
“Friends in High Places”

A SERMON on Acts 1:6-14 for the 7th Sunday of Easter, Year A
Preached 21 May 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹
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A few years back, Adam and I had the opportunity to see a wonderful production of a play titled *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, a contemporary comedy by playwright Christopher Durang. The story is a comedy which, at its core, is about a huge generational tension. Three aging siblings, approaching retirement age, are forced to confront a younger generation formed by a world radically different than the one they once knew. At the climax of the play, Vanya, the brother, unleashes a diatribe against Spike, the star stud of the younger set. Vanya goes on and on about how much better life used to be when he was growing up in the 1950s, when you actually had to lick your stamps, when sending letters could take five days, when dialing an old rotary phone took forever. Even having only four or five channels on the television seemed better to Vanya, because even if the shows were mediocre and boring, at least everyone was watching the same mediocre and boring shows *together*—a common experience and a common bond.

At one point, as Vanya’s diatribe seems to be winding down, Spike interjects... “I thought you were listing things that you *liked* about the past?” Sounding a bit defeated, Vanya admits, “I guess things weren’t necessarily *better*, I just don’t like change. I wish the world would go back to the way that it was.”

As we encounter today’s story from the Acts of the Apostles, I can’t help but hear Vanya and the sense of defeat he and his siblings face. The story picks up this morning some forty days after the Resurrection on Easter day. During this time, Jesus has continued to appear to his disciples, teaching and preparing them for what is still ahead. In the moment just before Jesus ascends up into heaven and is taken from their sight, they have one last question of him. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Despite following Jesus and participating in his ministry and teaching all these many years... despite being witnesses to the resurrection... despite all that the encounters with the Risen Christ had shown them these past forty days... in their final question, the disciples reveal how much they *still* really don’t get it. “Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

You see, “the Kingdom” for which the disciples so deeply longed was a return to the golden era of the Kingdom of Israel. It was a time when King David, and also his son Solomon, had reigned over the Israelites for many years, overseeing an era of peace, prosperity, and local prestige among the neighbouring kingdoms. In these disciples’ minds, when they heard Jesus speak promises about “the kingdom”, it was that old kingdom that came to mind, a kingdom that would, after all, stand in stark contrast to the present reality that they knew so well: an Israel with no king, a nation occupied by empire and a people with little autonomy and even less justice, a

¹ This sermon includes some material that originated in a 2014 sermon on this text written collaboratively together with the Rev. Adam Yates, at the time rector of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut. Used by permission.

time with no prosperity and only but a hollow shell of peace.

Now mind you, King David ruled more than a thousand years before the time of Jesus' first disciples, so it is not like they *remembered* the Golden Age of the Kingdom of Israel *personally*. They had heard the stories though... stories passed through successive generations for a millennium... polished, enhanced, given a soft-focus glow with each retelling, until the Golden Age of King David had achieved nothing short of a mythic quality, all its faults and atrocities long since forgotten. The disciples' present reality was broken and filled with suffering, so when Jesus promised a new kingdom, the only one that they could imagine was from long ago, when all was good and there was nothing that was bad—or at least so the story went. The disciples longed for the Kingdom of Yesteryear. Their hope was in that-which-once-was—*maybe*—but definitely is no more. Much like Vanya in the play, the disciples are unhappy with the world around them, and so they look to the past for comforting memories and long for things to be as they once were.

I wonder if this perhaps sounds at all familiar to any of you who've been around church—not just this particular congregation, but church in general in our era. Because, truth be told, this kind of longing for yesteryear happens *all the time* in churches.

But you see, the world of today is not the world of a thousand years ago, or a hundred years ago, or even of fifty years ago—perhaps *especially* not the world of fifty years ago. The church no longer has the same privileged status in society. The social norm and expectation is no longer that people will attend worship on Sunday mornings. Congregations for whom the only necessary evangelism was simply to open their doors and hold worship services, many of them now find themselves their numbers dwindling, their budgets shrinking, and even those same doors closing. Pastors, too, can no longer simply expect they will easily and consistently find full-time positions at churches, as congregations have to bring their staffing in line with their financial realities. No church can any longer assume that a basic knowledge of the scriptures and the faith is transmitted through our culture—increasingly people simply don't know the sacred stories and rarely will encounter them outside of a church.

It can be a scary time for congregations. It can be a scary time for clergy, too. The future is very different than what was before, and what was before is now long gone. If you listen closely, you can often hear communities—and occasionally even their clergy—longing for the church of the past. They long for a time when all that was necessary for maintaining a parish was holding the occasional social dinner or bake sale, a time when church pews were filled simply because people came to worship as a matter of course, a time when the general population was Christian by default, and a time when church budgets were never a source of anxiety.

Now, of course, there is an *honest* question of whether such a golden era ever *actually* existed for the church and, if it did, whether everything was exactly how some supposedly remember it. But whether or not such a past ever existed is beside the point: the truth is, we long for it, nonetheless.

But we do not worship a god of yesteryear. We do not worship a god of yesteryear, for that would mean we worship a dead god. No, we worship the Living God, the God of what is and what is still becoming. The Kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke is not a replication of the past in the hopes that it will be as good as we remember it. It is not a recreation of old glories—real or imagined—and it is not a return to that which is now dead. What the disciples struggled to

understand, even after all the time that they had spent with Jesus and even after all that they had seen and heard, is that the Kingdom of God is something new and never before seen, a creation that is still unfolding around us. The Kingdom of God is new life that is built upon our knowledge of and relationship with Holy One whom Jesus Christ has made known to us. The Kingdom of God is, of course, the kingdom that is ruled over none other than Jesus Christ as its reigning King, and therefore has seated on its throne the one in whom all things are being made new.

It would be nice to say that the disciples finally got it, but I'm not sure that's quite true. What I *can* say is that they *began* to understand, their comprehension blossoming slowly like a flower in the spring. And just like these disciples who came before us, we—the disciples of today and tomorrow—continue in the blossoming knowledge of God's Kingdom.

Whenever we talk about the future of the church, anxiety creeps into the conversation. For that matter, when we talk about the future of the world, we're no longer filled with that sense of optimism and progress that many of our ancestors through parts of the previous century. All the things I've said about church wrestling with shifting realities could be said about the world at large: cultural norms we used to take for granted, economic systems that we thought were working and now don't seem to be, and on and on. We are confronted daily by the changing realities of the world and the church, and the general unease around the uncertainty and unknowingness of what lies ahead makes us anxious. Just like Vanya, we don't like change. But if we can push through... if we can persevere in the face of our anxiety, then we will also find something else. We will find an excitement about what is possible now and excitement about what the future holds for God's church. It is excitement rooted not in the belief that we will return to the glories of yesterday, but in the boldness and confidence that comes with the knowledge that God is not yet done with us, that there is still yet something more in store for the church.

My friends, the church of yesteryear is no more, and that is ok. The church of today and tomorrow is filled with new life, because we worship a living God. Just as he did when he rose up from the sight of the disciples, Jesus beckons and calls to us, not to look over our shoulders and dwell in the past, but to follow him into the Kingdom of God. Let us go boldly into the future, whatever it may hold, trusting that Christ is calling us into something new, unimaginable, and wonderful. No matter what should come of what has been, and no matter what shall show itself yet to be, with none other than Christ as our friend in the high place, we shall find that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."