Living In the Safety Zone

*“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.**Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

 —Luke 12:32-34 (NRSV)

 This pulpit feels empty today. Someone we love is missing. We have said our good-byes, offered our best wishes, stood on the curb as the car disappeared down the street carrying four of the people who have loved us over the last nine years. And we have loved them. So, that adventure together comes to an end. I have shed tears, as I am sure many of you have, as well. But it doesn’t make this pulpit seem any more full to me today, and maybe you are feeling the same way. There is nothing left for us to do, but to turn our faces toward God and thank God for the wonderful days we have lived the last nine years. And now, we look to the future as we anticipate the beginning of a new chapter in our lives together.

 Today, we continue in our series called “Life together with Luke.” In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus offers us numbers of amazing, life-changing, bell-ringing, choir-singing, grace-bringing, heart-shaping, mind-bending, world-beating, all-consuming, Spirit-driven, Christ-centered, God-breathed lessons for us.

 I’m excited and I want to talk to you about unfailing treasure, about making purses for ourselves that do not wear out, about creating that treasure that no moth can destroy and no thief can steal.

 Oswald Chambers was a Scottish Baptist and Holiness Movement evangelist, preacher, and teacher. In his book *My Utmost for His Highest*, talks about our tendency to substitute a belief in a creed for a personal belief. He says that is why so many are devoted to causes and so few devoted to Jesus Christ. With all we are witnessing these days, this struck a deep chord with me. Chambers says he grew up on credal belief, and it never worked. He says it’s a dangerous masquerade that is seldom found out until it’s too late.

 So, I want to talk with you today about where your heart is, where your treasure is, and how you can grow into putting them in the same place together. I want to talk with you today about community, the ties that bind us together, and the wealth that gathers around those who live a life focused on following Jesus Christ, a life that honors God.

 Life is all about community. As a family, as community, it’s important to discover ways to live together with each other. We do this by embracing the teachings of Jesus and then acting on them. This church is a wonderful family and there are so many of you who have become very serious about living your lives for Christ that I am simply thrilled. It warms my heart to see the new faces and the old smiles, to feel the warmth of love spread through this place. When we become serious about our faith, we become serious about living for God, we become serious about treating others as Jesus treated them, we become serious about accepting others as Jesus accepted them.

 As we begin today, let’s offer a word of prayer…

 Say after me… I love you, Lord…

 Song…

 *While I was strolling along life’s highway*

 *There rose up a mighty storm*

 *Heard a voice from heaven saying*

 *You’re standing out there alone*

 *Well, I thought about King Jesus*

 *You know I folded up my arms*

 *and I started out for heaven, whoa, oh*

 *and I stepped in the safety zone*

 *I’m standin’ in the safety zone*

 *so many times I stand alone*

 *when all my of friends deceive me*

 *you know it cause me to weep and moan*

 *I’m standin’ in the safety zone*

 *so many times I stand alone*

 *Oh, if you want to get to heaven, whoa, oh*

 *You better stay in the safety zone*

 *well, if you want to get to heaven, whoa, oh*

 *You better stand in the safety zone.*

**What is the Safety Zone?**

 **“…It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom…”**

 The Safety Zone is that place where you rely on God’s provision, God’s grace, God’s love, and God’s will. It’s that place where you give all your wealth and possessions to God, releasing them, letting them go, confident that God will give you back exactly what you need when you need it. And accepting that when it all comes back to you it comes back awash with God’s blessings.

 **Reverence for God**

 It begins with the understanding that God has given us everything. How can we not lift our eyes with an **attitude of reverence for God**. For my generation, reverence meant quiet and solitude and darkness. It is an attitude of silence before unspeakable power and might. I was brought up to be quiet and still before God. It was what my parents did and it was what I was expected to do. But as I grew older and delved into the Scriptures myself, what I began to discover was that God didn’t expect quiet of me. When God asks for reverence, it comes in a lot of forms. Sometimes, it is dancing, but I guarantee you don’t want to see me dance. Sometimes, it is singing and playing of instruments, sometimes it is in the performance of miracles, and sometimes it is in offering an act of kindness to someone. I began to understand that reverence is not a thing you just did when you came to church. Reverence is an attitude of living, a willingness to do everything you do out of reverence for God. When we stand in God’s grace, in the Safety Zone, we live with reverence for God. We get up in the morning for God. We say grace at the table. We perform our daily tasks with prayer and thankfulness. We reach out to others in friendship and kindness. We may skip down the sidewalk in reverence. We may shed tears in the chapel in reverence. But we hold in our hearts a deep and abiding reverence for God.

 **Care for Community**

 When you’re in the Safety Zone, there is a sense of urgency about reaching people for Christ. See, when you are a person of faith, you **choose to care** about those around you. It’s not necessarily automatic. In the beginning, it is a conscious choice. You actively decide to care for others. Now, they may be your family and friends. Maybe they are co-workers or people you share interests with. Maybe they are folks very different from you, but who need to see the love and grace of God… and you are the messenger. So you **choose to care** about them. You include them in your prayers and you become interested in them and in their lives. You get to know their families. You are there for them when problems arise and you look for chances to be of help. You share their joys and their burdens.

 Now, as a Christian, we understand that care isn’t just about the things of today. You know that there is a reckoning coming and you know that there are many who have not accepted Christ. The Bible tells us what their fate will be. If you love them, you want to meet them in heaven when you get there. You want them to experience the joy you have in your heart. You want **them** to live in the Safety Zone, under the protection of God’s grace. So, part of caring for them is offering them the Good News. In the process of getting to know them and caring about them, you relate to them your experience of Christ. Whether your experience was a long progression of events that finally helped you know that God was guiding you, or a mountain-top experience that changed your life, or something in between… however you met Jesus, his love has been the center of your life. It is the most precious gift you have and you want to give it away to those you know.

 There is an urgency. This is serious business. God may choose to bring the Kingdom to completion tomorrow. We will not know the time or the day. When you care, when you are in the Safety Zone, you want others to know the truth of Jesus Christ. Large and small, near and far, you want their lives to be turned toward Jesus… because you care.

 **Obedience**

 When you are in the Safety Zone, you are **obedient to God**.

 In one church where I served, I met with some fellas met every Thursday morning at 8:30 at the Star Café for breakfast. We would talk for awhile and then we would do a Bible study. We chose the Star Café because of the way the servers were attired. You might call the servers “babe-ilicious.” It is an “eggs and legs” place. We felt that God needed a presence there. So, every Thursday at 8:30 we had breakfast and Bible study.

 One week, there was a woman all alone at a table behind us who was listening to our conversation. Ralph happened to be able to see her as we talked. After we had finished and were paying the bill, Ralph walked over to her table and laid down three dollars and said, “You look like you might need this.”

 Now, I’d come to expect this kind of thing from Ralph. We could hardly go anywhere without him embarrassing us somehow. He seemed to be tuned into another frequency, G-O-D FM. He did strange things for no apparent reason and they turned out in extraordinary ways. He was obedient to God.

 We paid our bills and we were standing in front of the restaurant when the woman came out. She came over to Ralph, with tears in her eyes. “How did you know?” she asked. “I couldn’t pay my bill. The three dollars gave me enough to pay the bill and a little for the server. Thank you so very much.”

 And Ralph looked a little sheepish. But then he recovered and gave her his card and invited her to come to church and to the coffeehouse at our church.

 Ralph is obedient and he is listening for the will of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit. And he has chosen to care for the community around him. God uses us to solve problems in this world, near and far, large and small. When you’re in the Safety Zone, you’re obedient.

 **Thankfulness**

 The pivotal point of the Safety Zone is **thankfulness**. For if we live in this world without thankfulness, we take for granted everything we have around us. There is nothing here that God didn’t have a hand in providing. To ignore that ignores the action of God in this world and makes the claim that we do it all by ourselves. If you are a Christian, you are called to thankfulness. And we are called to act on our beliefs… to be thankful.

 Reverence, Care, Obedience, Thankfulness… God’s grace at work. **All of this bound together by an abiding love for God and for one another.** The Safety Zone. Not all of us are there. Not all of us want to be there, sadly enough. But the point is that it is **not** about **us**. It’s about God. God wants us there. God loves us and wants us to be with him in eternity. Wouldn’t it be great if everyone in this room was bound for heaven? Wouldn’t it be great if everyone in Springboro, or Dayton, or Ohio, or the US, or the world was destined for heaven?

 The remarkable thing is that God has made that available for us.

Today’s Scripture passage says*, “…for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*

 God has given us the way to eternal life. We can use our free choice to take him up on it, or not. I’m hoping that every person here has chosen to follow God. But there may be some here who have not yet heard the message, not yet felt the tug on their heartstrings. It doesn’t come like normal messages. It is written on the heart. But the way is clear and it is easy to follow.

 There are things you can do to stay in the Safety Zone.

**Qualities Needed to Enter the Safety Zone**

 **Openness: How we become available to God**

 When I first began to have inklings about the ministry, I would go to church, to worship, to meetings, to events. I’d find myself thinking, “I could do that. I could write a sermon. I’ve delivered talks and seminars. I understand finance, marketing, public relations, communications. I lead a management team. I could help a church find its way. I know how to devise strategy, to set goals, to measure progress.”

 I was feeling pretty cocky. It looked like a no-brainer. I could survive in a church. The pay is crummy and the hours are horrible. We’d give up weekends and holidays. We’d seldom have enough money for a real vacation. We’d live in homes that were not ours and serve at the pleasure of the bishop. But I could do that. Isn’t it amazing how things look so easy when you’re looking from the outside in?

 And God said to me, “Are you interested?”

**Are you interested?**

I said, “Excuse me, Lord, but I’m not sure I’m your guy. I’ve never talked with Carol about going into the ministry. My daughter is still in college and we have these horrendous expenses. We’ve finally found our dream home.”

 God said, “Are you interested?”

 I said, “Lord, I’m not sure I’m religious enough. I don’t pray nearly enough. I’ve not been part of any miracles that I’m aware of. I’m not healing anyone or doing anything special and I’m really struggling with the Old Testament.”

 God said, “Are you interested?”

 “Yes, Lord, I have to admit that I’m a little interested.”

Once we admit our interest, God asks for our attention. God raises the stakes from curiosity to “I have a message for you.” We have to listen.

**Listening: How God gets our attention**

 I went through two weeks of hell as God took away from me one the abilities I have relied on all my life. I was adrift without a map, a compass, or a paddle. God hit me right between the eyes and I was down for the count. You may have heard me tell about my experience of estrangement from God. I could not function during the day. It was as if I was paralyzed. I had survived forty years relying on my own powers of reason and logic and memory. Now it was gone and I was panicked. I went to my pastor and he listened… get that, he listened… and when I was done, he said, “I think God is trying to get your attention.”

 I took my pastor’s advice and I made contact with God again.

 **Do I have your attention?**

 God said to me, “Do I have your attention?

 “Ok, Lord, you have my attention. And by the way, who do you think you are playing this kind of trick on me? Do you have any idea what my last two weeks have been like? I have felt like shooting myself. I feel like my business is collapsing, my family won’t talk to me, I can’t seem to read or think. What is your problem?”

 “Do I have your attention?”

 “Look, all you had to do was ask. I listen. If you’d just say, ‘Doug, listen up,’ I’d have listened. You didn’t have to go through all this.”

 God said, “I did ask you. You didn’t listen. Now, do I have your attention?”

 “Yes, Lord, you have my attention.”

God is all about listening. He listens to us, but he listens with his heart. We listen to him, but we listen with our ears. God’s way is better.

**Performance: How God helps us to live in the Zone**

Christian faith is not a name-only faith. In other words, we don’t claim it and then sit around. God expects us to perform. God rewards us on our performance.

There was a man who was very wealthy. But he was a stingy sort of guy and he never spent any time helping others. He used his money to make more money, which he then used to make even more. He cheated people, left debts unpaid, abused those who worked for him, and walked away from projects where he had promised big things, but never delivered, hurting those who had invested with him. But he was a Christian. He claimed Christ and had been baptized. He sat in church every week… and put his dollar bill in the plate as it came by.

He died and went to heaven and as he was shown around, he noticed that there were a lot of houses there. Some were grand and beautiful and he really looked forward to seeing the gorgeous home he would live in for eternity. His escort took him past millions of luxurious homes and into another suburb where homes were far more modest. They continued on until they approached a shanty town.

“Where is my house?” the man asked. He was a little alarmed.

“It’s right here,” said his host and stopped in front of a dilapidated shanty that looked like it was half-built and drafty and leaky.

“This can’t be mine. I can afford much better than this.”

“Well,” said his host, “each dwelling is built with lumber sent by the person who will live there. Whenever you act to honor God and serve your neighbor, another board arrives. This was all you sent.”

**Will you follow me?**

God said to me, “Doug, will you follow me?”

“Lord, I’m an awfully busy man. I run this company. People depend on me for their livelihood. If I do things that are outwardly Christian I’m going to insult my Jewish and Muslim customers. I will come to church, though.”

“Will you follow me?”

“Look, I try to help people when I can. Are you sure you have the right guy? I’m not worthy of all this attention. I don’t deserve your personal counsel. I’ll try to do the right thing, but that’s all I can promise.”

“Doug, I’m not asking you to promise. I’m asking you to perform. Will you follow me?”

“Lord, will you settle for anything less?”

“Yes. The question is, will you settle for anything less?”

“Any middle ground?”

“No.”

“Ok, then, Lord, I will follow. I place my life in your hands.”

 **Submission: What God requires of us in the Zone**

 To stay in the Safety Zone, **God requires us to submit** to him completely, based on our belief in him and in his son, Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit that leads us from day to day.

 You know the story from John, chapter 6… Jesus had been performing miracles and healings and a great crowd was following him.

 *When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat…" One of his disciples… said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"*

 *John 6:5, 8-9 (NRSV)*

 **May I have your lunch?**

It was this story of the feeding of the five thousand that led me to my personal experience of Jesus Christ. I came to God, empty and frightened. I was open and interested. He had my attention. He had my life.

“Doug,” God said, “May I have your lunch?”

“Lord, it’s all I have to eat. There’s not enough to share. If I share it, I will be hungry.”

“I don’t want you to share it. I want you to give it all to me. May I have your lunch?”

“Lord, I’m so hungry that I will die if I don’t eat.”

“Doug, may I have your lunch?”

 “But it’s all I have.”

 “May I have your lunch?”

 “Ok, Lord. Here’s my lunch.”

God expects us to give him everything, all we have. God expects us to give completely to him, no caveats, no excuses, nothing held back.

See, God does not just want your mind. God wants your heart and soul and mind and strength, all your possessions, all your thoughts and ideas, your whole self, everything you are, have been, will be. God wants all of you because you are his. He doesn’t want anything to get in the way of his love for you. He wants us to turn it all over to him.

That’s a scary thing to ponder, until you know a bit more about it. For God has a plan for you. It includes giving back to you everything you give to him. But when it comes back, it comes back in quadra-phonic, in Technicolor, in 3-D, in 1080i, in Sens-Surround, blessed, beautiful, perfect, fresh, and ready for use. When you are in the Safety Zone, you live for God’s pleasure and for God’s purpose.

**The Reward:**

 *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*

If you have not already stepped into the Safety Zone, it is time. Past time. God is patient, but God will not wait forever. You’ve heard the words of Jesus. Don’t be afraid. It’s your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. So, c’mon. Step in the Safety Zone.

 Pray with me…