

"ON BEING APPROACHABLE"

INTRODUCTION Every so often out of the scores of words that rain down upon us, one word gets through and sticks. It captures the attention; it triggers the imagination. The word "approach" recently struck me in this fashion.

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.

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 attitude 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 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.

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 the work he would go back to when 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 your harbor already has a sense of failure. Such persons do not need a lecture or a sermon; they need to be received, heard, restored.

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, momma" 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.

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In the world of bridges and tunnels, buildings and super-highways, the approaches are very important. They're important for a number of reasons.

DEVELOPMENT Functionally, there must be a way of getting to the bridge, or into the building, or on to the highway. These four-lane and six-lane interstate highways that we travel on are serviceable to motorists only as they afford safe and convenient access. This is why in recent years we have come to think of a cloverleaf as something white made of concrete rather than something green that grows in the ground. However significant the contents or services offered, access is a key factor.

But approaches are more than functional. I think 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, you had better be prepared for high prices and hopefully some good food. Approaches have a way of conditioning our expectations; they hint at what is coming.

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Approaches can be negative. I recall a friend once telling me of a visit she made to see a friend who had been transferred to a facility in Philadelphia. She said that as she neared the exact location she was somewhat appalled by a cold looking sign mounted on a plain iron fence: "The Philadelphia Home for Incurables". What a shocker that was. Imagine the impact of a sign like that on one who was admitted as a permanent guest.

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

In a sense, each of us 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 and decides that a certain job needs to be done. Someone says, "I know who should head this up for us - 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 for a college, or charity, or a hospital, or church. 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.

IT'S 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 is 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 sinners and He opened his mouth and spake unto them". Even a casual first-time reading of the Gospel will impress one with the fact that 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 which you may recall was last Sunday's scripture reading is a chapter that gathers up a miscellaneous collection of exhortations. Tucked away among those exhortations is this gem, "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality".

William Tyndale, back in the 16th century, gave us an arresting translation of the last phrase. He put it this way, "Be ye of an harborous disposition". I've always liked that phrase. The early church, of course, learned to practice hospitality out of sheer necessity. As the spirit of Jesus 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". Christians across the centuries have been pretty good in their practice of hospitality.

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 rounds there are people - if we have eyes to see them - who are begging us to let them in out of a rough and troubling sea. Little boats in peril are all around us - caught in a violent storm, rudder broken, compass gone, sails torn and tattered.

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

The distress signals are out, clearly visible to those sufficiently unbusy to see them. We are rightly concerned about the advance of the gospel in formal ways - such as by worship, teaching and program thrusts - but it is time that we

looked to those informal ways by which the truth is shared - person to person, resource to need. And this is something that can happen anywhere and anytime.

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. At least three types are distinguishable.

SELF-IMPORTANCE

First, there are those who are possessed of feelings of self-importance. They swagger with a sense of their own magnificence. They embody an unconscious arrogance that comes from conscious power. One thinks of the tightly wound businessman who called in his secretary and said, "Take a letter. 'Dear Mrs. Jones'. No correct that. 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 true relationship impossible.

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

Second, some others who tend to put us off are those who are preoccupied with their own goals. They're not as vicious as the first, but they, too, can be quite repulsive. Indeed, they are more subtle. Nonetheless, they are highly selective as to which boats will be admitted to their harbor. Anyone who can do them some good will usually 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 constantly on the work he would get back to when 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. We are being inundated nowadays by input from Oriental religions, many of which can contribute richly to our understanding of life. Some, however, are exceedingly individualistic in their emphasis. Within the pale of the Christian tradition it must be remembered that however devout the self may become, and however disciplined, however controlled, it must always be a "self for others" that is cultivated.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

The other group that looms as unapproachable are those who are given to what we might 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 here those persons who have been described as "good people in the worst sense of the word". A soul in need who tries to make your harbor already has a sense of failure. Such persons do not need a lecture of a sermon; they need to be received, heard, and restored.

A number of years ago a girl in her 20th year came into my study on a personal problem. She had been to her doctor back home, and learned that she was pregnant. "I can't go home" she cried, "Because I know my father will never understand". Her father, I learned, was a counsellor, a man who wrote articles telling others how to bring up children in an atmosphere of love and understanding. Giving the father the benefit of the doubt and assuming that he was a virtuous man, it was a hard-righteousness that 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!

BRINGING IT TOGETHER Self-importance, self-promotion, and self-righteousness. These are disabling traits that thwart our approachability. ~~If such traits represent tendencies in your life, it may explain why no one has gotten in for some time.~~ The way to overcome such tendencies is not to start with yourself, or others, but with God.

I was struck the other day by that saying of Jesus, "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". The apostles 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 QUESTION I should like to leave you with a question, "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 President Eisenhower's administration. 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?" Mrs. Eisenhower asked, as the entourage walked into the garden. As the President's wife appeared, the blind girl's mother bent over her daughter and explained that the President's wife was approaching. "Oh, mamma" asked the excited child, "Am I smiling?"

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PRAYER O God, Our Father, who came among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, 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 begin to grow callous and make us like Thee, who didst reach out to all men with the love of God. Amen