In the musical, Fiddler on the roof, the Jewish men of Anatevka, Russia joyously sing a hopeful song, “L’chaim, To Life”, in the face of an uncertain future before the revolution of 1905.

*…Life has a way of confusing us,*

*Blessing and bruising us.*

*Drink, l'chaim, to life!*

In Deuteronomy, Moses is in the midst of concluding a series of teachings to the Israelites as they approach the land promised to them by God. For a man that has described himself as *slow of tongue and speech*, Moses has been preaching for 30 chapters! In these teachings he recounts the story of their life as a people. They have been confused, blessed and bruised in their journey to this moment. He retells and reminds them of their relationship to God who has led them from slavery into freedom. A generation has passed, 40 years. And though they are not strangers to hardship and bruises, many do not know the strife of living in shackles under the shadow of Pharaoh in Egypt.

As he begins early in the teachings, Moses bids the people to listen, to pay attention to their history. Passionately throughout the narrative, he urges them to stay true and faithful to the covenant of God under which they have found life. And he does this in the most beautiful verses in Hebrew scripture, with the most important prayer in Jewish tradition, the Shema,

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when* *you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”* (Deut 6:4-9)

Moses continues to bid them to hear, and now, to make a choice. To make THE choice. They are standing at the edge of the Promised Land, ready to move forward into…into what? Moses has given them a depiction of what it means to be the people of the One God – people of obedience to the Law and devotion to the One who Saves. Moses minces no words – love God, only God, or perish. If they love God, they will be blessed in that love, in living in God’s ways. If they choose to stray from God’s ways, they will die.

Earlier in this chapter, Moses tells the people, do not forget God. Cling not to foreign deities, idols made of wood and stone, but to the Living God, and God will circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants, so that they will love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul that they might live. Called to *Shema*, to hear once again who they are, this call to be renewed in the blessing of the Sinai covenant, stands before them on the very threshold of promised land and abundant life.

*“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.”* Love God, walk in God’s ways, keep God’s commandments, statutes and judgements, hear God’s voice and cling to God. “But if your heart turns away…you shall perish.” Moses’ warnings against living in opposition to the covenant are not simply threats, scare tactics meant to keep a restless people in line. He uses them to teach, to inspire the people to make a choice…to use the precious and precocious gift of free will to ***Choose Life***.

Jesus and his followers are well aware of the teachings and requirements of Deuteronomy. In the continuing teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks with them, with us, about what it means to stand on the side of life. In what we call the Beatitudes at the beginning of his teaching, we found a radical reassigning of blessing. As Jesus’ teachings continue, his words are less those of comfort, and now present challenge, and perhaps more than a little unease.

Throughout the teaching of this section of the “Sermon” we hear him, over and over, using the phrase, “You have heard it said…but”. And… I caution us not to take that as Jesus’ dismissal of the law. True to his word, he does not come to abolish the law, but to make it ever more relevant. I might suggest we think of these statements much in the way we were encouraged in seminary; to think in terms of “and”, rather than “but”. This *both/and* approach invites us to consider both what has been known in the past AND to see what else is offered that is meaningful in the here and now. Both *past and present*, can inform each perspective, bringing us deeper into the transformative power of God’s commandments and Jesus’ teachings.

Jesus speaks of life in community. The prohibitions are as well known to us in our time, as to the disciples in their own – do not murder, commit adultery, abuse divorce, swear false oaths, break promises. Yes, we know all these things, and there are more to come in Matthew after these admonitions we hear today. Each expansion of the commandments and statues of tradition and societal norms brings with them the possibility for a sermon of its own. Right now, I’d like to focus on one in particular.

Jesus says, “You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder’ and whoever murders shall be liable to judgement’.” (Here it comes.) AND, “I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘you fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire.” He goes on to command that we refrain from approaching the community in worship until we have repaired relationship and made amends for our actions, thoughts and words.

Bp. Brian Maas suggests what Jesus does in these expansive clarifications is to declare, *“because I have called you into life-giving community, therefore I give you these rules for sustaining that community’s life. In other words, while specific disobedience threatens (very!) negative consequences, the outcome of a holistic obedience is a community knit together by intentional, compassionate behavior toward one another*.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Within the new community Jesus calls us into there is no room for anger, insult, or name-calling. There is no space for behaviors and attitudes that pull us further from relationship and cause divisions and brokenness.

Delmer Chilton recalls a tradition that comes from a small mountain church community where his father was a member. It’s called a Flower Service. He explains,

*“…..everyone brings a bouquet of flowers from the garden and wildflowers from the fields, and places them on a table in front of the pulpit.  After the sermon on Matthew (the passage we hear today), a genuinely amazing “passing of the peace,” takes place as everyone in the congregation comes to the table and retrieves their bouquet and then begins to go to every other person in the church to apologize for any hurt feelings or harsh words or misunderstandings. After apologies and words of forgiveness and reconciliation have been spoken and heard, people then exchange flowers, sealing the restoration of their relationship. Therefore, there is to be no walking around with deep resentments against others festering inside, while we act like nothing is wrong on the surface.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

A parishioner here at All Saints’ once reminded me that it was important to look in the eyes of the person I am greeting with the Peace of Christ. This is a deeply personal movement. I don’t know about you, I find it hard to hold a resentment or any animosity toward a person when I look into their eyes.

Jesus’ words from his Sermon on the Mount give us a way toward healthy relationships, grounded in God’s life-giving Spirit. When we hear and live his teaching, we can know such peace in our inner lives that it cannot help but to reflect in our outward behavior.

So, my friends, how does our choosing life in Christ make a difference?How might we think differently, more deeply, regarding the ways we honor God’s law? Where are we called to expand justice, to honor our neighbors? To whom will we offer our flowers?

Let us choose life this day in this community of promise. In the words of the Shema*: love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when* *you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.* And let us be joyful in the blessing of life in Christ.

I conclude today with the toast from Fiddler on the Roof…

*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.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

1. Brian Maas, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/february-12-sixth-sunday-after-epiphany [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lectionarylab.com/Feb-16-2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. L’chiam, To Life. Fiddler on the Roof. Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. 1964 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)