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Be the Church. This is our second Sunday sermon on the topic, and maybe by the end of summer we'll have a better idea of what it really means. Last Wednesday, being the church meant sitting in front of the steps to the sanctuary offering to give a cup of water, as last week's scripture suggested. Actually, we offered something even better than water: organic lemonade, iced tea, or cold lemon water along with cheese and crackers and watermelon! For free. To anyone who needed or wanted it, simply in exchange for sitting down and talking for a minute. If we are to love our neighbors, then we need to know who they are, right? Be the church.

Great thanks to Al Weldon and grandson Henry, for help setting things up, and to sisters Louise and Hilah, along with granddaughter Charlotte who brought all the goodies: even a tablecloth and flowers,

I'll be the first to say there are thousands of different ways of being the church. For the last two thousand years, people have been living out many different visions of what they think it means. In the first decades after Jesus, it meant to be a group of believers who gathered in a home or a place of prayer outdoors to share their stories of the amazing life of Jesus, the Christ, and to imitate his life with their own.

After the conquering emperor Constantine, it meant being part of the institution of the Roman Empire, when every group that was defeated was also automatically baptized as Christian. In the Middle Ages, faithful Christians gathered into monasteries, supported themselves with agriculture and cottage industries, and gave shelter and food to weary travelers who passed their way. During the Reformation, people read from the Bible, every day, and thought about what Jesus' life of sacrifice meant in

bringing God's gracious love to all. All of these are ways to "Be the Church." It changed, from year to year, and from place to place, and from culture to culture. Yet people always found a way to "Be the Church". That is the challenge we face in a social environment changing so very rapidly.

Two weeks ago we looked at what it meant to "Protect the Environment" and "Enjoy Life." This week our topics second from top and bottom of the menu are "Care for the Poor" and "Love God."

I think it is safe to say that in every version of the Christian church that has ever existed over the last two thousand years, almost every single one has practiced caring for the poor. In his lifetime, Jesus made very clear his own care for the poor and the marginalized and the despised. He fed the hungry and the destitute; he healed the sick and helped them recover; he included at his table those who had been outcast by the rest of society, for whatever reason; and he cared for the widows and the orphans.

In the earliest church, communion was actually a full meal that was open to those who were hungry. Churches organized themselves to share personal resources in a way that no one would starve or be naked or homeless. Monasteries were known to be places of giving food and shelter to those in need. Every cathedral had an offering box to provide for the poor and needy. Reformed churches took special offerings for mission priorities. As you are well aware, here at FCCB we are generous in offering food and clothing and helping with shelter and other needs of the urban population.

Where and when does God issue this command to care for the poor? In the earliest scripture, in the Torah, there is a great emphasis on caring for the widows and the orphans, those who had no one to provide for them, as well as for the "sojourners", the foreigners in their midst. As we already mentioned, in the New Testament scriptures we see Jesus giving of himself and his possessions almost constantly. He feeds the

crowds; he heals the sick; he has pity on the outcasts. Sharing is the norm, not the exception, for Jesus and his disciples. Care for the poor.

Out of all those scriptures, I had to pick one to read for today. Not being very good at limiting myself, I picked two.

First we are in Matthew, when Jesus is being tried and tested by the scribes and the Pharisees in Jerusalem. One of them asked him, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment of them all?”, expecting that Jesus would pick only one and then find himself in debate with Jerusalem’s finest intellectuals. Instead, Jesus replied both truthfully and cleverly with two:

“The first commandment is to love God. The second one is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

What a brilliant answer, coming up a bicameral solution that marries the prophets’ ethical insistence with the foundational covenant of Mosaic law based on loyalty to God and God alone. Jesus’ answer was airtight.

Care for the poor comes directly from the command to “love your neighbor.” Who is your neighbor? The famous answer to that question comes from another classic scripture we did not read, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Your neighbor is anyone who has a need. And how will we know if our neighbor has a need unless we know who they are, and we can actually see and hear them? We don’t get to know our neighbor by sitting inside our lovely sanctuary. We can and do send money for great mission projects like the UCC “Neighbors in Need” offering. The danger of sending ONLY money is that depersonalization between us and the unnamed neighbor makes it harder to be moved with compassion.

This is one of the big reasons for the lemonade stand out front: for this church and its people to know who our neighbors are, and to observe firsthand their needs, their difficulties, their gifts. Young Charlotte provided a great example on Wednesday, and I hope her grandmother won't mind me using that example. A family came for lemonade: a mother, daughter about Charlotte's age, and a three year old boy in a stroller. Charlotte took the girl over to show her the memorial garden while mom and brother stayed at the table. The boy began calling desperately for his sister, who returned quickly. Soon after the family continued on with their journey, and Charlotte said to me: "That was neat!" "What?" I asked. "That that boy had no feet and had a special way to be in that stroller." In fact the stroller had been so close to the table that I hadn't noticed his disability.

I was very moved by the fact that Charlotte had noticed it right away. Not only did she not say anything that would've embarrassed him, but she took it right in stride and only talked about it to me after they had gone. That's the kind of compassion I hope all our children will learn.

This beloved passage from John's gospel I've always called "Breakfast on the Beach". It is my segue to the next-to-last "Be the Church" command: Love God. I know it's right there in the Matthew passage as part of Jesus' Great Commandment. It is a foundational part of the original relationship between God and the Hebrew people in Moses' delivery of the Ten Commandments. The human part of that covenant deal is to love God.

Now I don't know exactly how you hear that, but to "love God" may seem like a very amorphous and broad task, too general and slippery to define. Does loving God mean singing songs of praise in worship? Does loving God mean to pray always? Does loving God mean to see God in our neighbor? Does loving God mean to care for the poor?

Of course it is all of the above, and in practice it is not abstract at all, but rather specific and concrete. This truth is well conveyed by the passage from John. Here's a recap of the story:

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples go back to their home, to the Sea of Galilee and the occupation of fishing. They've been out all night with little success, and they head for shore in the early morning light. Someone on the beach calls out to them with advice as to where to throw the net. They take in a huge haul!

No sooner do they all get to shore with this miraculous catch, when they realize that their old friend Jesus is the one who has been helping them out. Not only that, but he has made a fire, and cooked some fish, and invited them to sit down together to break the fast. As is his character, he has taken care of them from start to finish, not only by helping them out with their fishing, but by making sure they are warm and nourished when they come in after a damp chilly night. Jesus is right there showing compassion for his own community.

Then comes the best part: Jesus is sitting next to Peter around the fire. In my imagination, the sun is just peeking over the mountains at this moment. Jesus asks, three times: "Peter, do you love me?" Peter answers three times: "Lord, you know that I love you," and he becomes very distressed that he has to say it three times. Scholars through the ages have pointed out that these three affirmations are the mirror image of Peter's three denials of Jesus spoken just before the crucifixion.

Peter is not unique. Peter is the quintessential human being. We are all Peter. And this dialogue is what ties our faith and our devotion to Jesus all together. Do you, human being, really, really love me? Do you really, really love God?

That's a direct question for each of us to answer. Because if we say yes, then each one of us will be committed to caring for those in need, to caring for the neighbor. These seemingly different commands: to love God, and to love our neighbor, are actually one in the same.

BE the church. Yesterday I had an interesting conversation with my resident linguist husband. I asked about our transitive verb "to be" in English and how it works in other languages. Apparently there is no equivalent verb in Semitic languages like Arabic or Hebrew. For example: if I wanted to say "You -plural, meaning all of you – be the Church" in a Semitic language I would simply say, "You Church" You and the church are one in the same. You equal Church. No verb is needed.

Care for the poor is one and the same as love God.

So be the church! Let us claim that identity!