

Ephrata Church of the Brethren
Galen Hackman
A Spiritual Inventory
Matthew 5:1-12

There are three things I need to do in the sermon today.

First, I need to share with you a bit of a spiritual narrative of what I, and good number of you, have sensed and experienced in our congregational life for the last several years.

Second, I want to outline for you the spiritual journey of worship we will be taking for the next six weeks or so.

Third, I want to share with you what amounts to a reordering of the yardstick we use in assessing how well we are doing as a congregation.

First, a spiritual narrative.

The series we have just walked through in worship, Engaging the Powers, in which we sought to understand something of the nature of spiritual strongholds, was designed for a specific purpose. It is the culmination of about two years of spiritual searching and struggle.

There is no easy way for me to do this other than to just jump in and share a few things.

First, let me share how evident it is to me that God deeply loves this church and all of you who comprise the body here. God has been so very gracious to us, showing us his love in abundant ways. God has strengthened and empowered this congregation throughout its history, which goes back much further than 1899 when we were officially organized as the Ephrata Church of the Brethren.

The gracious hand of God upon us is wondrous and evident. It was very clear to me when I first came here in 2002; and remains evident today. And yet, something has happened in our congregation, something of a deeply spiritual nature, and many of you have felt this.

Over the course the last two years a good number of you have come to me at some time or another and have said something like, “What is going on in or church? Something has changed? Something is missing?”

No one felt that more than me. And it has taken me these two years, and a good bit of prayer and some consultation, to come to some level of understanding. Let me try to explain.

If you were with us two years ago, you will remember that during Lent we had an emphasis on prayer. The small group component of this was called, Learn to Pray, and the worship themes were built around the Prayer Life and Teaching of Jesus. We ended that series with a healing service during both our worship services. It was much like the one we did a few weeks ago, if you were here then. The Sunday I am talking about now was Sunday, April 30th, 2006.

According to those of you who have been around awhile, that was the first time we did anything quite like that. It was a great morning where many of you came to one of the stations and were anointed with oil for healing as you named significant needs in your life. It was amazing.

While I was sitting through that service of worship and healing, watching what was going on, I had a really weird experience.

I increasingly felt detached from what was happening and in my heart had this growing sense—I can only describe it as a feeling of dread—that something very bad had just

happened. This was true at both services. It was really weird, so much so that after the second service, I called Tim and asked if he sensed anything.

I sort of put that out of my mind over the next weeks and went about my usual life.

However, and this is much easier to see in retrospect, ever since that morning, something changed in the spiritual climate of our life together, and not for the good.

What is the evidence of this? Let me share a few things, but for many of you, you do not need this, you already know it?

- People backing off from their commitments, in service, giving and attendance
- Some nasty interpersonal relationship stuff
- Some immature acting out by people from whom many of us would have expected more
- A period of nearly unbridled criticism of one another, and particularly leadership
- Some very difficult times in some of the central ministries of our church
- A feeling by many that no matter how hard we tried or how well we did, our worship and praise was not rising much above our own heads
- People, especially some of us in leadership, who have experienced significant personal setbacks of a nature that can only be defined as spiritual attacks
- Some of us had some weird experiences in the church building that can only be understood from spiritual perspective

In discussing this with me, some of you described this feeling as a glass ceiling over our congregation; others about

a spirit of lethargy that has settled in. I've described it as a spiritual wet blanket.

For a while, if you were looking in from the outside or if your only yardstick for the measurement of the health of a church was the normal outward things, it may have appeared that all was well. However, on a deeper level it was, and is, not at all well. People whose gift mix makes them sensitive to these things have quickly discerned it.

Anyway, as time went on and I tried all the normal ways of working at things, I began to believe that what we were experiencing had its roots in something more spiritual and more diabolical. I began to feel that we had come under a direct spiritual attack. Quite frankly, this was a bit unnerving to me. Seminary did not offer courses on this. I was totally sure I was not fully equipped to handle this and I did not know exactly where to turn.

I sought out counsel from a variety of places, including our District Leadership, colleagues of mine, both Brethren and otherwise, and resources in our community.

Through the course of my prayerful discernment, and that of the core leadership of our church, I have come to what I believe is an understanding of what has transpired.

I believe two years ago our adversary, the devil, said to himself and his cohorts in crime, the Ephrata Church of the Brethren is moving to a place of spiritual openness in which exists the potential for significant spiritual advancement and ministry; this must stop. And Satan leveled a spiritual attack against us.

How does the devil do this? He does it on several levels. He does all he can to divert our attention off God and onto ourselves. He seeks to sever relationships, to build disunity

and distrust. He uses those places in our lives, and in our church, where over the years he has built up some inroads—places of spiritual stronghold. And we all have them: pride, wealth, control, ego, anger, guilt, shame, or whatever.

That is how Satan attacks us. So this led me and the leadership to do a number of things, the most recent of which has been this emphasis on spiritual strongholds. I believe that we will not break through this place of spiritual oppression and stagnation we are in, until we address some spiritual strongholds personally and corporately as a body. That is where we are headed in the next weeks. We are going to press this hard. We are going to be relentless. And we are going to break through.

And we are going to do this with great hope, because we know the battle is the Lord's. God has a wonderful future for ECOB; it remains for us to clean up our house and claim that future.

Second, a spiritual journey

You might wonder why I read the Beatitudes this morning. It is because they outline the journey we seek for the future. I am not expanding on the Beatitudes today, but hope to come back to them later this year.

My hope is, during the next six weeks or so, to walk together on a spiritual journey. This journey will enable us to identify and deal with the obstacles in our lives that have been keeping us from fully giving ourselves to the kind of spiritual pursuit that pleases God and opens up to us new vistas of spiritual power.

We have been dealing with the topic of Spiritual Strongholds. During Lent and Easter we walked with Jesus

through his life and learned from him as he engaged the powers that often seek to derail us from living fully for God.

That series was largely informational. However, I fear that many of us have yet to get it. Get what—get the fact that we all have some strongholds that God is asking us to identify and demolish. This means you, and it means me and it means us.

So that series was informational—the next weeks will be experiential. We will be do some teaching, but largely, we will be calling on each of you to engage in four simple steps required for our gaining of victory over the strongholds of our lives.

The next four weeks will focus on confession, repentance, accountability and restoration. These are four parts of the journey necessary for the successful defeat of strongholds.

As we move through this process, we need to ponder not only where these strongholds might exist in our lives personally, but also in our families and in the church. These strongholds may have generational histories.

Then, on May 18, in the tradition of the people of God in Old Testament times, we are calling for a Sacred Assembly. The purpose of this Sacred Assembly is to come clean as a people of God and to declare a new day. ***Now listen very closely***; it is important, I believe, that we all be together on that day so that what God does among us is experienced by all of us at the same time. Therefore, I am calling for a combined worship service that morning—May 18, 2008.

Information will follow concerning the time of that service, but for now, do whatever you must do to ensure you are here that Sunday.

Between now and then, in addition to our worship themes, we will be calling for a season of focused, consecutive prayer. Beginning on May 1, the National Day of Prayer, and continuing through May 3, we will enter into a prayer vigil. More information will follow on this as well.

As I said earlier, during these next weeks we are going to press hard after God, to go deeper into his heart and into our own, with the hope of finding cleansing, healing and empowerment that takes us to a new place as a people of God.

Let me move now into talking about what that new place might look like.

Third, a spiritual yard stick.

I sense that many of us are beginning to use a new yardstick, so to speak, to assess the health of a congregation. I know that I am. This new spiritual measuring tool has three markers on it. One is for worship, another for membership and another for ministry.

Worship

Worship is about just that, worship. It is about honoring God and passionately seeking his presence and blessing.

Worship is more about authenticity than excellence. Though we will always strive to do our best for God, what is more important is whether or not we have bared our soul to God, and to one another.

Worship is not some show designed to please people and impress them with its decorum and polish.

Worship is rather a passionate seeking after God in confession and praise so that we might connect with him in a

life transforming encounter. Worship has everything to do with God and nothing to do with my comfort. True worship is sometimes messy and often unpredictable.

We no longer measure the “success” of our worship service by how many people show up, but by how much God has shown up. That, of course, is much more difficult to measure and may be somewhat subjective. However, this change in outlook leads us to ask a series of different questions.

The question on my lips is not “did the people like what happened—but did God smile? Was God pleased?”

We no longer analyze worship by things like:

Did we stay in the time zone allotted?

Were my expectations met?

Did I enjoy the music?

Was the sermon written well?

Did it inspire me?

Did I like the way the sanctuary looked today?

The new yardstick asks different questions:

Did we sense God’s blessing?

Were people set free?

Did people function in their giftedness?

Was the Holy Spirit speaking?

Was there a sense of the supernatural present?

Did people leave better equipped to share Jesus with their world?

A second place the measurement of success is changing is in

Membership

We are not an affiliate of American Express, where membership has its privileges. We are more aligned with John Kennedy when he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; rather ask what you can do for your country.” Of

course, I rephrase that to say, “Ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for the kingdom of God.”

For sure, being a Christian has its privileges—we are privileged to be counted worthy by God to die on the cross with Jesus.

Membership in the church brings with it only the privilege of being considered a member of the family of God in which we each have significant responsibilities. Jesus set us free from our sins so that we might freely surrender to him in a relationship where, out of love for him, we live as his slave.

With membership comes expectations:

We are expected to love Jesus above all things and to seek passionately after an enfolding relationship with him

We are expected to behave like Jesus

We are expected to surrender our lives to Jesus, along with all the things God allows us to possess.

We are expected to join hands with Jesus in the work he is doing in this world.

We are expected to live in community with the other pilgrims on this journey—to love them with a love that expresses itself in authenticity and accountability.

At times we are expected to be as radical as Jesus when laying our own needs and comforts aside to take up our crosses.

And another area that comes under the scrutiny of this spiritual yardstick is

Ministry

The church is called into the world for ministry. Jesus said that he saved us out of the world so that he might send us back into the world (John 17). The model of Jesus is that he

leaves the 99 who are safely in the fold and risks all to find the one who is still lost (John 15).

Jesus asked Peter to feed his sheep. The call on my life as a leader of the church is to bring you all to maturity. Read Ephesians 4. This maturity relates to being at a place where you walk in a relationship with Jesus; where you find your full identity in him; where you live for others, not yourselves; where you understand God's call on your life; where you know the purpose for which you were created and you live for God wherever you are.

This is the ministry of the church. To be a place of healing, teaching and sending, so that the people of God carry out the ministry God has called them to.

So we no longer measure the “success” of our congregation by how many programs it has, or how many people come to those programs.

Rather we care about how many people have found healing, how many people are walking in a mature relationship with Jesus, and how many people are actually serving him in some manner outside the walls of this church. The church exists primarily for the people who are not yet members of it.

That is not to say the church will not have programs—in many ways worship is a program we run—but it is to say the focus and purpose of these programs will be clearly about these three things—healing, teaching and sending.

Rather than asking what are our needs, we need to ask, what are the needs of our community, the place into which Jesus has sent us to serve him. If churches would assess the needs of their communities, the programs they offer would be very different.

I doubt our community needs another coral concert or spaghetti dinner (unless it is free for the homeless) or revival meeting or sports team.

When we truly assess the needs of our community—this one in which we live—we will learn about the plight of the working poor, the drug trafficking, the struggle with addictions, the broken marriages and painful lives, and we will see that the majority of our community are not in church and do not know Jesus. Jesus is the hope of the world, and he is the only message we have.

The Bible is rather clear that the heart of God turns toward the broken, hurting, poor and disadvantaged. And yet our churches are filled mostly with the middle and upper class, who, far too often, prefer their comfort to the challenges of ministry.

What I am saying is that increasingly we are using a different set of standards to assess the “success” of our church. It will take some time; and it will hurt. Some of us will not like this; others will thrive on it. But, since we desire to be judged based on God’s standards, rather than on human standards, we are seeking the approval of God, not humans.

There are many really cool things about the Ephrata Church of the Brethren.

One of those cool things is that by being Brethren, we have the foundation for all this that I have just talked about. Every one of these things was true of our forbears. This is primal Brethren theology. It is our heritage.

Secondly, there is no doubt that this vision, that I have just outlined for you, has been evident here at ECOB throughout your history, and because of that, God has been very gracious to us. All the events of your past, whether positive

or painful, have led us to this place and prepared us for this moment. And this is a very good place to be. There is great joy in my heart today.

Every one of your former pastors have been used by God to prepare the congregation for this time. And I am grateful for the sacrifices made by those pastors and by generations of lay people. I am very grateful for all of you.

Let me close by saying that this is new ground for most of us. You may feel like staying away during the next weeks. But it is supremely important that we experience this journey together. God has fit us as a family and we want to remain an intact family. Please come to the services as there will be great benefit for you personally, and for us as a whole, as we journey through this spiritual experience together.