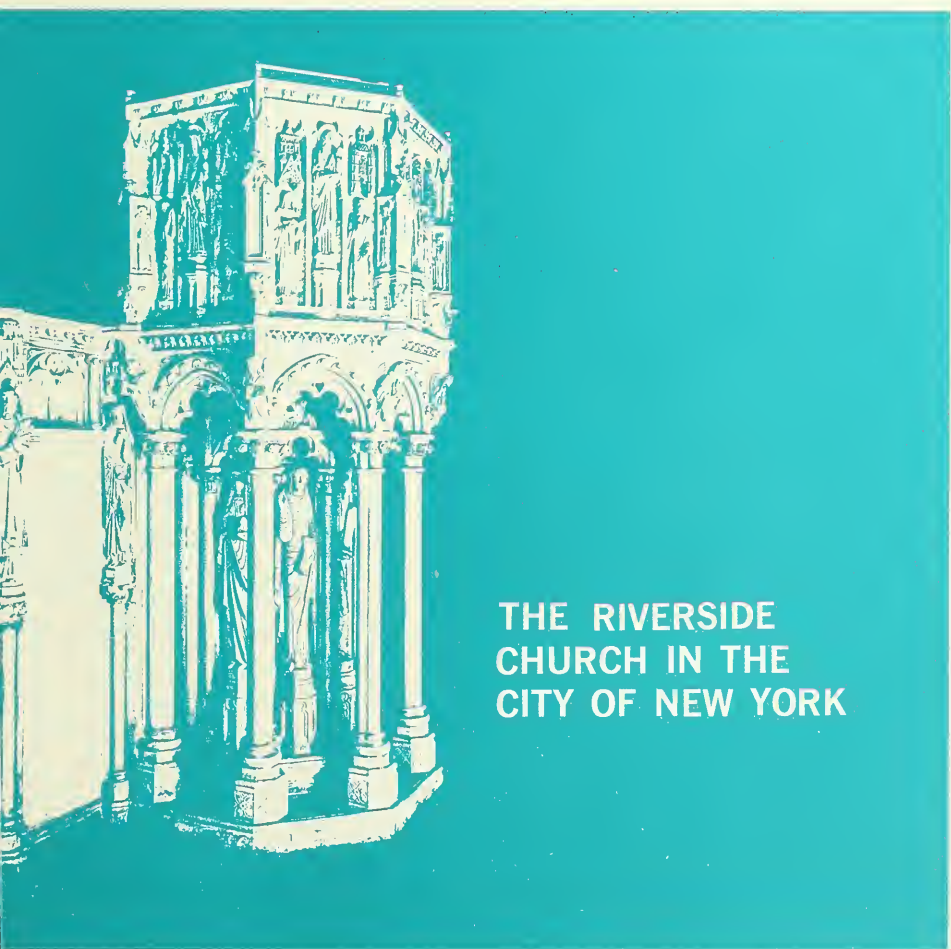


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


ON BEING APPROACHABLE

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ON BEING APPROACHABLE

Every so often out of the thousands of words that rain down upon us day after day, one word gets through and sticks. It captures the attention and sends the imagination soaring. Awhile ago the word "approach" struck me in this way. "Approach" and its cognates "approachable" and "approachability." And the negative "unapproachable."

In the world of bridges and tunnels, buildings and super-highways, approaches are critically important. Functionally, of course, there must be a way of getting to the bridge or into the building or onto the road.

The Verrazzano Bridge that links Brooklyn and Staten Island required approaches that uprooted multiplied thousands of families on both sides of the water. Four-lane and six-lane highways 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 the services offered, access is a key factor.

Some years ago when I lived in Pennsylvania I discovered that when Penn State College (now Penn State University) was conceived, the legislature determined that it should be located in the exact middle of the State. Citizens of that Commonwealth have been known to quip that State University is equally inaccessible from all points.

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

entrance of Rockefeller Center stands the sculptured figure of Atlas -- his massive shoulders bearing up the world. This is a fitting approach to a building complex in which man's prowess in business and the arts is featured.

Approaches can be negative. I remember going down to see a parishioner who had been transferred to a facility in Philadelphia. As I neared the exact location I was appalled by a cold looking sign mounted on a plain iron fence: "The Philadelphia Home for Incurables." Fortunately the kind of care that was offered inside belied that sign. I'm happy to report that the name has since been changed. But what a shocker that was! Imagine the impact of a sign like that on one who was admitted as a permanent guest.

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

Many Psalms in the Bible are described by scholars as Psalms of Ascent. Jerusalem was located on a hill. As the pilgrims made their way toward the holy city for solemn or festal occasions getting there was part of the experience. The gradual ascent heightened expectations. "I was glad when they said unto me let us go up into the house of the Lord." (Ps. 122:1)

* * *

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

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! We rate others on approachability and they rate us.

A group forms in a church and decides that a certain job needs doing. Someone says, "I know who should head this for us -- Sylvia." Then comes the question of who should approach Sylvia. Some are more likely to get through to her than others.

Or, a major fund drive is about to be launched for a hospital, a charity or a church. Of vital importance in such a campaign is the way in which the canvassers and potential givers are matched up. Most prospects are not equally approachable to everyone. This is not an exact science. It moves by hunch, by intuition, and by feeling -- but it is real, very real nonetheless.

* * *

There is a correlation between our approachability and our commitment to Jesus Christ. Approachability to some degree is a matter of temperament. But it is more. It is always a matter of faith.

One of Jesus' most endearing and admirable traits 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. The common people heard Him gladly because they felt the steady radiance of His welcome.

Recall the time when the disciples thought that 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." (Mat. 19: 14) Even youngsters 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.

Jesus would have us like Himself in this regard. The twelfth chapter of Romans is a chapter that gathers up a miscellaneous collection of exhortations. If we could begin to approximate obedience to what Paul gave us there, what a tremendous church would result! Tucked away amongst these exhortations is this gem: "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality." (Rom. 12:13)

William Tyndale, back in the 16th Century, gave us an arresting translation of that counsel: "Be ye of an harborous disposition." I read those words twelve years ago and have not been able to shake them. "Be ye of an harborous disposition."

The early church learned to practice hospitality out of sheer necessity. As 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 where it did unless Christians everywhere kept "open house." Christians over the years have been rather consistent 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 don't very often knock on our door and ask for a sandwich or a bed for the night. But in the course of our daily rounds there are people, if we have eyes to see, who are begging us to let them in out of a rough and troubling sea. Little boats in peril are all about us -- caught in boisterous storms, their rudders broken, their gunwales awash, their sails torn, their compasses gone. "Be ye of an harborous disposition." Let them in!

In this city innumerable multitudes stand in need of a listening and caring friend. We dare not become so involved in complex structural reorganizations of religion and high level theological disputations as to forget this basic requirement of the Christian life. We owe people the hospitality of our love and compassion.

The distress signals are out, clearly visible to those sufficiently un-busy to see. We are rightly concerned about the advance of the gospel in formal ways, such as by worship and teaching, and the right use of the mass media. It is time that we looked to the informal ways by which the truth is shared -- person to person, resource to need. This can happen anywhere. I am not asking that we become boldly intrusive. There are patterns of evangelism that are positively abhorrent. I simply plead that we study to be dependably open and receptive.

Some may say that they lack sufficient background and knowledge for a witness of this kind. They fear that if they let people in they couldn't handle their problems. Thus, they would be discovered to have rendered a disservice. May I say to you as one who has done his share of counselling over the years that most of the troubled people who come to see me are not in search of information anyway. They want to know that they matter to me and thus that they matter to God! It may be said of every believer, whether ordained or lay, what was said of John, "He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness to that light." (John 1:8) I can live with that, can't you?

* * *

As we examine our approachability it might be helpful to inquire into those attitudes or characteristics that put people off. Who are the people that you would never turn to if your mast was cracked? And why wouldn't you turn? At least three types are distinguishable. 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 his secretary in and said, "Take a letter. 'Dear Mrs. Jones.' No, correct that. Make it 'Dear Mother.'" There is no way of pulling into that kind of harbor.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in discussing heroes and their limitations said, "Every genius is defended from approach by quantities of unavailability. They are very attractive, and seem at a distance our own: but we are hindered on all sides from approach. The more we are drawn, the more we are repelled." 1

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. For such there is only the hope that somewhere the myth will be exploded.

I have carried around for sometime the story of a 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." 2

Others who are unapproachable are those who are preoccupied with their own goals. They are not as vicious as the first, not quite as 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 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. 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 the 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 these days 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, however disciplined, however controlled, it must always be a self for others that is cultivated.

The other group that looms as unapproachable are those who are given to what we may call "hard righteousness." If there is such a thing as "easy virtue," there is also such a thing as "hard righteousness." I have in mind those individuals 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 and restored.

A young girl came into my office one time in another city. She had just been to her doctor and learned that she was pregnant at the age of seventeen. "I can't go home," she cried, "because I know my father wouldn't understand." 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 gone home freely. "I thank Thee, God, that I am not as other men." The only one who could have prayed that prayer did not!

These are the disabling traits: self-importance, self-promotion and self-righteousness. If such traits represent your life it may explain why no one has got-

ten in for some time. The way to overcome such tendencies is not to start with yourself or with 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." (Lk. 17: 4,5 NEB) You know what the apostles 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 our relationship to God that enables us to be harborous -- even towards those who have done us wrong.

* * *

I leave you with the question, "How approachable are you?" May I be personal toward the end? Being tall and lanky, I enjoy propping up my feet when I get into an easy chair. At the end of a long day I find it pleasureable to sink back into a deep chair, stretch my feet out on an ottoman and delve into a newspaper. When my youngsters were still young and crawling on the floor, I would come home at night and indulge in this modest pleasure. I wondered why the children did not draw close. It finally dawned on me that from their point of view I was fortified in and virtually unapproachable. A reclined chair and a widely opened newspaper were barriers not easy to surmount.

We do not always know how to judge our approachability. Help is needed from outside. One of the most moving experiences involving children in the White House happened 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 start off a 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 youngster, "am I smiling?" 3 O God, am I approachable?

CLOSING PRAYER

*Make us, O Lord, as open
toward others as Thou hast
been toward us.*

*Awaken us to the little parish
that each of us has -- peopled
with souls within our reach
who need Thy light and love.*

*And make us faithful -- there.
For Jesus' sake.*

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Uses of Great Men, Great Books, edited by Houston Peterson, p. 188, Pocket Books of Canada, Ltd. Montreal, Canada
2. "Washington Post," June 1971
3. "Detroit News," November 12, 1967

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