First Congregational Church
October 4, 2026
19th Sunday after Pentecost & World Communion
Matthew 21:33-41
“Being Tenents”
Rev. Dinah Haag, preaching

I’m not suggesting we try it, but apparently there is a church where they include dairy with communion. They call it "Cheeses of Nazareth” Not being Catholic, I’ve never partaken of communion in any of their churches. So I wonder, what do those communion wafers taste like? Are they sweet, or a little saviour-y?

Once upon a time at a church meeting, a wealthy man stood to share his testimony. “I’m a millionaire,” he said, “and I owe it all to God’s blessing.”

He told how, as a young man, he had earned his very first dollar. That evening he attended church, where a missionary spoke about his work. The congregation was told that the entire offering would go to support the mission.

The young man wanted to give, but all he had was that one dollar—and he couldn’t make change from the offering plate. So he faced a choice: give nothing or give everything. He gave it all - the whole dollar.

“That was the turning point in my life,” the millionaire said. “I gave everything I had to God, and God has blessed me ever since.” The man sat down, and after a moment of silence, an older woman behind him leaned forward and whispered: “I dare you to do it again.”

Before we get to the scripture passage, a couple of insights. It doesn’t say so within the passage, but Jesus was speaking to the chief priests and elders of the temple. He’d turned the tables on the cheating money changers, cursed a fig tree, had his authority questioned and according to Matthew, told the parable about the two sons that we sat with last week.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve read today’s piece, but never have I ever given the winepress or watchtower a thought, other than wondering, so what? But they hide gems of relevance.

The winepress represents a serious investment in the vineyard, because in Jesus’ day they weren’t made with wood, but cut into bedrock, like limestone. There was a large, shallow upper treading floor, where grapes were crushed underfoot. Yes, like Lucille Ball did in that famous scene. And there was a lower collecting vat, into which the juice

flowed through a grass sort of strainer into a channel or opening where the fermentation took place in the open air.

Once fermented, it would have been transferred to ceramic jars for shipping and sales. There are some pictures in the downstairs dining room of how they might have looked along with photos of excavations. They are near the Doritos. The presence of the winepress meant that everthing that was needed for an efficient outcome, had already been provided.

At any point along the process, the vineyard was vulnerable to thieves and animals, especially the closer it got to harvest time. Building a watchtower could be done with stone or wood, could have potentially provided shade or accomodations for the harvesters, but more importantly, it gave one guard a perspective that was greater - and more cost effective - than several guards on the ground. Like the winepress, the watchtower represented care, preparation, protection, intentionality and investment - even if the story is a parable and not a true story.

Matthew 21:33-41
33 "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.

36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. 38 "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.'

39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Thank you, Mike. I'm sure I'm not the only one with a little emotion about this passage. Not being a true story, it is meant to teach us something, maybe several things - not just in our own minds, but in dialogue with others. You may have insights all week about it. But here's a little thing to add to the kettle of knowledge. The references to the vineyard, the wall, the winepress, and the tower were code to a reference from the prophetic book of Isaiah, to a section called "Song of the Vineyard." The first two verses from chapter 5 read like this.

Isaiah 5:1-2 “I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.”

At the end of that chapter, after the singer tells of destroying the vineyard, the prophet writes, “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” The short version of all that is that despite all the provisions and potential, the people didn’t realize the gift, so it was taken away.

The people of Jesus’ day would have heard his parable, and I have no doubt that a goodly number of them would also have heard the words from Isaiah in the background, and maybe understood Jesus’ parable to be more prophetic than descriptive. I think we can certainly look at the passage that way, too.

Reducing the parable even more, one could say: The owner plants. The owner provides. The owner protects. The owner expects fruit.

The tenants hold all of it in trust. The sin in this parable isn’t failure - because of poor soil quality or plants or even care. It’s that the tenents attempted to possess what they were only entrusted to manage. Well, and maybe the dim-wittedness of the land owner, but that’s not for today. While the issue being about the tenents is not necessarily the first one that pops into the mind, it may be the greater lesson. We are not landowners, but tenents, caretakers, protectors and healers of what can sometimes become sick - in lots of different areas and subject matter.

In a little video speaking to those who might doubt the existence of God, the gentleman had a long litanty of precious creation bits that are little miracles in and of themselves. The gentleman wondered how people can’t not believe in God when octopuses dream and otters have a favorite rock they carry around in a little skin pocket, how cows have best friends and how bees are out here communicating the coordinates of flowers through dancing. How can a creative God not exist when when cats are purring at frequencies associated with bone healing, dolphins literally invent names for themselves and yell them across the ocean, and crows remember your face, then tell other crows about you, and then tell their children about you.

How can a tiny acorn know how to become a huge tree? It just has a blueprint inside it. Your body started as one cell, one. And that cell divided itself into a brain that can think about its own existence. And eyes that can look at stars and hands that can hold somebody else's hands. And a heart that runs on electricity without you even asking it

to. And somehow we're supposed to act like this is a normal place to live. We're supposed to act like this is all just a random accidental sequence of events?

If those aren't reasons to take care of this ball of dirt and rock and water, then we aren't understanding how God set it all up, so we would have a place to be safe - once we worked with it, that would give us fruits to enjoy, from work that can satisfy, and rest to feed our senses of curiosity and aspirations to inspire.

God created us to be tenents, not to be slaves or rulers, that we can be part of what God has created and envisioned as life interconnected not just with the earth, but with the people of the earth. As we prepare for the bread and cup that Christ gave us as his supper for us, on this World Communion Sunday we are reminded that brothers and sisters from the 72% of Costa Ricans to the 4% of Kosovo people who follow Christ, the 90% of Mexican people to the 1% of Thai people who practice Christianity, theoretically, we are all celebrating our welcome at the table, where everyone is welcome - follower or not - equally graced, equally loved, equally held in God's arms.

Let us pray. Holy God of the Ages and Creation, we are grateful for your blessings and love and gifts. Forgive us when we overlook the preciousness of all that, treating all of this creation as common and ordinary. You well know we are capable of just so much, so help us to use what we have been given with all the wisdom, creativity and care to the best of our abilities. May all our works and efforts bring you glory and praise as all your people say, Amen.