

## Affirmation

Rev. 2

The word that used to mean “doing the right thing in relation to those different from us” was “tolerance.” Seattle Public Library once showed an exhibit of the history of interracial relations in Seattle. This included a newspaper article about the first white businessman to hire an African American secretary. The photo showed him dictating a letter to her, and the caption read, “He practices racial tolerance.” It seems he was practicing something very different – justice, basic humanity, the right thing. We don’t know what kind of boss he was. It may well have been the secretary who was practicing tolerance...

**Tolerance** implies that there’s something wrong with the other person. Tolerance is what we try to feel about the kid having a tantrum three rows back, because we’re 30,000 feet over South Dakota and there’s nowhere to escape the noise. There’s a bit of teeth gnashing in it.

Affirmation is not tolerance.

How about acceptance?

**Acceptance** is a step up from tolerance. Acceptance is a way of working with a situation we don’t like – it’s not ideal, we can’t fix it, but we can make peace with it. Acceptance is how we come to terms with death, divorce, someone with whom there can be no reconciliation.

In relationships, acceptance seems to imply that a superior group is allowing inferiors to join them – like “accepting” the family of the person your child is about to marry. There’s no gnashing of teeth, but there’s not much of a smile there, either.

Affirmation is not acceptance.

**Affirming** is rejoicing – not just accepting, but giving thanks for – the special, unique gifts that make us all different. Affirmation is delighting in the beauty of light brown and dark brown and pink and beige boys and girls and grownups. It’s taking comfort in the wisdom and experience of our elders and enjoying the energy of our youth. It’s acknowledging the love between an old man and woman whose children are grown, and between two young women raising a small child. Affirming means not politely looking away from difference, but embracing it, welcoming it. In short, affirmation is God’s extravagant welcome in action.

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