Sermon, February 25, 2024
The Second Sunday in Lent
A Sermon by Rev. John Balicki
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Waterville, Maine

To life, to life, l'chaim.
L'chaim, l'chaim, to life.
Life has a way of confusing us,
Blessing and bruising us.
Drink, l'chaim, to life!
God would like us to be joyful,
Even when our hearts lie panting on the floor.
But how much more can we be joyful
When there's really something to be joyful for?
To life, to life, l'chaim.

"Fiddler on the Roof "- In one of the best scenes in movie history, the Jewish people of Anatevka joyously sing a hopeful song in the face of an uncertain future. And if just thinking about this scene makes you want to get up off the pew and run out into High street and do a Jewish folk dance, well go right ahead but please the Church Insurance Company compels me to remind you not to slip on the ice, get hit by a car or, above all, throw out your back.

But well Jesus was a Jew also, and yes, it seemed clear since he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard that he would hoist a glass of wine or two. To L'Chaim? We don't know. But how could this charismatic man so full of life be such a Debbie Downer today? "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.
No wonder Peter was so upset – suffering, rejection, death doesn't sound like anything you'd make a toast to or start dancing about. And to put it in our context of today, aren't we doing everything possible to save our lives? Why? Because I like, maybe love, my life and I want to hang on to it. L'Chaim!

But maybe we're hanging on a little too tightly. Here's how Debie Thomas puts it:

Might I begin by acknowledging that I live in such crippling fear of suffering and death that I use up a huge amount of my mental, spiritual, and physical energy each day trying to stave off both? To be fair, contemporary western culture encourages me to do this. What would Jesus say, I wonder, to the multi-million-dollar industries that invite me to deny my mortality through cosmetics, fashion, leisure, sex, entertainment, real estate, sports cars, weight loss,

beauty? What would he say to a culture that glorifies violence but cheapens death? A culture that encourages rugged individualism and "freedom" at the expense of self-giving compassion and empathy? What would he say to my own frightened heart, that prioritizes self-protection over so much else that matters in this life?

And here's Dorothy Day's perspective:

> *If our cause is a mighty one, and surely peace on earth in these days is the great issue of the day, and if we are opposing the powers of darkness, of nothingness, of destruction, and working on the side of light and life, then surely we must use our greatest weapons – the life forces that are in each one of us. To stand on the side of life we must give up our own lives.*

So maybe Dorothy is getting at what Jesus was getting at. We use our life, our life force to save another's life, for good. It's like the gasoline we buy for our car; we don't keep it to preserve it for eternity, we buy it to burn it, to use it, to get somewhere we need to go.

Jesus' charge is not a demand to deny your true self. It's an invitation to imagine that your self needs the other. Desperately. Intimately. Because this is what to be human is all about — intimacy. Belonging. Relationship. Attention. To what extent we barely know ourselves without all of the above in our lives, without others in our lives acknowledging, regarding who we are. We can't be ourselves on our own. And when we do, it is a self-absorbed existence. It is to be become narcissistic in its truest form, where those around you are only pawns to placate your self-perceived power and importance.

Philip Chircop tells this story at his site, Wisdom Stories to Live By:

> *Some people were attending a seminar. The speaker, wanting to wake up the group into full consciousness, decided to start with a group activity. He gave each participant a colorful balloon. He continued by asking everyone to take some time to blow up the balloon and to write their name on it using the few indelible marker pens scattered around. Then all the balloons were gathered in an adjacent room. The participants, now in the adjacent room with the balloons, were challenged to find the balloon bearing their name within five minutes. Everyone was frantically searching for his or her own name colliding with each other and pushing around others. There was utter chaos. At the end of the five minutes hardly anyone had found the right balloon. The speaker now asked the participants to randomly pick any balloon and give it to the person whose name was written on it. Within minutes everyone had their own balloon.*

Ahh, I give up my life in order to gain it, and it works for someone else too. What if we were to re-envision discipleship as not so much about ourselves as about "the other". Lent cannot be just about me. Somehow, we have defined our identities as that which is connected to Christ and to a community of believers.. Lent is this radical communal experience in many ways. People willing to wear crosses on their foreheads when buying groceries.

Why? Because we realize it's not just about our own selves. Lent is a denial of the self in the best way, denying the self that refuses community. The self that thinks it can survive on its own. The self that rejects the deep need of humanity — belonging.

Singing L'Chaim wasn't a solo. It was a chorus line. The people of God, the Body of Christ, the beloved community, one big long chorus line, often disjointed, often off key, but definitely not a solo. *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?* Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? No bottle deposit required for this life. Use it. Lose it. Give it to others. L'Chaim!!