

If the church were Christian, affirming our potential would be more important than condemning our brokenness.

Back when I was pastoring at Irvington Friends Meeting, it was in the summer of 1990, I would go there every morning and sit behind my desk. **I'd never had an office before, so I would just sit there and wait for the phone to ring.** I'd get the most interesting phone calls—people wanting someone to talk with, or trying to sell me something, or needing help. Weird people. I was so clueless about it. I had an obscene caller one day and it took me half an hour to figure it out. **One morning I was sitting at my desk and the telephone rang.** It was a man calling to ask about the church. So I talked with him about the church, then he said, "I grew up in the church, but stopped going. Now I have children and want them to go to church. Church is good for kids, don't you think?"

"I suppose that would depend upon the church," I said. "There are some churches I'd just as soon not take a child."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

“Well,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to take a child to a church where he was told over and over again he was a sinner. I don’t think that’s a good thing to tell people, and especially not a kind thing to say to children. It could really mess them up.”

Then the man said something very interesting. He said, “But that’s what I was taught, and it didn’t hurt me.”

I pointed out that he no longer went to church. “Maybe it’s because you got tired of hearing you were bad every time you went.”

The next Sunday, he and his wife and child came to meeting. They were with us several months, but the whole time they were with us, the man was fidgety and anxious. **He would argue with me after meeting for worship, urging me to come down a little harder, take a firmer stand against sin, and even suggested some groups of people I should speak against.** I would explain that I didn’t think people came to church wanting to hear they were rotten. The man and his family finally left the church. Several years passed before I saw the man again, in a hardware store. **Sometimes when I talk with people, they remind me of other people I’ve known and as I spoke with him, I was reminded of a kid I’d known growing up who’d been abused by his parents, believed he’d deserved it, had grown up suffering the ill effects of that, and still believed that was the best way to raise a child.**

How do you get that song out of your mind? **I have a feature on my CD player, a little button you can push so the same song plays over and over again.** I buy a new CD, there'll be a song on it I really like, and I'll play it over and over again, until I know the song by heart. Then I can't get it out my head. **It's like some churches I know—you walk in, push the button, and hear over and over again what a flop you are.** Where's the eject button that will get rid of that?

I have a friend who's an alcoholic. He'll go a month or two without drinking, then start back up. When he drinks, it's just terrible. He can't sleep. He doesn't eat. All he does is sit at home and drink and tell his wife, "I'm such a failure."

I asked him once, "Why do you say that about yourself? Why do you think you're a failure?"

He said, "Because I can't stop drinking."

"Well, maybe you can't stop drinking because you think you're a failure."

But who first told him he was a failure? Who put that in his head?

Growing up Catholic, I'd go to Mass and the very first words were the Penitential Rite. **"Lord, we have sinned against you," the priest would say.** Just once, I wanted someone to argue back, wanted someone to stand up and say, "Hey, buddy, speak for yourself."

But geez, you're just a kid, just learning how to talk to God, and you're taught that the first thing you have to do when you talk with God is apologize.

Did you ever know anyone who became a better person by being told how bad they were? But think how often religion begins with that premise.

Now let's talk about what good religion should do. In her wonderful little book, The Gift of Years, the Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister writes, "Religion is not a topic, not a course, not simply a body of beliefs. It is a process of becoming...and if successful can bring people to the height of whatever spiritual mountain they climb."

Do you hear the potential in that? **Good religion shouldn't keep us down in the mud, reminding us of our failures.** It should elevate us. It should help us become...become who we're meant to be, not by beating us down, but by lifting us up, elevating our vision, giving us a glimpse of the presence of God within us and others. **Isn't it instructive that in the Hebrew Scriptures, whenever God met someone, it was always in an elevated place.** Remember, friends, if something is from God, it will lift us up, it will give us a vision, it will help us see the world and ourselves in a new way and a fresh light.

That is what God does, and because that is what God does, that is what the church should do.

The world isn't going to put you in a high spot.

If you're old, the world will tell you your best days are past.

But God will start a nation through you.

If you're poor, the world will punish you.

But God will tell you the story of a widow's mite.

If you're sick and hurt, the world will forsake you.

But God will send a Samaritan to bind your wounds.

If you've given all you can and are exhausted and worn down, the world will demand even more.

But God will let you lie down in green pastures.

We don't need the church tell us how bad we've done. The world does a fine job with that. We need the church to give us a vision, give us a hope.

I was at home this past week working. The phone rang. It was Larry Hesson, wanting to read me something from a book. **He'd just been to Barnes and Noble.** I don't know if it's accurate, but I had this mental image of Larry driving down Highway 40, reading from a book, talking on his cell phone. I was impressed by his dexterity. **Plus he was excited, because he had this story he wanted to read to me.**

It was about a church that decided someone needed to go preach to the Eskimos. **So they sent a missionary to go live with the Eskimos and preach to them.** When he's done preaching, an Eskimo elder says, "Before you leave, let me ask you something. If we had never heard of Jesus and sin, would we have gone to hell when we died?"

The missionary said, "Well, no, of course not. Not if you hadn't heard."

And the Eskimo said, "Then why did you tell us?"

If all Christianity can do is tell people how bad they are, the world would be better off without it. **But if we lift up the human spirit, enable one another to see others and ourselves in a new and lovely way, if it expands our hearts and fills us with hope, then people will look at us, as the first disciples looked at Jesus, and say to one another, "Did not our hearts burn within us when they were near!"**