

"THE POINT OF CONTACT"

INTRODUCTION

Someone remarked recently that "we should stop trying so hard to get along with God and try to get along with people..."

People are being pushed and squeezed closer and closer together. There was a time when the closest neighbor might have been a mile or two away, but today we can reach out the window of one house and touch the next one. We can knock on the apartment wall or pound on the floor and such knocking or pounding will generally bring forth a response of one kind or another from our neighbor.

DEVELOPMENT

This word "neighbor" was formed by putting together a couple of old Anglo Saxon words meaning "nigh" and "dweller". In today's urban setting, nigh-dwellers are apt to be very "nigh" indeed, and also very numerous. As a result, it often takes a bit of doing to be a good "nigh-dweller". Especially if the one who is very nigh plays his radio or TV late and loud or jogs after mid-night. But lets face it - in that doing we find the real answer to world as well as city problems.

Many of us may not be able to make any great contribution to solving the big problems of the day between nations, or even between individuals, but we can and should start with ourselves. Each of us can strive to be a human catalyst bring people together in common understanding and purpose. Long ago a Chinese philosopher defined life "to be in relationships", and he said that a person lives "in proportion to the number of points with which he makes contact with life and the world".

I remember a person saying to me some time ago that he could count his real friends on the fingers of one hand. His acquaintances were many, but his real friends were few. On the other hand, I recall it was Will Rogers who said, "I never met a man I didn't like". Without a doubt, this business of human relations - getting along with people or making contact with people - is one of the most needful things in life. It's the key to a successful and a happy marriage. It's the key to success - in school, in business. It's the answer to a happy, peaceful and fulfilling life. But - how can you find that something that insures the harmonious human relations that we need.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Perhaps this story will provide an answer to that question. In the course of the Armenian atrocities in the Middle East some years ago, a young woman and her brother were pursued down a street by a Turkish soldier. They were corned in an angle of the wall and the brother was slain right before the sister's eyes. She dodged down an alley...leaped over a wall...managed to escape. Later, because she was a nurse, she was forced by the Turkish authorities to work in a military hospital. Into her ward one day was brought the same Turkish soldier who had killed her brother. He was very ill and the slightest inattention would have insured his death. As this young woman told the story some time later from her new home in America, she confessed to a bitter struggle that took place in her own life.

Something had been crying out in her mind for vengeance. But somehow, the spirit of Christ within her, working through her reasoning mind, told her to love. She finally came to realize that the "eye for an eye" pattern had to be broken somewhere, that to harbor hate and bitterness was a poison to herself.

So she nursed this man as carefully as anyone else in the ward. One day, unable to restrain his curiosity, the Turk, who had also recognized her, asked

his nurse why she had not let him die. When she replied that she was a follower of Him who once said, "Love your enemies and do them good", he was silent for a while. Then he said, "I never knew there was such a spiritual philosophy. And if that is your religion, let me hear about it because I want it for myself!"

There's an important point involved here.

Just knowing the words "Love your enemies" didn't do the work. The girl had somehow made an inward commitment and an inward contact with God. She was so accustomed to making an inward contact with God in others that this loving tendency literally overwhelmed her. And this, I believe, is the secret as far as getting along with people is concerned...making contact with God within yourself and making contact with God within other people.

GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

Now a person will always have difficulty in getting along with others until he first learns to get along with himself. And how often we're at cross purposes with ourselves because we are at cross purposes with God. We're off center...as it were.

The reason people are apt to rub us the wrong way and we have hurt feelings is because we're not on solid ground with ourselves. The person who is poised, at peace with himself has nothing to worry about. When we find ourselves losing our temper we should remember it is because we have lost our inner contact. We've cut ourselves off from the source of power, the source of peace. So, rather than letting ourselves lash back at people, we want to learn to get still - to cool it, to find the inner point of contact, that depth of Reality within ourselves.

E. Stanley Jones, the great evangelical, missionary spirit to India in the 1930's and 1940's and author of several devotional booklets put it this way: "Get the Center right and the circumference will take care of itself".

The classic example of the man who got along with people because he knew how to control himself was Abraham Lincoln. He came up from the backwoods to the capital where he was surrounded by the most cultured, educated and ablest men of his time. Most of them had a low estimate of Lincoln at the start. When he made Seward the Secretary of State, it was first constantly inferred that Lincoln did not have the intelligence to shape policies and that he should let Seward do it. A little man who had no inner contact might have been insulted, but Lincoln patiently showed Seward that he knew what he was doing and a few weeks later Seward said, "The president is the best man among us".

UNDERSTANDING

We must form the habit of making contact with God within ourselves and then within others. This calls for understanding. We need to remember the old Indian saying:

"I will never judge a man until I've walked at least three miles in his moccasins....."

The main reason we don't get along with people is because we don't like them. And we don't like them because we don't know them. And we don't know them, or take the time to get to know them because we're too involved in our own selfish thoughts about our own private world.

There's a salesman for a firm that sells long-burning light bulbs that has been stopping by here for years. He always greets me with a sad face and a tough-luck story. Often he's said, "You know...people won't talk to me..they run the other way when they see me coming" (I know what he means) "I have a good product, but I can't seem to reach them, get them to listen...I have difficulty in selling them on it". Last Spring when he stopped by, I took the time to listen to him and tried to help him with a bit of "off-the-cuff" counselling. I asked him about the people he calls on..."Do you know their names? Anything about them - their interests, are they single or married, anything about their kids. Do they like sports, etc." "No" he said, "People usually think such things are silly and unimportant...I just ask them if they want any of my light bulbs. That's all there is to it. It's a good product and it should sell itself here in the city where there are high ceilings and where the changing of a lightbulb can be a headache".

I tried to explain to him that selling is a "fine art" - that you have to first of all: sell yourself. You have to "make contact" with the customer as a person and once you make that contact you'll then have a field in which to do some business, that you just can't go in and put it on a "take it or leave it" basis. A bit of research in advance might help.

I'd suggest: first, make contact with God in himself. Get a sense of "oneness" with the Divine Intelligence. Then seek the "God-self" or the "Christ-spirit" in the other person. This will provide respect and the basis for cooperation, and a fragile bridge will be fashioned along which the traffic of understanding can pass.

CLOSING We need to practice this approach in all of our contacts with others. Seek the "Christ-spirit" in the other person. I think one of the real barriers to effective human relationships is the human insistence upon getting our point of view across to the other person. This is the first thing that leads to putting the other person on guard and can hinder rather than help. People today say "We've got to get our American point of view across in the world....I've got to get my point of view across to him". But if we became more people-minded...less concerned about getting our point of view across, more concerned about a point of contact within another person, we'd come out ahead.

The secret of getting along with others is to make contact: contact with God within ourselves and then to establish contact with the "Christ-spirit" in others. Let this be our approach as on this World Communion Sunday we kneel at the altar of our Lord with many others - from other lands, speaking other languages - to seek the "Christ-spirit" in them, and to fashion bridges across which love and understanding can pass.

PRAYER Grant us, gracious Lord, that what we have heard with our ears, we may believe in our hearts and what we believe in our hearts, we may practice in our lives. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.