

*Presenting a Winsome Witness: Selling Snowshoes to Eskimos*

*Acts 2:14a, 36-41, Luke 24: 13-35*

*April 6, 2008*

This morning in the second in my series on *Presenting a Winsome Christian Witness* I want to focus on the question, “when do we know it is time to present the solution?” to the new guest to our church or to a friend. I want to introduce the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance, an important concept for our understanding. The best way is to give you a simple, personal example. As a child and a young adult I thought that squid were disgusting sea creatures. On top of all that I remember seeing the movie *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which I am pretty sure showed giant examples of these creatures along with other frightening creatures like octopus threatening the heroes of this movie. Then one day someone introduced to me fried calamari as an appetizer. I was disgusted! Really, put one of these disgusting creatures in my mouth! For some reason I tried them. Um delicious! In fact they tasted like chicken. And if you add some fried batter and wonderful marinara sauce and if they weren’t too chewy these things were great. I even got used to eating the pieces that looked like squids with tentacles and all – not just the round, non-descript pieces. Now I order them at every restaurant where they are featured. I experienced cognitive dissonance. Quite simply I felt the discomfort when what I thought to be true encountered what I now knew to be true. Calamari, even the ones that looked like little squids, really were my friends.

Now let me give you a more relevant example. Let's suppose I believe myself to be a kind, good-hearted person. But since I also drink too much I find myself treating my partner very badly or even cruelly. I experience dissonance. Further if this happens over and over again, and I continue to hold this high opinion of myself, I will experience dissonance. That dissonance will either cause me to change my opinion of myself or seek to change my behavioral patterns, which cause me to treat my partner badly. Do you see how this cognitive dissonance works? Can you imagine in your own mind examples? Take a moment to do that.

Now that you have that in your mind, let me go back to the sales question of when do I present the solution of Jesus Christ or Bering Church? Let me let you in on a little sales secret: The sale takes place in the mind of the buyer. If that is true, that the sale is conceived in the mind of the buyer, the person presenting the solution should look for telltale signs of cognitive dissonance. You do it when dissonance rears its head. Some will tell me, "You know, I just don't have the personality for selling. I am not charismatic, or extraverted, or persistent enough." All of these are excuses. People buy from people, but they don't just buy from you just because they like you. They buy from you because they think you have a solution that solves a problem that they have. And sometimes when they have lots of choices, they buy from the best solution. Let me let you in on another little secret: Bering is no longer the only game in town for the GLBT person. There are many churches with which they will be accepted, welcomed and even pursued! There is a little bit of cognitive dissonance going on with us. We hold on to this romantic notion from 1990 or so (or whenever we came to this special place) that Bering

provides the only “sanctuary” for a GLBT person. Until we encounter the truth that there are many church sanctuaries now where that is the case we will not experience the required dissonance for a change in attitude and behavior.

My subtitle today is “Selling Snowshoes to Eskimos.” Eskimos need snowshoes, lots of them. You present the Bering solution when the need is absolutely obvious in the mind of the buyer. Speaking of great salespeople, let’s listen into Lary Barton again this week for his answer to what he has learned about when to present the solution to his clients...Lary aptly describes how one of the keys is teamwork of the people behind him and how he brings them in. Also he matches his customer needs to his resources and their personalities and skill sets.

What I have observed is that he is correct in presenting the technical aspects of the solution. You bring in the geek or the subject matter expert to build the solution sell; but ultimately they go away or they stop talking and the responsibility goes back to the salesperson for the closing question of what should happen next. Everyone should look at the salesperson, when the solution looks good, and say “ok, now what do I do?” The important thing is to filter all the extraneous things out of the conversation – qualifying the sale – so that the unspoken or spoken qualifier is stated that if we do all these things you will visit the plant, go visit a reference site, or hopefully, buy the product. That is the job of the salesperson that no one else can do. The person making the sale is the quarterback or the cognitive dissonance manager. No dissonance – no sale.

There are two ways that I want to describe in which dissonance can emerge in a faith situation that you may encounter. There are witnessed in two of our Bible texts this morning. What are they? Dissonance about self (the buyer) and dissonance experienced about the presenter. Peter on the Day of Pentecost illustrates the first kind of dissonance. He speaks in such a way in his sermon that the crowd asks, "What must we do?" That is the question that you want the visitor to ask as well. Now Peter does it with a sermon in which he convicts them by telling his Jewish audience of their history and their collective guilt in killing the Son of God. He convicts them of their sin and causes this dissonance. They now must resolve this conflict within of thinking we are good people and we have killed this prophet of God. Now I am not suggesting that a guilt trip is the answer. It is not and many have rejected that guilt trip. In fact for those who come beat up by the church and guilt-ridden, cognitive dissonance suggests the opposite: suggest to them in word and deed that they are people of the most sacred worth and dignity. For those who come already self-affirming, the process of sniffing out dissonance may take longer. I find that the open-ended question of "what brought you here today" works really well to get them talking. Ask all kind of open-ended questions to get them talking. Finally, they will begin to trust you and open up about struggles in their lives. Once they do this, you have the opportunity to present the solution directly to the question, "what must I do?" And when they ask, tell them clearly and concisely what you think they should do – like Peter said to be baptized and repent. Now contrast that to presenting your solution too early. Before they ask you directly or indirectly what they should do. You will probably say something like, "well if I were

in your position here's what I would do." Those unsolicited proposals usually fall on deaf or even hostile ears. Instead be patient and let your visitor lead you in the conversation.

Jesus shows us the other kind of cognitive dissonance on the Road to Emmaus. In this case they see a conflicting truth about him. When he shows up at first they think he is the village idiot. They say, "Excuse me, are you the only one in town who do not know about the story of Jesus?" Jesus continues in the walk with them and creates dissonance by showing them just how smart he is about prophetic scripture and the Law. They are absolutely amazed at his knowledge. I have to tell you that there is dissonance out there in the world about the knowledge of Holy Scriptures today. There is a fundamental misunderstanding about the relative knowledge of conservative versus liberal Christians. Why is it that there is a feeling that conservatives are the only ones who can effectively use scripture to argue a point about theology? Scripture is important, and we sometime look like people who have little grasp over its meaning and interpretive techniques. I find that the best *selling* of Bering is when a newcomer (or an adversary for that matter) is exposed to the excellence of Biblical and theological study here at Bering. It turns heads. It changes hearts. It forces people to stay.

Speaking of staying, Jesus also practices in our scene and in many other scenes in the Bible what is known as the "Tom Sawyer" close. We also call this "reverse psychology." Notice that he continues to walk beyond the disciples on the road and they ask him to stay the evening. He doesn't invite himself. In fact, he

suggests just the opposite in his actions by moving down the road. That's how the Tom Sawyer close works. If you see cognitive dissonance going on with a visitor, but you're not sure, say something like "you know, you may find that this is not the place for you, but this is why others have found it to be the place for them." You undercut the reasons and the benefits of Bering and return power to the visitor to make the ultimate choice. This is the winsome witness of non-coercive testimony.

My key this week has been the power of *cognitive dissonance*. This is not a manipulation game. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to work its full affect on people. The two ways that this changes people is if they see how the solution has worked in your life or if they see dissonance in their own lives. The important thing is that they see a power greater than themselves that moves independently of their best efforts.

In closing I want you to spend some time this week imagining people and their spiritual state as they walk through the doors of Bering for the first time. My friend Tom Pace, Senior Pastor of St. Luke's UMC, is a runner. He is a marathoner and as he runs around the neighborhood of West U, looking at the well-manicured landscapes, he imagines what is going on in the house inside those walls. He imagines the couple living beyond their financial means, just one paycheck away from financial strain. He imagines the alcoholic, taking his first drink of the day. He imagines the loveless partnerships within those walls. He imagines the God-sized holes that exist in the souls within, covered up prettily by freshly planted impatiens

and well-trimmed hedges. He imagine the cognitive dissonance all around and within, a dissonance that only the Holy Spirit can fill.