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How many of you would like to live long, healthy lives? If so, I invite you to enter the “Blue Zone.” Interested? So where do we find a blue zone?

The term *blue zone* originated when researchers were looking for the healthiest places to live, and they began to draw blue circles on a map around the geographical areas where people had the longest life expectancies. In Okinawa, Japan, for example, the longest living women reside there. Another blue zone is off the coast of Italy in the mountains of an island called Sardinia.

The picture on the bulletin is from a blue zone in Ikaria, Greece, a small island off the coast of Turkey, where

Chronic diseases are a rarity... People living in this region have 20% less cancer, half the rate of cardiovascular disease, and almost no dementia! People traditionally have farming or fishing jobs and live in a mountainous terrain, which keep them active throughout life. They eat a variation of the Mediterranean diet, rich in olive oil, whole

grains, fruit and a little fish. Goat milk and wine are also traditional here and loaded with antioxidants. Time is taken out of their day to nap and connect with friends, reducing stress and promoting relaxation.¹

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in one of these areas where people live healthier lives and live longer? Sounds like a great field trip, doesn't it? Most of us, however, cannot just pick up and move to a small island on the other side of the world, but researchers have begun to discover the factors that make these areas so healthy, including (not surprisingly) diet, exercise, low stress levels, getting enough sleep, and even taking naps!

You may be wondering, *Ok, so what's this have to do with those of us sitting here in the church?* I think the answer is related to what the people living in the blue zone of Okinawa, Japan, refer to as “*Ikigai*, [*e-key-guy*, which] means, the reason for which I wake up in the morning.”² In other words, part of what helps us living longer, healthier lives is

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having a purpose, having something we believe in that gives meaning to our lives.

In a sense, both Jeremiah and Jesus entered a blue zone when they sensed God's call in their lives, when their identity became intertwined with God's vision and purpose. Jesus entered into the temple of his hometown, read from the scroll of Isaiah about his mission to serve the oppressed and the poor. People wondered how this hometown boy could speak such words about himself, questioning how God could call him, for he was just the carpenter's son. When Jesus gave examples of faithful people who lived in areas other than his hometown, the crowd began grumbling. Jesus referred to the "outsiders" of other countries—such as the widow in Zarephath who helped the prophet Elijah or Naaman from Syria who was healed—the townspeople wanted to send Jesus away—not to a blue zone, but to a dead zone as they attempted to throw him over a hill. They didn't like the idea that Jesus envisioned

God's zone as including people other than just themselves.

Throughout history folks have tried to draw boundaries around themselves to define a narrow zone and leave others on the outside, even to the point of harming those who they believed didn't fit into their zone. Others tried to expand the boundaries, such as in the 1800s when some Americans began to define a wider zone that included more than those with light colored skin. People such as Harriett Tubman and Frederick Douglass knew that God's zone also included those of darker skin. They found purpose in expanding the vision of God's universal love, which inspired them to speak out and offer a wider zone of life to everyone, regardless of one's skin color.

Living with a purpose may at times be dangerous, but oftentimes it leads to greater health for oneself and those around us. Sometimes we may not even realize we are living in a blue zone, as Jeremiah discovered at a young age when he sensed

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God's invitation. Even before Jeremiah was born, he was immersed in the blue zone of God's "consecration" of him. The Hebrew word describing this process is *הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי* (hiq-das-ti), which comes from the root word meaning "holy." The word used in Jeremiah's case is an unusual form called the Hiphil, which means to "cause one to be holy" or "set apart" or to "regard as holy."

Jeremiah at first thought he was too young to be in this blue zone of God's holiness, but God reassured him "I am with you" as God invited Jeremiah to take a message that would challenge the people in the ways they were living.

I suggest that as Jeremiah and Jesus sensed God's role in their lives, that they entered the blue zone, a place where they found meaning in the midst of the difficulties they faced. Today researchers have found that people living in the blue zone have found a similar kind of meaning by serving as volunteers, by reaching beyond

themselves to help others. In an interview, one person described the findings in this way:

Volunteering stimulates the exact same neuro pathways as sugar and crack cocaine. So you taste altruism and you tend to get addicted to it. And we know that people who volunteer regularly have lower [body mass]... They have less chance of heart disease and...they actually have lower health care costs. So you want something better than any supplement you'll buy online to help you live longer, go down the street and volunteer."³

By helping others we end up helping ourselves, and sometimes the small acts of kindness we do can make an amazing impact, as in the case of a Christian man on his way to church [who] saw 4 boys loitering on a corner. He invited them to go with him [to church] and organized a class with them as nucleus.

Years passed and the original group scattered. But on the birthday of the teacher in

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1932, he received letters from each of the four original members: one letter from a missionary to China, one from the president of Federal Reserve Bank, one from the private secretary of Pres. Herbert Hoover, fourth from Hoover himself.⁴

Attending church for these boys had a huge impact on their lives. Did you know that attending church can be good for your health? Back in 2005 an article in the Wall Street Journal stated that “A growing body of scientific evidence shows that Americans who attend religious services at least once a week enjoy better-than-average health and lower rates of illness, including depression. Perhaps most important, the studies show that weekly

attendance confers a significant reduction in mortality risk over a given period of time.”⁵

It’s through the church that God continues to call us, to consecrate each of us, for God sees each of one you as holy and filled with purpose. In order to enhance our lives and find meaning, we don’t have to move to a small island in the Aegean sea (although that would be a great place to live!) We can do that right here and now by finding meaning and purpose in our lives. Think of one thing that gives your life meaning and purpose...

Now you know how to enter the blue zone. May you continue to find those blues zones in life as you hear God’s call to reach out into the world and invite others to join you.

¹ <http://www.bluezones.com/live-longer/education/expeditions/ikaria-greece/>

² <http://thedianerehmsow.org/shows/2012-11-21/dan-buettner-blue-zones-second-edition/transcript> (11:15:45)

³ <http://thedianerehmsow.org/shows/2012-11-21/dan-buettner-blue-zones-second-edition/transcript> (11:24:14--11:24:45)

⁴ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

⁵ Kevin Helliker, “Body and Spirit: Why Attending Religious Services May Benefit Health,” Wall Street Journal, May 3, 2005, http://molokane.org/molokan/Religion/2005_May_WSJ_Healthy_Churchgoers.html