

Sermon Proper 22A October 2, 2011
The Dedication of an Organ and Stewardship Kick-off
2 Chronicles 5:11-14
Psalm 98
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46
Bill Watson

Yesterday was a beautiful day in so many ways. Fortunate ones of us gathered at Gross' Orchard in Bedford to glean and harvest apples for the Society of St. Andrew. I must tell you that there are few sights more beautiful than walking through an apple orchard on a crisp fall day. The trees were heavy with red ripe fruit; the evidence of God's extravagant abundance surrounded us. We filled bags of apples as fast as we could pick them. It was a vineyard experience of biblical proportions. What a prelude for today.

What a Sunday in the life of St. John's! We have arrived at a pivotal point. Having heard the parable of the vineyard, I would say that the people of St. John's know well the lesson of the parable. St. John's is not filled with begrudging servants who hope to hold onto all that the vineyard produces. We know the good fortune of being called into this vineyard with its many gifts and opportunities.

We have entered a vineyard that has been one hundred years in the making. Others have labored and we have entered into the harvest of their labor. What a blessing we have to follow in the footsteps of such faithful servants.

But having become laborers in this vineyard, we in turn understand that we have been asked by God to be faithful stewards of St. John's Church. Everything has been given to us in trust. We hope to be a people who produce the "fruits of the kingdom." We are a people formed here in worship who produce fruits to spare.

In that light we receive and dedicate our glorious new organ. This organ will support our hymnody as we glorify and sing the praises of God whom we worship and adore. This organ was carefully designed, crafted and constructed. This organ was carefully funded and made possible by faithful Christians some of whom are no longer with us. They have entered into God's nearer presence and witness this event from a divine perspective. This week in particular we witnessed many saints called into the nearer presence of God. We were reminded of how fleeting life can be. We must make the most of each day.

You see vineyards are not self-maintaining and neither are churches. They take constant care and attention. They must be nurtured, repaired, restored and sustained. Otherwise they become overgrown and run down and cease being productive. An untended church like an untended vineyard can quickly deteriorate. Productivity in agriculture is a continuous process and so is the life of a vibrant church. Left untended, there may be nothing left, no church for those who come after us. Today we give thanks for the faithful work of so many here and so many gone before us who have given us such an inheritance, such a fine gift. The gift of this fine organ and the gift of such a beautiful church and facility.

Today we not only dedicate our new organ, but we also rededicate ourselves to the work that God calls us to as we reflect upon what it means to be a steward of God's gifts.

Today is Stewardship Kick-Off Sunday. I am deeply thankful to Kent Van Allen for heading up this year's stewardship campaign. You will hear from Kent in a few minutes. Kent graciously asked me though to touch upon the theology of stewardship.

Stewardship calls us to present back to the vineyard's owner a portion of the gifts of our lives. The gifts of time, talent and treasure that we have been blessed to receive. Amidst all that clamors for our time and attention, God asks for a portion as well. We are each asked by God to gather in community and to work for the church's wellbeing and growth. God has blessed each of us with specific gifts and talents and we have to decide which and in what proportion God may be calling us to share them. Share your ideas, we want to welcome you and we want to hear what God is suggesting to you. The more people listening for God's call and direction the more likely we are to hear that still small voice.

Then there is the treasure part. As Christian stewards we understand the giving standard, the portion that God calls for, the tithe, 10% of our annual blessings. Now that may not seem like a large percentage, but I can assure you

that when you consider offering 10% it can seem monumental. I know of what I speak because this is a walk that I have made.

Tithing does not come automatically or easily. My experience was that it came over time. We calculated where we were as we began the journey. What percentage were we giving? Then knowing where we began, we endeavored to increase by 1% a year until we too became tithers. We did not experience this as easy. It took dedication and the ability to quiet all the opposing voices that clamored for our attention. But we are tithers and the experience has helped us come to realize just how much our lives have been blessed and we are deeply thankful.

I wish you God's blessing and grace as you reflect upon your commitment and pledge to St. John's. We need everyone's full participation if we are to be successful. If you have not made a pledge of commitment to St. John's before, I encourage you to begin this year. Begin as you are able. It requires all of us working together, giving together. Together we can live into the dream that God has for St. John's Church.

We are the inheritors of a remarkable and historic parish. Faithful stewards have bequeathed us all that is here. They gave us, the faithful followers, this treasure in faith, trust and hope. And so we are faithful stewards of what has been given us. Yet, we know that more is expected. There is more to be done, we need only look around.

A faithful life of discipleship is marked by worship and mission of loving God and loving our neighbor. Generations to come will inherit the faithfulness of our life and ministry. They too will experience the glorious sound of this organ; they will lend their voices to continue singing praises to God in this sacred sanctuary. I hope that they too have the good fortune to have their worship supported and uplifted by an organist and choir of such magnificent ability.

Yes, we have entered a vineyard where faithful stewards have been laboring for generations. They have bequeathed us this sacred structure where we sing the praises of God and receive the holy sacrament each week. They have given us this loving environment where we are formed and sent into the world in mission and love. Sent out in love to be the hands of Christ extended to all those in need. We are stewards who present out of our abundance the alms and oblations of our lives. In our faithful support, we too produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Today we labor, hoping/knowing that others will follow us. Hoping that we have maintained and created the optimal environment for people to come to know Jesus. A church that is dedicated to forming disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is our vineyard where we are formed as disciples. Our vineyard, where faith and hope blossom. God has called each of us to labor in this vineyard called St. John's Church. We realize there is work to be done. But we know how fortunate we are to be able to sing with joy accompanied by this organ and this choir while we worship thanks to the faithful stewardship of those who have gone before us.

For each and everyone of you. For all you are doing. For all you will continue to do in support of the life, worship, and ministry of St. John's Church, thank you, thank you, thank you.