# PROMOTING ACCEPTANCE AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

By James Bailey

We continue this morning the series of services focusing on the seven principles of our association. In this, the third in the series, I am speaking on the principle that we affirm and promote ACCEPTANCE OF ONE ANOTHER AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN OUR CONGREGATIONS. Two Sundays ago Bob Gordon spoke compellingly about the first principle—the inherent worth and dignity of every person—and last Sunday Steve Abbott helped us understand the second principle and the connections among its three parts—Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. As we consider all the principles, we can begin to see a logical order in the arrangement. If we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it follows that we are committed to justice, equity and compassion and it also follows that we should accept one another and that we should be concerned about one another's spiritual growth.

As I have been thinking about this third principle and the first of its key words, ACCEPTANCE, I have decided that the place for me to start is with self-acceptance because that seems basic. If I cannot accept myself and who I am and who I am becoming, then it will be difficult for me to accept others. So I am going to start with a few verbal snapshots of me and the community in which I came of age—these might be thought of as notes toward a memoir or perhaps a confession. Walt Whitman, some of whose words we heard earlier, began his epic poem SONG OF MYSELF with the lines, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." I am not going to be so bold as to celebrate myself and to sing myself, but I am going to give you some personal history to illustrate problems of self-acceptance not unique to me and to illustrate a point about acceptance in a community such as ours.

So step into my time-travel machine and journey back to a few years before the start of World War Two. For some of you this will be revisiting a time you also remember; for many others it will seem like a trip into ancient history. The place I take you to will likely seem remote although it is literally only a four hours drive from here today. If you travel Interstate 70 to about 30 miles beyond Indianapolis and then take local roads you will find the crossroads hamlet of Eminence, Indiana. There's little in the village today—just a convenience store, a bank, a post office, two churches, a consolidated school and a few houses. It is literally a wide spot in the road.

The village was much the same when I was growing up on a nearby farm in the 1940s and 50s. Visiting this community in the 1930s and 40s, you might well think you were in the 19th century aside from the presence of automobiles and the availability of electrical and telephone service along the main roads. The economy was agricultural—small farms, family farms that a man and his sons might manage—although the economy did begin to change as war-time produced manufacturing jobs in Indianapolis and thus within commuting distance. The social structure was working class with a low level of education. It was a white Anglo Saxon Protestant world. If individuals you might think of as THE OTHER or as social misfits were present (and I suppose they were), they would have been unwed mothers and the physically and emotionally handicapped. Almost no racial or cultural diversity was visible, and the locals tended to be suspicious of outsiders. Were there any gay men or lesbians in the community? Statistically there must have been but they were invisible. Local churches might have shown compassion toward an unwed mother or someone with emotional problems—but to a gay or lesbian? NO, NOT HARDLY.

Into this rural community I was born. I was born at home—not in a hospital, but at home in the front bedroom and ushered into the world with the help of grandmothers. Oh, I'm sure a local doctor was in attendance, too, although he was probably less important than the grandmothers. I was the third child and the second son. My paternal grandmother, who kept journals, documented my arrival with this entry:

March 13: Sunday. Temperature about thirty-six. Cloudy and started to rain about nine-thirty. Rained all day. Well I did not entertain the minister and family after all. *[She was supposed to have them for dinner following church.]* We have a new grandson. Born about nine-forty-five this morning. His name is James Ross and he weighs ten pounds good and strong. He has a lot of black hair and dark eyes. Dale *[that was my brother who was not quite two]* thought he was a big doll and wanted to get him.

You may have noticed that the announcement of by birth came after the weather news—always important to farmers.

This grandmother left behind several journals and we have copied them so all of us grandchildren can have them. They are a mixture of farm records, family history and community news with occasional notations about national and world events.

As you may infer from my grandmother's note about planning to have the preacher for dinner, churches were important social institutions in this isolated scene. Locally there were a Baptist church, a Methodist church and a Christian church and for a while a Pentecostal church, which we referred to, with a certain humorous snobbery, as Holy Rollers. I attended Sunday school at the local Christian church—what some would have designated a Campbellite church after the reformer Alexander Campbell. It could not afford a full-time minister but engaged one for Sunday services. In my youth the ministers were often students from the seminary at Butler University, but by the 1960s the theological students were deemed too liberal for this small, ultra conservative congregation. I was baptized as a member of the church when I was 13. It was an old-fashioned "total immersion" baptism, performed in a traditional baptizing hole in a local creek.

Despite the ongoing war in Europe and the Pacific, I had a happy childhood. I was surrounded by a loving family, including two sets of grandparents and a few great grandparents and several aunts and uncles and cousins. Had I thought about self-acceptance—about belonging—I would have had no qualms (aside from the usual ones we all have when we've been punished and have that sudden insight—that we surely must be adopted!)

Of course, with perfect hindsight, I can see moments in my growing up that could foreshadow I might become an outsider, the Other, even, by the standards of that time and place, a Sexual Outlaw. For instance: I recall going to a birthday party for one of my brother's friends. I was probably five and the other boys seven and eight. I wore sandals that revealed my toenails, which my sister had painted bright red. I was hurt when the older boys laughed and said I looked like a girl. Then there was also the fact that I had more fun playing dress up and house with girls than with throwing balls and running with the boys. I liked school but came to dread recess if it meant I had to play baseball or basketball. I loved to read and to be in school plays but felt no joy anticipating gym class.

Adolescence inevitably complicated my life. I'd had the usual crushes on girls—usually popular ones with plenty of potential boyfriends to choose from. But then puberty arrived and my secret crushes were on other boys and male teachers. Yet I was an active member of my church's youth group and also of a bible study group at school. I was aware that some other students considered me odd—teacher's pet, sissy—but their judgments did

not diminish my self-acceptance. I knew my family loved me. And I'd been taught by approving Sunday school teachers that Jesus loved me. But once I became aware of being sexually attracted to boys, I was certainly primed to hit a major bump on the road to adult self-acceptance.

I relied on what many gay youths of my generation did. Denial. I was in a phase, I told myself. I'd outgrow it. So long as I didn't act on my sexual fantasies I was all right, wasn't I? I'd eventually meet the right girl, fall in love, and all would be fine. In the meantime, I talked to Jesus about my problem, made promises, prayed for his intervention. Maybe Jesus had a long line of supplicants because he never got back to me.

Forward to my college years. Although I'd checked out books about homosexuality from the library and though I'd decided I was probably homosexual, I had no personal way of responding to that knowledge. Although I had a few casual sexual encounters with other males, I never talked about those with anyone. I had never met anyone who identified himself or herself as homosexual. A clarifying moment came in a local park, where I met a man who used the word gay. "How long have you known you're gay," he asked me. I knew immediately what he meant although I'd never heard the word used in that sense. More importantly he talked about his experiences and assured me that there were many of us. Welcome to the secret society, I thought. Now if I can just find some other members.

Rather quickly I did begin to find other members of that secret gay society, and of course after the Stonewall Revolution all of us became less and less secret about our membership. The membership I did give up as I accepted my sexuality and acted upon it was membership in organized religion. I knew of no religious body that tried to reconcile homosexuality with its teachings and that would accept the real me as a member. I asked myself—why try to belong to a church? I was happy and productive without religion in my emotional and intellectual life. I had undertaken graduate studies and had chosen a life in academia, where religious affiliation seemed a non-issue. And so I remained for about thirty years until I began to attend the First UU church—at first because it is a welcoming congregation and eventually for many reasons besides its reaching out to gay, lesbian and transgender people.

Self-acceptance came for me despite the early religious teachings that told me I should change and conform in order to be worthy. My own journey toward self-acceptance has, I believe, made me more accepting of others. Acceptance as integral to our third principle is a noble ideal; it would be excellent if, as in the children's story about the penguins at the zoo, we could so easily solve tensions within any group. However, we all know that in everyday life—in family life as well as in work and church life—we do confront tensions and differences that make it hard for us to accept another's point of view and even to accept that other person. Differences in culture, in age, in politics, in education, in appearance—you name it—there are so many issues that may get in the way of the ideal community where everyone is accepted and valued as an equal. The Reverend Robin Gray of the First UU of Milford, Massachusetts, advocates "radical acceptance" in her sermon by that name. She distinguishes radical acceptance from tolerance, an important distinction. Tolerance, she says, is pale and passive whereas radical acceptance is robust and active. Following her lead on radical acceptance, I turned to the etymology of the word—it comes from the Latin word for root, radix [R A D I X]. A radical belief strikes at the root of the matter. Radicals want to change institutions from the roots up. The concept of radical acceptance is, I think, reminding us of our basic commonality—that we all spring from the same root. Despite our differences we are all human beings and, as our first principle asserts, are all inherently worthy. Our acceptance of one another is based on that root similarity—our human kinship—and we are to accept one another regardless of the many ways in which we differ.

Our third principle also affirms that we promote spiritual growth in our congregations. Spiritual, spirituality—these are words that convey many meanings, often very personal meanings. I've noticed a tendency in recent years for people to declare—"I an not religious but I am interested in spirituality." This, I take it, means that the speaker wants his or her life to express more than material values. Historically, mysticism has been an important route toward spirituality in many religions, including Christianity. Mysticism, or the idea that an individual can commune with a deity (or First Cause) through contemplation and without using human reason, is an exceedingly attractive idea, and writings from the middle ages and on through the modern era attest to the appeal of the mystical. The lines from Emerson's essay on nature, which are at the head of today's program, describe a mystical experience—exposing himself to the world of nature, he loses his sense of self, and, as he says, "the currents of the Universal Being

circulate through me" and" I become a transparent eyeball." He loses that sense of separate ego as he merges with the all. Mystical experiences such as this are solitary and in that sense asocial and unique.

In contrast to exploring mysticism as a means of spiritual growth is the idea that we live a spiritual life by finding the sacred in the ordinary and in the everyday (This is language I've borrowed from the Reverend Harold Babcock in his sermon on THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.) The lines we heard by Whitman, which emphasize how we may find the miraculous in the mundane, merge a mystical tradition with the pragmatic: "The narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery," he writes . . . "And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels." Our other reading today, Dixon's "Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt," gives us a view of spirituality similar to Babcock's idea of finding the sacred in the everyday. The spiritual growth dramatized in the poem is experiential and social rather than mystical and solitary. Aunt Ida, despite her age and her afflictions, continues to grow and learn and teach, in the poem. The concept of making an AIDS quilt to memorialize her great-nephew, at first, seems strange to her because she has quilted all her life for the practical reason of keeping people warm—yet she lets us know indirectly that each of her quilts has been a personal statement and she has concealed her name in each of them. Each quilt is a testament to her life and work. She can accept the dead Junie for who he was—a handsome and talented young man who liked to have a good time on Saturday nights and make beautiful music on Sunday mornings. Speaking her thoughts, she comes across as being both religious and spiritual. The character Aunt Ida actually comes across as a neat embodiment of our third principle because she affirms acceptance and illustrates spiritual growth.

It is the essential connection between the two terms of our third principle that I emphasize in closing. We affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. If we fail to accept one another, then we will surely fail to encourage spiritual growth in others and ourselves.