



Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren

Continuing the Work of JesusPeacefully, Simply, Together

March 2, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren in the Diaspora.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are experiencing more daylight, seeing more snow melt away, more vaccines being made available and I am even hearing more birds singing. Spring is on the way! I am reminded of the hymn: 'This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise, the morning light, the lily white, declare their maker's praise. This is my Father's world. Oh, let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet!' Praise God...He is still on the throne!

Praise God for many of our congregation who were able to respond so generously to the Mission Stimulus Fund challenge which as of this writing stands at \$24,960. This outstanding generosity on your part will greatly help the Delmas Church of the Brethren in Haiti acquire a meeting place for their congregation. It reminds me of the early church in the Book of Acts who pooled their resources to help the church in Jerusalem. Mutual aid has been at the heart of the Christian Church since its inception.

I solicit your prayers for this coming Saturday morning as the Family Transition Team has a retreat to seek God's direction in developing a strategic plan for our children and youth ministries. I so much appreciate the dedication of so many volunteers who are providing leadership for this ministry initiative.

And speaking of volunteers, I am thankful for our team of brothers and sisters who are assisting in our worship services as children storytellers, worship leaders and musicians. Ed is doing a fantastic job coordinating all the technical aspects to enable our worship services to be broadcast over YouTube. Be sure to thank Ed for his dedicated service especially when we have not all been able to gather onsite.

This coming Sunday's message continues the sermon series on the I AM Sayings of Jesus. Our focus this Sunday will be 'I Am the Vine' as found in John's Gospel chapter 15 verses 1-11.

I am connecting and reconnecting with many of you over the phone as I work my way through our membership. If you haven't received a call yet, feel free to pick up the phone and call me. You can call the church phone number and I can receive your call either at the church office or in my home office. Praise God for the technology which enables us to be connected.

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Through my phone calls I am learning a lot about you and you are learning a little about me. I thought I would include in each of these letters a piece of personal trivia about myself so that you can get to know me better.

For this week's piece of personal trivia, I would like to share that I am a chess player. In high school a friend of mine and I started a chess club at Hershey High School and helped form a chess league of area schools. I taught our children and grandchildren to play chess and I enjoy playing a friend of mine who is nationally ranked. He almost always wins...but occasionally I can catch him off guard...CHECKMATE!

I even got to play chess in Washington Park in New York City which was a dream of mine. It turned out to be a nightmare. Before I knew it, I was defeated. Playing chess is a great game. It has helped me become a strategic planner. Any chess players at Mechanic Grove? Give me a call. It's your move!

"The God of peace be with all of you. Amen." *Romans 15:33*

Bob Kettering, Interim Senior Pastor

I AM THE VINE

- I. Today's message continues the present series of sermons on the *I AM* sayings of Jesus. This morning we focus on the self-disclosure statement of Jesus as found in John's Gospel chapter 15 when Jesus said I AM THE TRUE VINE. I want to divide and dissect verses 1-11 into three parts dealing with:

- the primacy of the vine
- the potency of the branches
- the productivity of the fruit

-first off...the primacy of the vine is established in the opening words of Jesus in chapter 15 when Jesus said I AM THE TRUE VINE.

- II. Why did Jesus choose to identify himself with the image of a vine? We know from the parables of Jesus that he often chose common stories and everyday illustrations to make significant spiritual truths...mustard seeds, lost sheep, a sower, an unjust judge and so forth.

-there were many vineyards in Palestine and everyone could easily sense the significance of the statement: I AM THE VINE YOU ARE THE BRANCHES.

-but in this particular saying the image of the vine also had deep religious and national symbolism among the Jews. Over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures Israel was identified as the vine or the vineyard of God.

-in Isaiah 5:7 the prophet records the words of God: THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD OF HOSTS IS THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL.

-and God's message to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah as recorded in Jeremiah 2:21: I PLANTED YOU, O ISRAEL, A CHOICE VINE.

-twice in the Book of Ezekiel, in chapters 17 & 19, Israel is likened to a vine.

-in Hosea 10:1 the prophet records: ISRAEL IS A LUXURIANT VINE.

-the Psalmist in thinking of God's deliverance of His people from Egyptian bondage writes: YOU BROUGHT A VINE OUT OF EGYPT...Psalm 80, verse 8.

III. Just as the eagle is the symbol of the United States; or the hammer and sickle was the symbol of the Soviet Union; or the swastika was the symbol of Nazi Germany; so the VINE had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel.

-it was the emblem inscribed on the Jewish coins during the reign of the Maccabees about 140 years before the birth of Christ. The Jewish historian, Josephus, records that grapevines of gold adorned the gates of the Temple. Barclay in his commentary relates that: "Many a great man had counted it an honor to give gold to mold a new bunch of grapes or even a new grape to that vine on the Temple gates."

IV. The vine was part and parcel of Jewish imagery, the very symbol of Israel. Without question, ISRAEL WAS THE VINE! Every Jew identified with the symbol of the vine. And then along comes Jesus...telling the Jews, who perceive themselves to be the vine...THAT HE, NOT ISRAEL, IS THE TRUE VINE!

-what would you say is the symbol of our church? Three little pre-schoolers were asked that question. One was from a Jewish family, another from a Catholic family and the other from a Church of the Brethren family. The teacher asked each of these pre-schoolers to share some symbol which was central to their faith.

-the little Jewish boy went first and he held up a..... star of David. The little Catholic girl shared what she thought was the central symbol of her faith and she held up a..... crucifix. The little Brethren boy was last and what he held up to symbolize the most important thing among the Brethren faith...was a..... casserole dish.

V. Amidst all the other major religions of the world...amidst all the cults and the occult...all who are claiming the allegiances of millions of people around the world...Jesus stands out and stands up declaring I AM THE TRUE VINE . This is the symbol Jesus is suggesting for his identity.

-money and materialism...status and social standing...our work and our wealth...none of it is the TRUE vine. Jesus Christ and he alone is the TRUE vine. The 1991 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren overwhelmingly affirmed: JESUS CHRIST IS THE SON OF GOD AND SAVIOR OF THE WORLD AND THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES.

-in our pluralistic society with a proliferation of so-called 'saviors' ...we need to be perfectly clear...salvation is through Jesus Christ and him alone. No preacher...no politician ...no philosopher or guru of any type will ever be our salvation. Acts 4:11 & 12 clearly states: 'This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you the builders; it has become the cornerstone. For there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'.

-brothers and sisters let us not be deceived...JESUS IS THE ONE...THE ONLY TRUE VINE! This is the primacy of the vine. Moving along in the text we come to the second point...the potency of the branches.

VI. Jesus said more than I AM THE VINE; he went on to say: YOU ARE THE BRANCHES. You and I are the extensions, the appendages of Christ. Paul said it this way in II Corinthians 5:20...WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, GOD MAKING HIS APPEAL THROUGH US.

-Christ is depending on you and me to do his work in this world. Ever since Jesus first issued his call to fishermen: COME FOLLOW ME...men and women have been giving their hearts and lives to the Lord Jesus in faithful obedience and sacrificial service.

-there is much work to be done in the kingdom for Christ and the church...for we are ALL branches of the vine as followers of Christ. Jesus Christ needs you, and he needs me, he needs all of us to be about his work through our church and be his witness in the world.

VII. Our source of strength...our source of survival...our source of sustenance as branches is derived solely from the vine which is Jesus Christ. Jesus reminds us that apart from him...we can do nothing. Apart from Christ we are impotent as branches and cannot bear fruit.

-to our smug supposed self-sufficient society Jesus is saying APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING. Despite all your technology, education, money, military might and power...APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING...or at least nothing worthwhile. All our plans and priorities...attitudes and actions must be grounded and grafted in Christ. Apart from Christ our lives and accomplishments mean nothing!

-without Christ and his love at the center of our lives we are spinning our wheels...we are going nowhere and accomplishing nothing worthwhile. As followers of Christ we need to abide in his love and have his love abide in us. Our strength and sustenance as branches is derived through being grafted into Christ. This ensures the potency of the branches.

-from the primacy of the vine to the potency of the branches we move to the final point in this text...the productivity of the fruit.

VIII. As his branches...Christ expects us to produce fruit. Jesus wants us to be more than bunches of branches; he wants us to bear fruit. In fact in verse 8 Jesus says he wants us to bear MUCH fruit! In the Book of James we hear those famous words FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD.

-you can have faith and still not fulfill Christ's desire for your life. Christ wants you to be more than a branch but to bear fruit in sharing his love and making Christ and the teachings of Christ known throughout our world. We are the body of Christ...grafted into the vine.

-his life is in us....his blood courses through our veins...his heartbeat beats within us. When you surrender your life to Christ, his presence lives within you. Paul said it like this in Colossians 1:27 CHRIST IN YOU, THE HOPE OF GLORY. As his branches....we become the body of Christ grafted into him. Christ wants to abide in us as individuals and as His church.

IX. One of the most powerful stories of that embodiment of Christ abiding in us was shared by a speaker I heard at a youth conference the other year, Rodger Nishioka. This is the true story he shared which took place in San Antonio, Texas. I feel compelled to share it with you.

-Elsa Gonzalez, a single mother, received late one night the phone call no parent ever wants to receive. Her only child, a handsome 18 year-old Daniel was driving home late that night from work. He was likely tired after being in school all day and then going to work.

He was a good student....athlete....faithful with his mom at their church. He planned to be the first in his family to go to college....handsome....strong. He took a corner too fast and lost control of the car and crashed.

He was in the hospital in San Antonio, Texas on life support. Elsa rushed to the hospital with her sister, Daniel's aunt. Their parish priest arrived soon. Daniel had suffered massive head trauma. There was no brain activity, but his body was being kept alive by the technology surrounding him in the intensive care unit.

X. Elsa of course was distraught. Everyone began to pray and soon after other friends and family came. They stayed there for three days and then the doctors came to Elsa and said there was no change.

She had to make the excruciating decision to take Daniel off of life support...her beautiful son. Before they turned off the machines, the chaplain who had been with her asked the delicate question about organ donation and Elsa remembered that a year or so earlier she and Daniel had been watching the news together and they mentioned a little girl who had received a kidney and now was doing well.

She remembered that Daniel had turned to her and said if he ever had the chance, he would like to do that. So she signed all the forms and crawled into his bed and held him as all the machines were turned off and he died.

- XI. Over a year later, Elsa was thinking about it and contacted the hospital to see if it might be possible for her to know and perhaps even meet those who had received organs from Daniel. The hospital said it was not possible for them to share that information but they would contact the recipients and if they agreed, they could contact her.

To a person, they agreed and thus began an amazing journey for Elsa as she visited five persons. She brought with her an album she had made so they could see Daniel's life. And she took his football jersey and baseball cap. The meetings were so wonderful.

The last meeting was with a young man in Albuquerque, New Mexico, so it took Elsa the longest to get to see him. He had received Daniel's heart. He had contracted a virus that damaged his own heart and this young father of three little girls was going to die when word came that Daniel's heart was available.

Elsa was welcomed into their home. They shared a marvelous dinner together. She loved meeting the young man, his wife, their three girls. They had made cards for her. It was a wonderful evening. They spent the next day together. It was a healing visit.

- XII. And just as Elsa was getting ready to go to the airport, she was saying goodbye to the young man and she said, "I wonder if I might have one last favor." The young man said, "Of course, Elsa...anything."

Then Elsa said, "I wonder, if just one more time, I might put my ear to your chest and listen for the heartbeat of my son." The young man smiled and opened his arms. He gathered Elsa to himself and she put her ear to his chest and closed her eyes. And once more she heard the heartbeat of her son. She felt it. And she was startled and said: "Oh my. Oh my. It's so strong. It beats so strong."

- XIII. As a church, we are the body of Christ. I know without a doubt that Christ's own heart beats strongly within us at Mechanic Grove. As Christ's branches we derive our sustenance and salvation when we are grafted into Jesus Christ, the true vine. When we abide in him...he abides in us. O WHAT A SALVATION THIS THAT CHRIST LIVETH IN US.

- XIV. O God, be embodied among us. Abide in us...dwell within us...so that when you put your own ear to us, the body of your son...you too might say. Oh my...oh my. It is so strong...for Your Son Jesus is the vine in whom we have our sustenance...we are the branches grafted into him so that abiding in his love we might live and bear much fruit. Amen