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How many of you have seen the new “Be the Church” banner above the front sanctuary door? For all of you who didn’t raise your hand, I must insist that you take a moment after worship to do so. Go out that way, if you must, (you will find the refreshments there this week anyway.) You can always come back in through the double doors.

Did any of you read about the origin of this UCC banner in this week’s Church Newsletter? If not, the story is simple. Back in 2014 UCC Facebook folk created a new graphic for FB headline which they hoped would celebrate what it means to “Be the church”. The words were requested in print version so often that they decided to create a banner. At first only in black and white, now it’s made with rainbow colors like the one we have.

What does it mean, then, this phrase “Be the Church”?

It invites us to be clear about who we are, collectively, as the church and how we live into that understanding of “church” every day. What kinds of things does the church do? What imperatives does it take seriously? What are the most important things for others to know about us, especially those who may have never even stepped inside a church? What will they find?

There are nine imperative statements after the title “Be the Church.” I have no clue why these particular nine. It could have been two, as in the Great Commandment: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. It could have been Ten Commandments or 613 mitzvah laws. Why nine?

One for each Sunday of summer, perhaps? I’m only scheduled for five sermons through Labor Day including this one, so I’m taking up these topics two at a time on

those Sundays. This week we are talking about “Protect the environment.” And “Enjoy life.” One from the top and one from the bottom.

Protect the environment. I ‘ve been preaching on the environment, climate change, and earth advocacy for quite a while now, ever since the first Step It Up campaign created by Vermont homie Bill McKibben in 2007. He is largely credited with getting mainline churches on board with concern for climate change. The hope then was to keep carbon below 400 parts per million. As minister in Williamstown, MA, we had the traditional tall white steeple in the midst of the college campus. A graph often seen at the time showed how the ppm of carbon had been creeping up slowly over the last couple of thousand years but began a very steep rise in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We had a wide red piece of sturdy canvas that we hoisted up the entire height of the steeple on the outside to show the expected steep rise to the whole town and campus. Since that year I’ve been preaching on the environment regularly.

Lots of new phrases have entered the language in the last decade or so. The one we’ve chosen for this banner is not one I’ve heard often in connection with earth activism. Protect the environment, it says. I agree with its placement as the top priority for the present day church, I would have picked a different word.

Climate change is happening – no rational, compassionate person can deny it. We don’t have to look any further than our own backyards, where the seeds have been washed away multiple times. Or in my case, the front yard, where the Winooski River is time and again approaching flood stage. Not to mention record high temperatures across the country. You have all heard the litany of disastrous changes around the world: melting ice caps in Antarctica, disappearing glaciers in Greenland, disappearing islands in the seas, superstorms and droughts.

Those of us who think we are activists for the earth have been alarmed at recent political decisions that have made earth’s prospects even worse. First there was the approval of the Keystone Pipeline last winter, but more frightening still is the recent decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement. This is not about trying to

make the church political: it is about being the church that stands for justice, justice for the earth and all its creatures.

One question often asked is where do we find the mandate for a strong stand on ecological activism in the Bible? There is always danger of proof-texting: that means, knowing what you want to say and finding a verse that can be read after the fact to support it. I confess I'm a bit guilty of that in choosing today's scriptures. Ps 104 is one that celebrates God as creator

*"May the Lord rejoice in his works— who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke."*

We honor and respect the Creator of heaven and earth. The larger question, though, is what ethics, what morals, does the Bible teach us to embody with regard to our own relationship to the earth? This week I picked up a book I started to read years ago called "Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology" by Willis Jenkins.

I confess that I still did not digest it all: it is very dense. He observes that it is a field with many different concerns and starting points, and that complicates the way we approach it as Christians.

He identifies three ways: the strategy of ecojustice, the strategy of Christian stewardship, and the strategy of ecological spirituality. Ecojustice means that just as we Christians pursue God's reconciliation with all humanity, we also include all of creation in that redemption. It recognizes that it is the poor and marginalized people of the earth who suffer the most from human abuse of the earth: the poor who live near the trash dumps of affluence, the poor who live near the rising seas and are losing their land and livelihood, the indigenous peoples whose sacred homes are being defiled. Justice is not just for people, but for all of God's created earth.

The strategy of Christian stewardship is the one we are perhaps most familiar with. God has given us this earth to till and to care for, to produce abundantly in the lands of

milk and honey, and to raise our children in harmony with their land. It is in the context of obedient response to God's invitation to be stewards that we take seriously our relationship to the earth.

The third strategy is one that may be less familiar to us and thus a little more difficult to grasp. It states our very humanity is inextricably related to the rest of creation, "We are part of all that is" as a familiar hymn states. We cannot be wholly human without consideration of how we are interwoven with all creation. Teilhard de Chardin with *Spiritual Cosmology* and Matthew Fox with *Creation Spirituality* were the earliest of the modern theologians to express this viewpoint.

For me, there is no question that God calls us, as the church, to a concern for and commitment to environmental activism. Returning to my first point: I want to argue that "protect" is not the best of verbs. Protect means "To keep from being damaged, attacked, stolen, or injured; guard." Derived from Latin meaning to protect the front of something.... Primarily, I think it is presumptive of us to assume that we have the power and strength to preserve in a way that God does not. Yes, it is important to protect: the land, the water, the air insofar as we are able. But it is not enough because there are economic forces much stronger than our good will that will irretrievably damage the earth. Perhaps this way of being the church should be something more like: advocate for the earth. Stand up and make your voice heard when forces that will damage the earth are taking control. Do your part in your own lifestyle as a steward of the earth: something which ought to go far beyond recycling and composting, including things like reducing power usage, using the least power-hungry form of travel, simplifying life styles and committing to environmentally friendly forms of housing and building, eating in a way that is most gentle for the earth, etc. And finally, we must worship in a way that recognizes and upholds our part in the web of life. Not only are we connected to all humanity on earth, but we are connected to all forms of life, and we must let go of the tendency to make human beings into the kings of all the earth. Yes we are called to be justice-makers; we are called to be stewards; and we are called to be family with all of creation.

Protect the earth. Advocate for the earth. Care for the earth. Join in with all creation in the praise of God. That is one way to be the church.

For the next imperative I went to the very bottom of the list. "Enjoy life!" Somehow that does not seem like something that belongs on the list of good moral behavior. In fact, there are those who think that "enjoying life" means to do things to excess: to eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. A surfeit of food, of wine, of sensual behavior, of things: is that really what it means? Certainly there is a class of people who regard wealth as a means to pursue this kind of "happiness". In America we are guaranteed rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But indeed, this is where the ethics of Jesus himself comes roaring back into play. What is the pursuit of happiness? What is enjoyment? What, indeed, is life?

Enjoy comes from a Latin root, and is related to the old French word, rejoice. To feel joyful; to be delighted; to fill with joy. Joy is not about excess. It is more like a deep peace and sense of harmony with the world, mixed with gratitude. Most of you, I hope, have experienced joy at one point or another in your lives. The command to "enjoy life" means to find experiences that bring you to that place. The obstacle to that joy, besides the gluttony, is anxiety. Those words from Matthew 6 are always in our ears: "Do not worry about your life!" God provides those things which allow us to "enjoy life" in its simplicity and grandeur: the lilies of the field, the birds of the air. How do we get there? By seeking first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness. Esoteric words, perhaps. But again, it's simple. If our intention is to walk in Jesus' footsteps, in the path of right living, other things will fall in place.

Does "enjoy life" really merit being on the list of all the things we can do to be the church? I think it does: it trains us to let go of the egocentric desires and dreams we have, and to appreciate life as God gives it to us.

When I learned Spanish, I was delighted by the word for "enjoy". Disfrutar. It is not like other European languages in this meaning. It means to "take the fruit out of something:" to enjoy all of what is given us. Somehow I have always connected the

Spanish word to this passage in Matthew, which is so clear in saying God's gifts are generous and beautiful. Enjoy the essence of them. Disfrutamos.

In some way these two imperatives "Protect the earth" and "Enjoy life" work well with one another. This planet and its gifts, as it was created by God, is something for us to enjoy: to "disfrutar" its simple pleasures. At the same time, as creatures with a capacity for intellectual understanding, not only must we protect that which is given, we must not abuse it for our own glutinous desires.

Be the church. Protect the earth. And enjoy life.