

Approach/Avoidance

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It's hard, I suppose, to get through an American life without having read the book or seen the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Lee's classic tale is a national treasure. A story of a Southern lawyer, Atticus Finch, and his two children, Jem and Scout, who live through the racial drama of an Alabama town in the 1930's. Several plots run through the story and one of them has to do with a neighbor to the Finch's – Boo Radley. His name is Arthur Radley – but the town calls him Boo, because he's sort of a ghost, a recluse, hidden away in his home, subject to the speculation of the townsfolk as to who and what he really is. Is he crazy? Is he a monster? Is he a danger to the town? Stories swirl about his childhood and his inclination toward violence. The children are fascinated with this man whom they do not know and have not seen. Along with a friend they carry out little reconnaissance missions into Boo's backyard and onto his porch to see if they can figure out what this man is all about and to try to draw him out of the house. The closer they get, the more afraid they become. At any hint of discovery they turn and run. And yet it is these attempts to draw nigh to Boo and to draw Boo out to them – that are soon met with a response. Boo begins to leave the children little gifts inside the knothole of a tree – some chewing gum, a broken watch, Indianhead pennies and two soap dolls carved to look like them – quiet efforts by a quiet man to reach out. At one point even, when Scout falls asleep outside, Boo, without her knowing it, sneaks from his house and covers her with a blanket so she won't get cold. And, of course, at the end of the story – when the children's lives are threatened – it's Boo who saves them.

In the closing pages Scout reflects and says, "Neighbors bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives."

Sometimes the person furthest from you is the person who ends up being the one you need closest to you. Sometimes the person you're most afraid of is the person most apt to save your life.

You remember the story of St. Francis of Assisi riding his horse upon the Umbrian plain, pondering his own spiritual life. He was a rich man's son and still insulated from the world, and as he pondered these things all of sudden his horse shied underneath him and he looked up to see the sight he most feared in all the world – a leper. Horrified to come so close to someone so unclean, he galloped away. But a voice within spoke and he knew what he needed to do. He stopped and turned and approached the leper. He dismounted and took money from his purse and placed it into the leper's hand and turned away. But the voice spoke again. He turned back and took the leper's hand and brought his leprous skin to his lips and he kissed it. The leper, seeing the love of Christ in this traveler took hold of him and gave him the kiss of peace, and Francis kissed him also. Francis mounted his horse and rode back to Assisi and from that day onward made it his regular practice to visit the colony of lepers.

It may explain in part, the words of Pope Francis, this week. The first of the popes to take the name of Francis – no surprise to hear his words of invitation to those who are afar off.

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So Jesus makes his way into Jericho and there in Jericho is Boo Radley. They don't call him Boo, they call him Zacchaeus. That's his Jewish name. But they treat him like a ghost because he hasn't been very good Jew. He's more a Roman. He's a Roman tax collector and it is his job to shake you down for as much money he can get to cover the Roman tax and to fill his own pockets. And he has filled his pockets well at the expense of a lot of people. So Zacchaeus is the guy you stay

away from. Zacchaeus is the guy you avoid. Zacchaeus is the guy you don't want to be friends with. Zacchaeus is the guy that everybody looks at and says, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as that guy." Zacchaeus is the guy who makes everybody else feel righteous. And the name of the game is avoidance.

So Jesus comes to town and he's been hearing from the righteous people about Boo Radley. He's been hearing stories. And they may not even be rumors. They may even be true. He really may be as bad as they say he is – extorter, liar, cheat, a bad Jew, a discredit to his people – it may all be true. Probably not, but it could be. And so there comes the day when Jesus is making his way through the city and the crowds have crowded out the short little tax collector ... forced him up a tree to see Jesus. And Jesus sees him in the tree and while the name of the game has been avoidance, while the name of the game has been separation and fear, Jesus says to Zacchaeus, guess what Boo – I'm coming to your house today. The name of the game has been avoidance – but the name of my game is approach. Something is going to happen to you today, Zacchaeus, instead of avoiding you, someone is going to approach you.

This has, of course, been Jesus' M.O. from the very beginning. From the very beginning it has been about approach. God has always been on the approach. In the disobedient days of the Garden – the story goes that God approaches the man and the woman in the cool of the evening. In the burning bush, God approaches Moses. In the baby born in Bethlehem God approaches the world. In the woman at the well that we talked about a couple weeks ago, it was the Jewish rabbi approaching the Samaritan woman. This is the righteousness of God, you see. This is the name of the game. This is what God does. God approaches. It is his righteousness. "So Zacchaeus," Jesus says, get ready I am on the approach.

Now Luke tells us that the people of Jericho are dealing with a different kind of righteousness. Theirs is a righteousness of avoidance. Theirs is a righteousness that takes great pleasure in not being Zacchaeus, in staying away from Zacchaeus. Luke tells us that they grumbled. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner," they said. That's what self-righteous people say. That's what self-

righteous people say when they think that the righteousness of God is something that takes residence in them. Some kind of seal of approval. A certificate from the health department. But Jesus is there to say that righteousness is not a state, it's not a seal of approval, it's not a certificate. Righteousness is a way. It is an act. It is an approach. It is approach. Self-righteousness leads to avoidance. God's righteousness leads to approach. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I – the one here who could have any claim of self-righteousness—I am coming to your house today."

Now it is interesting that Luke records for us no conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus. No words of scolding or rebuke. No pithy parable. All we read is that Jesus approached. And all we know is that upon approach all Zacchaeus has to say is that I have something now to give. To the poor I give away half of everything I have. And to those I've cheated – I gave away four times as much. All because someone thought to approach. And Jesus says, "See, I told you ... he really is a son of Abraham. I knew it. I just knew it. He's just like one of us."

Sometimes the one you're most afraid of, is the one who has the most to give.

It makes me think of the time when I was ministering up in suburban Detroit and I was in a coffee shop trying to get ready to give a talk to my youth group. I had some notes scattered on the table and my Bible opened. Across the way were three young Arab looking men. Southeastern Michigan, at least at that time, had the largest Arab population of anywhere in the world outside of the Middle East. So it wasn't unusual to see three young Arab men in this little shop, but what was unusual was to see the three young Arab men get up and walk over to my table. They stood in front of me and one of them said, "You have something we need." I said with great hesitancy, "OK. What might that be?" "We noticed your Bible and we guessed you are a Christian." I said yes. "Well, we are Muslim and there is so little we understand about your book. Do you have some time to tell us about it?" Sure, I said. And so they sat and we talked for the next hour or so about "my book". When we got done talking about my book, I said to them, "You know, you owe me something." What's that? they asked. I said, "You owe me an hour for you to talk about your book." And we agreed to meet a week later. And we did and they shared with me about their book – the Koran. I

wish I could say that it was the start of a lifelong friendship, but it wasn't. But I will say that when we got up from the table and shook hands and hugged – that something deep had been given and received. We had been filled by righteousness. Not ours. Not even the one locked inside our books. But in the righteousness of their approach.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Sometimes the one you're most afraid of is the one who has the most to give.

So maybe there was great method to the madness of God creating human beings so different from each other. As different as we are from God – so different God made us from each other. At least that's the way it looks. But God's righteousness changes that. Paul points to the cross and says that it is the righteousness of God. It is God in his deepest approach. God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And it is in the approach by which all are filled. That all become children of God. And those who hunger for that kind of righteousness will discover the promised blessing.

Fred Craddock, one of the great American preachers, tells the story of when he and his wife were on vacation and were out to dinner at a restaurant outside of Gatlinburg, Tennessee and he tells the story this way:

Early in the evening an elderly man approached our table and said, "Good evening." I said, "Good evening."

He said, "Are you on vacation?" I said, "Yes," but under my breath I was saying, *It's really none of your business.*

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"We're from Oklahoma."

"What do you do in Oklahoma?"

Under my breath, but almost audible, I was saying, *Leave us alone. We're on vacation, and we don't know who you are.* I said, "I am a Christian minister."

He said, "What church?"

I said, "The Christian Church – Disciples of Christ."

He paused a moment and said, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church," and he pulled out a chair and sat down.

Craddock said, "Yes, have a seat." I tried to make it seem like I sincerely meant it, but I didn't. Who is this person?

He said, "I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, a bastard. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid someone would say, "What's a boy like you doing in a church?"

One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was.

A moment later he said, "Well, boy, you're a child of ..." and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, "Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy." Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, "Now, you go claim your inheritance." I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.

I was so moved by the story I had to ask him, "What's your name?"

He said, "Ben Hooper."

I recalled, though vaguely, my own father talking when I was just a child about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a bastard, Ben Hooper.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.