

My good parishioner

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There's a young man in my congregation--let's call him "Michael"--who's trying to turn his life around. He's been in and out of detention centers and prisons since he was 13. Over and over again, he was caught stealing cars, smoking pot, breaking and entering; you name it, he's done it. But now he's trying to change, to turn around.

Michael's ready to settle down, to be the father he never had, to get a job. But every time he fills out an application, he has to deal with that box--the one you have to check off to disclose your previous convictions.

When potential employers see this checked box, they do one of two things. Sometimes they try to let him down easy: "I'm sorry, we just filled that position." But more often than not, they give him a flat-out no: "Why would we hire someone like you? There are hundreds of people who want this job, and none of them have records."

The last time I saw Michael at church, he was so discouraged, his self-esteem non-existent. During coffee hour, I overheard him say to another congregant, "It would be easier to go back to prison. In prison, I'm somebody!"

In the beginning, sings the ancient poet, God created the heavens and the earth, and God said, "Let there be light"--and there was light, and God called it good.

Then God made the sky, a dome to separate the waters above from the waters below, and God gathered all the waters together so that the dry land could form, and God said to the land, "Put forth vegetation: cherry trees, asparagus and black-eyed Susans."

God saw all the vegetation and said, "This is good, this is really good."

Then God said, "Let there be stars!" And, lo and behold, there were stars: a big one to rule the day and a charismatically bright moon to rule the night.

And after God commanded both the water and the earth to bring forth creatures, God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, according to our likeness. And so God created Michael--in the very image of God, God created him.

And then, taking one look at that broken young man so full of potential, God said, "This is good, this is very good!"

I think that this, more than anything, is the good news that we proclaim from the pulpit, over cups of coffee, in small groups, during bible study and in Sunday School. It seems to me that the doctrine of the *imago Dei*--the doctrine that says that *you're somebody*--is the sure and steady foundation that our scriptures, tradition and communities are built upon.

Thanks be to God. I'm going to give Michael a call.