

Sermon: 19th Sunday After Pentecost/Pr. 22 - "What Came Before"

Date/Time: Sunday, Oct 4th 2026 – 7:45a, 9:00a, 11:15a **Service:** Holy Eucharist Rite I & II

Let us pray:

"God of All, take my lips and speak through them;
take our minds and think through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.

Amen" – Please be seated.

I've been thinking this week about how much of what matters most in our lives is something we didn't create.

We learned something about love because somebody loved us first.

Someone taught us the stories that shaped us.

Someone taught us how to pray - or maybe they prayed for us long before we knew enough to pray for ourselves.

We come in to families and friendships and communities whose stories started before we got there. And if we look around, we begin to realize that some of the most precious things in our lives are things we didn't make at all.

We received them.

And that seems like a pretty good place to begin this morning, because Jesus begins with a vineyard.

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard."

Notice what happens before anybody else enters the story.

The landowner plants it.

He puts a fence around it.

He digs the winepress.

He builds the watchtower.

And only then does he entrust it to the tenants.

By the time they arrive, the vineyard's already there.

They didn't plant the first vine. They didn't clear any land.

They didn't build the wall or dig the press.

They received something someone else had already prepared.

Something had been given into their care.

And I wonder if that isn't one of the first things Scripture wants us to notice about our lives with God:

Before we are givers, we're receivers.

Before we ever offer anything to God, God's already given.

Life itself.

Breath.

Creation.

Grace.
Love.
One another.
And finally, God doesn't only give us things.
God gives us God's own self.
Because --- that's where this vineyard story goes.

Actually, it gets dark pretty quickly?
Harvest time comes - and the landowner sends servants to receive the fruit of the vineyard.
The tenants beat one. And they kill another! Then they stone another!
Then - incredibly - he sends more!
The same thing happens!

Finally - the landowner says, "I'll send my son."
And we know where Jesus is going with this.
Jesus is standing in Jerusalem telling this story.
The cross is coming.
God sends the Son.
And the Son comes, anyway.
That's important.

Because at the center of our faith we don't have a God standing at a distance - waiting to see whether we produce enough.
At the center of our faith is Jesus Christ.
God with us.
God coming among us.
God giving God's own self to us in Love.
Even when that love is refused.
Even when the gift is rejected.
Even when the Son is taken outside the vineyard and killed.
God gives.
And gives.
And gives God's very self.

That's why Christian stewardship can't begin with, "*What does the church need from me?*"
It has to begin somewhere much deeper:
What has God already given me?

What have I received?
What's been entrusted to my care?
Because somewhere along the way, the tenants in Jesus' story lose sight of that.

They've been entrusted with the vineyard, but they begin acting like the vineyard - and its fruit - belong only to them.

And that is where this Gospel gets uncomfortably close to home.

See, we humans are really good at turning gifts into possessions.

My life.

My time.

My abilities.

My money.

My church.

And Scripture keeps gently - well, sometimes not so gently - opening our hands again.

This life is God's gift.

This earth is God's gift.

The abilities we have are God's gifts.

The resources placed in our hands are gifts.

The people we love are gifts.

And the Church - this Church - is gift.

This life we share together is something Christ has gathered us into.

For a little while, we get to tend some part of God's vineyard.

And what an extraordinary gift that is.

We get to worship here.

We get to baptize children here.

We get to bury our beloved dead from here.

We get to sing and pray and learn and serve here.

We get to feed people and welcome strangers and care for one another.

We get to carry Christ beyond these doors into Tallahassee and into the world.

We get to sit beside people we might never have known otherwise and somehow, through the grace of God, become the Body of Christ, together.

We didn't create any of this.

We received it.

And what we receive as gift, God entrusts to us to tend with love.

And that brings me to something we're beginning together today at St. John's.

Throughout October we're going to be talking a lot about how we give - you may have already gotten a letter about it, if not it's on its way

Now, some of you have been around St. John's long enough that you know exactly what that means. But we also have a whole lot of folks who are new among us.

And thanks be to God for you - we are so glad you're here!! But just to get us all on the same page - and that would be the Hymnal 1982 ;) - let me tell everybody where we're going...

Over these next few Sundays, we'll spend some intentional time thinking and praying about financial stewardship and the spiritual practice of giving.

And yes, we're going to talk about money.

Because money is part of our real lives.

It's connected to our work and our choices, our hopes and sometimes our worries - what we value and where we put our trust.

So of course, our money is part of our life with God.

But we don't begin with budget.

We're beginning with gift.

We begin with a God who gives first.

And then we ask how we might respond faithfully to what we have received.

Our invitation this year is Grow One Step.

Not somebody else's step.

Not the step you think you're supposed to take.

Just this: God, what is the next faithful step you're leading me to take?

Across this next month, we're also going to hear some wonderful stories about what St. John's has meant in the lives of a few of our own parishioners.

And that will begin a little later today - with Cheryl.

We'll listen to one another.

We'll pray. We'll talk about giving.

We'll talk about money.

And we'll ask together what it might mean for each of us to grow one step.

And all of this will carry us toward Consecration Sunday on October 25th

When we'll gather for worship and bring our financial commitments for the next year, in the form of our pledge cards.

And everyone will have the opportunity to bring those offerings forward.

That ritual is pretty special - and it's not because God needs a pledge card.

But because we need ways to make our gratitude tangible.

Coming up to the altar and laying that commitment on the altar is a very real way to say:

"This is part of my life, God - and I recognize it all came from you.

And I offer this back in love."

And then we'll go eat together.

'Cause we're Episcopalians, and sooner or later, everything leads to a meal, or coffee.

But all of that's still ahead of us.

Today, Jesus simply puts us in a vineyard.

And vineyards aren't planted just to be preserved.

They're planted to bear fruit.

That's what the landowner comes looking for in Jesus' story.

Isaiah reminds us what fruit looks like: justice and righteousness.

God's gifts bearing fruit in lives made more whole.
Because God doesn't give us gifts just so that we can hold onto them.
God gives so that life can grow.

Love received becomes love given.
Mercy received becomes mercy offered.
Welcome received becomes room made for somebody else.
Faith received becomes faith shared.
Resources received become ministry and service
and beauty and healing and hope.
And then the fruit becomes gift, again.

That's the strange abundance of God.
God gives.
The gift bears fruit.
And the fruit becomes gift for somebody else.
Maybe that's enough for us to begin with today.
Not yet: *How much should I give?* God will get you there.

So our thoughts today are filled with the gifts we've received:
God...
What have I received that I didn't create?
Who loved me before I knew how to love them back?
Who made room for me?
Who taught me?
Who prayed for me?
Who planted something whose fruit I'm enjoying today?
And what, in this little stretch of time that's mine to live, has God placed into my hands?

None of us planted the whole vineyard. And none of us will see its final harvest.
But here we are.
Together.
For this little stretch of time.
Surrounded by gifts.
Entrusted with gifts.

Loved first by the God who comes all the way to us in Jesus Christ.
And invited to tend what God has given us with love, so that it may bear fruit for people we
may never even meet.
That, is stewardship.
And that seems like a pretty good place for us to begin.

Amen.