

**August 21, 2016
John 15:4-10
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“Fruit of the Vine”

Good morning! I have prepared an extra long sermon today because I know for some of you this is the longest that you’ve had to sit down for the past few days. Thank you to those of you who participated in planning, preparing for and working at the Fish Fry, to those of you who picked and processed tomatoes, and to those who have been busy in ways that I wasn’t aware of this week. Thank you for your hard work.

Speaking of hard work, my sermon preparation was a little more stressful this week than usual: it’s difficult enough to prepare to speak in front of people, but it’s asking a lot of your pastor to do that when I know there’s an entire field of ripe tomatoes right outside the church door. I should have had the ushers check for ammunition as you came in, but I will trust in God’s grace in in yours.

I want to review some Brethren history with you this morning, tell you some of the ways that intersects with my personal history, and to think about our life in Christ in light of our scripture from the 15th Chapter of John. On a side note, this text is the theme for N Indiana District Conference next month -- September 16 and 17 -- and David Bibbee, who was pastor here at Creekside for many years is the district conference moderator. David will be preaching at the Friday evening worship service at Camp Mack. You are all warmly invite to be there. I’m pretty sure that David will say something different than I will say this morning, and I’m almost positive that David hasn’t written that sermon yet, but this is a great text, and worth hearing more than once.

These words from John are part of Jesus' words to his disciples, after Jesus has washed their feet and they have eaten their last supper together. Jesus tells the disciples that he is the true vine and they are the branches, and they are to abide in him and bear fruit. The image of grapes as a symbol of bearing fruit, the wine of communion, and Jesus' blood has been part of Christianity for a long, long time. It also has a special place in our Brethren history.

Slide 1 AM seal This is one of the earliest images associated with the Church of the Brethren. Alexander Mack (AM) was the leading spirit among the five men and three women who were baptized by immersion in the summer of 1708. Their beliefs were a blend of pietism and Anabaptism -- "ana" means *again*, *anti* means against. These folks were not against baptism; they had all been baptized as infants, and were committing civil disobedience by being re-baptized, or baptized again.

We don't know a lot about this seal -- it's a combination of a cross, a heart, and grapes: although these grapes always looked like raspberries to me. You may have seen this at Camp Mack or on Brethren literature or books. The AM is presumably for Alexander Mack, although it could refer either to the founder of the Church of the Brethren, or to his son, Alexander Mack, Jr. Later scholarly research concluded that this seal was probably created by Mack Jr. That scholarly research was done by my father, who was a college professor and Brethren historian.

Slide 2 Eller version This is my dad's re-working of the Mack seal. This is an image which was woven through my childhood. I heard dad talk about it in Sunday School classes and at church camps, we had mimeographed copies around the house which were used for handouts in college classes; I have a photo of a cake that I decorated with this on it: I made banners and I don't know what else. I liked it better than the raspberry version, and like so many other things which a child takes for granted, it never occurred to me that this wasn't familiar to everyone.

Let me just review the concepts here -- in case the words *Gemeinschaft* was part of your childhood. This is Vernard Eller's interpretation of the Mack seal: the cross as the instrument of Jesus'

crucifixion and our salvation, with the arms of the cross providing the structure we received from the Anabaptists: non-conformity, community, and the ordinances--Love Feast, baptism, marriage--the visible ways we practice our faith.

The heart traditionally represents the blood of Jesus, but I know for my father the heart meant the inward, emotional, devotional aspect of our life in Christ. This heart-felt devotion is our Pietist heritage, the love which is the root of Christianity: radical means root, just like radish. I guess you could say they're root words. Love is the ground in which discipleship is rooted: discipleship and the New Testament are at the heart of our faith.

The clusters of grapes represent bearing fruit, and that we produce good works -- service, mutual support, love of neighbor -- when we are connected to the vine. In 2004 I was invited to create a logo for the Annual Conference theme, "Loving God and Neighbor," a version of the personal motto of early Brethren printer Christopher Sauer, "For the glory of God and my neighbor's good." Because of that church history and my personal history, I chose to re-work the Mack seal.

Slide 3 Mack with grapes This version is stylistically different, but conceptually the same. The elements of the cross, the heart, and the grapes are combined with a heavy, rough outline a bit like a colored woodblock print. We are blessed at Creekside that back in 2004 Jean Mann made an embroidered fabric version that's here on the lectern.

I have been pondering this week how I could present this symbol which is so familiar to me, and make it fresh and relevant to you, and create an image which could help us think together about abiding in Christ and what bearing fruit in Christ might look like. Something strong and contemporary, but which still recognizes our heritage and history. This is what I came up with:

Slide 4 Do you like it? I think it's pretty awful -- all those different shades of red! -- but it's still better than the raspberries, and maybe it can help us to think about bearing fruit in a different way.

As I already mentioned, the fruit to which Jesus is referring in John 15 is a grapevine and grapes. Tomatoes are technically a fruit, but if

they existed 2000 years ago, it was on a different continent than where Jesus lived. Tomatoes are a New World fruit; nobody would have known what to do with them in ancient Palestine. I've never picked grapes, but I've picked a few buckets of tomatoes in the past two weeks, and I think tomatoes can teach us something about being connected to the vine.

Let me qualify my comments by saying that fruit-bearing is an illustration -- a metaphor -- and like any metaphor, it can be pushed too far. So I'm not implying that picking tomatoes is a more noble or more godly thing to do than breading fish or welcoming guests or pouring a cup of cold water or using a weedeater or any of the other worthwhile things that so many of you do at Creekside. But picking tomatoes fits the scripture which came to mind, and was the metaphor I had at hand, so to speak.

Slide 5 Creekside tomatoes I took this photo in the Creekside garden on Thursday. I can't tell you where I was standing, because I could have gone almost anywhere and got a shot like this. In fact, I could turn around and look at a row I had just picked, and it still looked pretty much like this. It's kind of a cross between picking vegetables and an Easter egg hunt. There's an amazing amount of fruit out in the garden. It's pretty easy to tell which fruit has come off the vine, though. Especially if you're picking bare-handed: it's either green or it's rotten. Either way, unless the fruit stays on the vine until it's ready to pick, it isn't much good. It doesn't matter if the tomatoes around it are all good, a ripe tomato which gets knocked off and sits in the mud for a while is going to get rotten.

There's a lot of difference between people and tomatoes: rotten people can actually get better, while rotten tomatoes are pretty much a loss. But being connected to Jesus Christ, the source of life and health and joy is how we grow and mature and produce something worthwhile. We can support and encourage one another, but at the end of the day, no one else can make that connection for us. Even if we hang around with some really good tomatoes, if we drop away from the True Vine we're either going to dry up or start getting soft and soggy.

Abiding in Jesus is more about being than doing. The surest sign that we're abiding in Christ is that we are full of joy. Fruit bearing isn't a competition; one of the sure-fire way to kill joy is with envy. It's no wonder that envy is one of the seven deadly sins. Let me give you an example: I signed up to bring cupcakes for the Fish Fry yesterday. I enjoy baking, but I don't often make time to do it.; I had cleared out some time Friday afternoon and was looking forward to making cupcakes. And then I was on my way out of the office on Friday, and Betty Snyder was bringing in her cupcakes. They looked so good, I asked if I could try one. It was delicious. And instead of thinking, "Betty is really talented; I'm so glad she's willing to share her gift with our guests at the Fish Fry!" I thought, "Well, darn it. *My* cupcakes aren't going to be nearly that good." And as I was driving home I thought about Danielle Garcia -- her cupcakes taste delicious *and* they look like they were made by a professional baker -- because they are. And suddenly I was all tied up in knots, and I wasn't looking forward to making cupcakes any more: I don't know why people have all these unreasonable expectations of me, anyway. Like I don't have enough to do? Thank goodness I can laugh about it, because it's ridiculous.

We have to be careful about taking on what we think are other people's expectations and making them our own expectations, and then acting like those are God's expectations. That's not fruit-bearing, that's crazy-making, and that is not what God is calling us to do. Here's what Jesus says: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full." (15:8-9, 11) We are called to be people who are saved by the cross of Jesus and connected to the heart of God so that we can grow and bear fruit. May we abide in Jesus, and may our joy and our buckets be full! Amen.