

Presenting A Winsome Witness: Submarines with Screen Doors?

John 20: 19-31, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Acts 2: 22-32

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Johnny, only six years old, and already becoming quite serious about life, paused in the great memorial hall of his First United Methodist in a large downtown area. On the walls were the saints of the church who had passed away in the great World Wars. There seemed to be dozens of plaques remembering the lives that were lost. The pastor saw Johnny looking up at all the plaques with a curious look on his face. The pastor leaned over to him and said, "Quite a sight, huh Johnny?" The boy said, "Pastor, I don't understand what all these plaques mean." The pastor got down on one knee and said, "These are church members who died in the service." "Oh," Johnny said. He paused for a moment and looked right in the pastor's eyes. "Which one, the 8:30 or 11 o'clock?"

We laugh at the innocence of the child and the way it gets us to think about our church, don't we? But the old cliché about the church of Jesus Christ is really true: The church is always only one of two generations from dying off completely. It's up to us to transmit the faith tradition to the next generation. If you don't believe this, consider the example of the United Kingdom over the last years. The Brits are known for their stiff upper lip, their rationalism, what the wars of the 20th century did to the church, and the low rate of Christianity in their country. In an independent study conducted in 2004 the following troubling statistics of church decline were published:

- Between 1998 and 2005, half a million people stopped going to church on Sunday.
- While 1,000 new people are joining a church each week, 2,500 are leaving.
- 6.3% of the population goes to church on an average Sunday, compared to 7.5% in 1998.
- 29% of churchgoers are 65 or over.
- The drop in the 20-29 age group was 29%.
- In fact, on any given Sunday, if you summed all the Church of England, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostalist in the pews of the UK, they would not equal the number of Muslims in England (1.5 to 1.8 million).

Of course in the United States mainline denominations have been in steady decline since the 1960s. We could be looking at the same problem in the next generation. Adam Hamilton says in his book, "Selling Swimsuits in the Arctic," that "we live in a post-Christian culture where the church is now forced to compete with a host of other activities and organizations for the time, interest, involvement and resources of people." Urban churches feel this pinch more than suburban or rural churches. People have enormous choice facing them on Sunday mornings and during the week.

For these reasons I am starting during Eastertide as we move toward Pentecost a new sermon series entitled, "Presenting a Winsome Witness," based upon the New Testament lectionary readings. It is because we live in a post-modern, post-Christian era in our diverse culture and because we are all called to share the good

news of Jesus Christ in our lives that this topic is so vital. It is not because we need to grow Bering or because we ought to buttonhole people, but because evangelism is implicit in the Christian faith.

Adam Hamilton in his book equates sharing the good news of our faith to sales. Sales, says Hamilton, is not a dirty word. Selling is getting people to buy what you have. Marketing is having what people want. Both are important in the life of the church. Our visioning committee is about marketing strategic directions. Every week my sermon is kind of a sales presentation. My invitation is an attempt to call you to some kind of action – many of those are calls to a change in behavior. Those are the hardest to pull off.

Hamilton says that there are seven principles of selling that apply to the church.

1. You must believe in your product – your church. If you don't, please either do what you have to do to believe or find a church you can believe in.
2. You must believe that people need your product – people need to come to Bering, not because we need them, but because they need Christ and what Christ is doing at Bering.
3. You must understand the needs of each unique person. No one wants a cookie cutter approach.
4. You must offer an excellent product – or they will not come back.
5. You must embody the product – whatever Bering is about, you must walk the talk.
6. You must be articulate in explaining the product. Don't just say, "let me introduce you to this staff person or this minister."
7. Perseverance is the key. Look at the most effective evangelists – Paul, Peter – and you will find tough-minded, persevering people.

Most of you know that I was in sales for eighteen years. I loved selling. I was not fantastic at it, but I made a pretty decent living. I agree completely with what Adam Hamilton says about equating sales and church growth. Every week when I

prepare my sermon I try to look at what I am going to say from three perspectives: Where is the text coming from? Where am I coming from (biases, passions, etc.)? Where is the congregation coming from? The congregational perspective may be the most complex because there are many of you and you have diverse attitudes, experiences, etc. So I simplify things by focusing on just a subset of you. For this series I am focusing on the doubting Thomas's among you – the skeptics, the fearful, the naturally shy, those who would never be accused of being shameless promoters. There are some among you who are really afraid of inviting people to Bering. Why? You're shy...or you don't want to out someone... or you want to keep the place small...or you just have low confidence in this area.

If you think about the principles that Hamilton lifts up they can be reduced to four questions that will be the organizing questions for my four sermons: one, how does one determine the need that a guest has for the church? Two, how and when do I present the Bering solution, if there is one, to satisfy those needs? Three, when do I bring in outside resources to help a visitor appreciate what God is doing at Bering? Fourth, how do I handle potential objections that a visitor may have? During this series I have an expert salesperson who will share his 28 years of sales experience with us. That person is our own Lary Barton. Lary has had a marvelous career with his company in sales and is a person who loves Bering and faithfully serves our church. Let's listen in to what Lary can teach us on the first of these questions... What Lary said there that is so applicable to evangelism is that we need to listen intently to the person who is visiting or who you might be inviting to Bering; that we all need to be adaptable in the way we talk to each person to meet

them where they are (but still be exactly who we are); and that we should never push too hard, but instead lead them to come to the church. Good stuff!

So what do we learn from our scriptures today on this subject? Jesus and Peter are the models for our approach of determining need. Now need for Christ and the church is both universal and particular. What do I mean? Peter shows us the universal need in both his letter and in his actions from the Book of Acts. In his letter he expresses the human need that has existed since the dawn of humankind. The salvation of all humankind – returning to the arms of a loving God – is the most important purpose of our faith. That is what it is all about. That is why we spread the message. If you don't think people need saving, if you think that the world is just fine, you might as well skip this morning and go to brunch. What church becomes is a social club or a liturgical society. You must see that the world is like a sea in which there are people bobbing up and down in icy waters, and you are in a lifeboat. What you are throwing them is the gospel; it is a lifeline. That doesn't mean you have to beat them up with the Bible; it doesn't mean that all you talk about is "sin." But there must be a passion about what you are engaged in which is a life-saving enterprise.

Jesus shows us that needs are also particular to the individual person. Take Thomas for example in our gospel lesson. Thomas was different in his trust level than the other disciples. He needed specific proofs before he would be convinced of Jesus' raising; however, once convinced, he utters the highest pronouncement of Jesus' Christology – "My Savior and my God!" He wouldn't take the disciples' word

of testimony to Jesus' appearance. His needs were different. He needed to actually touch the wounds. It was a full week later when Jesus returned. He addressed exactly what Thomas needed to become a believer. Thomas became one of the most faithful disciples and led the missionary journey into India and the East, according to tradition. His personality is described by scholars as a bit dull, pessimistic, but stubbornly loyal when finally converted to the truth of Jesus' resurrection and missional call.

So how do we prepare in advance sharing our faith story with a potential visitor? Obviously, we need to listen to that person as if she is the only person in the room. We need to show absolute respect for the needs that we express to us. But we also have some general preparation we can do alone in the quiet of our own thoughtful reflection. As I close with you this morning I want you to do some homework in the form of journaling answers the following three questions that each of us should have at the tip of our tongues when confronted with a person that we believe the Holy Spirit is nudging us to share our faith story. Are you ready? First, what are the reasons that each person needs Jesus Christ? Second, what are the reasons that a person needs the Church (in the universal sense)? Third, what are the reasons that a person needs Bering Memorial UMC? Until you can write out in an articulate way the answers to those three questions you will only be able to describe in very superficial ways what Bering has to offer. Your witness will lack passion and purpose. But if you can place all of yourself in passionate, personal ways, just like Peter did, your witness will attract people far and wide, from Montrose to the Heights to Downtown, to the outer stretches of our great city.