letter. 'Dear Mrs. Jones'". No. Correct that. Let's make it 'Dear Mother!'. There's no easy way of pulling into that kind of harbor.

Self-obsessed individuals bear signs saying "Keep Out". "Do Not Enter". "Enter At Your Own Risk". Powerful waves of unfiltered ego emanate from their presence making lasting relationships almost impossible.

You may have heard the story of the golfer on the PGA who was very high-strung. He was having a bad round in a championship tournament. He shanked a shot toward the end of the match and his wrath exploded. Turning to his caddy, he said, "You are without a doubt the worst caddy in the world". The caddy calmly held his ground and quietly said, "It couldn't be. That would be too much of a coincidence."

SELF-PROMOTION Second, there are some who put us off because they are simply too preoccupied with their own goals. They're not as vicious as the first, but they, too, can be quite repulsive. More subtle perhaps. Nonetheless, they are highly selective as to which boats will be admitted to their harbor. Usually only those who can do them some good will get in. The "right" phone calls will get through. The "right" conferences will be set up. But anyone who will be a ~~drain~~ on them or divert them from their goals will not get in.

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A number of years ago a girl in her early twenties came into my study. She had a personal problem. She had been to her doctor back home and learned that she was expecting. Unmarried. This was back in the days before legalized abortion. "I can't go home" she cried, "Because I know my father will never understand." Her father, she told me, was a counsellor, a man who wrote articles telling others how to bring up children in an atmosphere of love and understanding. Giving her father the benefit of the doubt and assuming that he was a virtuous man, it was a kind of hard righteousness he possessed else his daughter would have felt that she could freely go home. "I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men". The only one who could have prayed that prayer did not.

I have a friend named Eli who works over at the Merrit Farms on 85th Street at Lexington Avenue. A bit of a philosopher, he waits on the customers and always has a warm word for them. The other day he shared this one with me. "How's this for a Definition of Right" he asked. "When everything goes your way". Unfortunately, that's the definition of "right" for a lot of people. "When everything goes your way". We all know people like that!

BRINGING IT TOGETHER Self-importance. Self-promotion. Self-righteousness. These traits tend to lower our "approachability quota". The way to overcome such tendencies is not to start with yourself, but with God.

I was thinking about that saying of Jesus the other day, "If your brother wrongs you, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you seven times in a day and comes back to you seven times, saying 'I am sorry', you are to forgive him." Remember what the disciples said in response. They did not say, "Lord, increase our tolerance", or Lord, "increase our patience". They responded, "Lord, increase our faith". [It is in the final analysis our relationship to God that enables us to be harborous even toward those who have done us wrong.

FINAL QUESTIONS How approachable are You? We do not always know how to judge our approachability. Help is needed from the outside.

One of the most moving experiences involving children in the White House took place during the Eisenhower years. A young girl who had been blind since birth was brought in by a national organization to meet Mrs. Eisenhower and to start off a national fund drive. The first lady was never enthusiastic about public appearances, but this was a good cause. "Are we ready?" asked Mrs. Eisenhower, as the entourage walked into the garden. As the President's wife appeared, the blind girl's mother bent over her daughter and explained to her that the President's wife was approaching. "Oh, mamma" asked the excited child, "Am I smiling?"

O God, am I approachable?

PRAYER O God, Our Father, who came among us in the person of Jesus Christ, to care for all sorts and conditions of men, lead us further along the way of compassion. Forgive us for our insensitivity to others. Take us in hand when we grow callous and indifferent to others and their needs, o Thou who didst reach out to all people with the love of God. Make us approachable, more than we are. In the spirit of Christ.

PASTORAL PRAYER: June 15, 1986

O THOU, who art the LIGHT of the minds that know Thee,  
the JOY of the hearts that love Thee,  
the STRENGTH of the wills that serve Thee...

HEAR OUR THOUGHTS as we enter once again into the quiet  
time of prayer. Far from us Thou never art, but by  
the busyness of our lives and the insensitiveness of  
our hearts we shut Thee out. We keep Thee distant.

GREAT IS THY power. INFINITE THE love. THY CONCERN is  
for all mankind.

FOR THE warmth and the beauty of a Summer Day...for the opportunity  
to assemble in worship and to share in fellowship with friends  
within these hallowed walls, we give Thee our thanks.

FOR THE guidance and for the care that have brought us safely through  
the work of another week to this place where we may find  
faith and draw strength, we would give YOU our thanks.

NOW HELP US never to trifle with the sacred purposes of this hour,  
never to fritter away its meaning with wanderings of mind,  
and bring to each worshipper present a sense of under-  
girding, a sense of forgiveness, and feeling of renewed  
purpose and deep meaning.

AS WE NOW UNITE together in the pastoral concerns of life, we ask that  
YOUR blessing might rest upon -

All who are engaged in healing the wick.  
All who are helping to rescue the fallen.  
All who are entrusted with responsibility for leadership  
in high places.  
All who are working diligently and faithfully for peace  
among the people of our troubled world.

REMIND US, LORD, that we cannot fellowship with Thee, if in our  
hearts we neglect, or reject our brother or sister  
who is in need.

MAY THE INFLUENCE of this Lord's Day be strong in our land.  
And may those who call upon Thee in prayer be given  
the strength to bear their burdens and the willing-  
ness to help bear the burdens of others.

ALL THIS we now ask in the name and the spirit of Him who long ago  
came among us and of whom people said, "Indeed, He is the  
Way, the Truth, and the Life".

In Him we see life's deepest meaning as well as its highest  
hope!