

“Parable of a Coke Bottle”
Matthew 22:15-22
November 8, 2020

Once in a while, a dynamic person comes along into society and stirs the waters of sameness, troubling the establishment and making all patterns new. Jesus was such a person. Hear in Matthew’s Gospel how Jesus stirs the political waters and forces his people to look at time-honored practices in new ways, in God-ways. Matthew 22, verses 15-22.

That’s when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod’s followers mixed in, to ask, “Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don’t pander to your students. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, “Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it.” They handed him a silver piece.

“This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?”

They said, “Caesar.”

“Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his.”

The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

The film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, is a modern parable about how the harmony of a pure society is upset by the appearance of an object that becomes everyone’s fancy. A parable is a simple story told to illustrate a profound spiritual truth or moral lesson. The word “parable” means an illustration in the form of a brief fictional narrative. Jesus used parables to broach sensitive cultural and religious questions, illustrating his lessons with relatable stories that were easy to understand.

“Sometimes the Gospel authors begin a parable with an analogy, as “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard (Matthew 20:1). Or Jesus may provide an example from everyday life to convey spiritual truth, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to emphasize love and mercy, or the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-13) to show persistence in prayer.” [Bible Study Tools, 1/30/2019]

The story in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* might be written in parabolic style like this:

“The kin-dom of heaven is like a family that lived in peace and harmony. They had no need of rules or laws or ownership or power. Everyone worked to sustain the family and life for them was full and joyous. One day from a passing crop plane overhead, the pilot threw out an empty coke bottle, which landed just outside the family home. Having never seen such an object before, the family was curious and tried it out in various ways—as a tool, as a musical instrument, and as an art object.

But jealousy came with the coke bottle. Everyone wanted the bottle for their own, and soon they began to fight over it. When a small child of the family was hit over the head by the bottle, her father decided that the bottle, once an object of delight, was actually an evil thing that must be returned to the gods. He threw it up into the air as hard as he could, but the thing fell down again, nearly knocking out his small daughter. Try as he may, he could not get the gods to take back the bottle and restore peace to the family.

So, the man took the bottle and went on a journey to throw the evil thing off the end of the world. As he traveled, he came across strange men and women who looked and acted very different from him. They squawked quite loud and

made no sense at all. The people hurt each other and fought over silly things like paper and land and strange animals with no legs and round feet that moved around in circles, the purpose of which the man did not understand at all.

He stopped to help these strange people for a while, but some of them treated him badly. When they at last let him leave, he retrieved the bottle and continued his journey to the end of the earth, throwing the evil thing away once and for all. When he returned home to his family, they were again peaceful and happy, for the evil thing had been sent away and their father had returned.”

The Parable of the Coke Bottle has a central theme: Harmony is upset by that which comes to upset the peaceful order of things. The message of the parable is that what is perceived as evil *becomes* an evil thing which must be thrown out of the world if peace and joy is to be restored.

Jesus was the coke bottle of his day. Jesus was the thing-the man- that appeared in the midst of the religious and cultural society of his time and disrupted the order of things. The Pharisees didn't quite know what to do with him. He challenged their authority; he caused bickering and power struggles within their ranks. He caught the attention of the Romans, who were threatened by him because he caused dissension and riots among the Jews. The Romans tolerated the Jews as long as they paid their taxes and didn't stir up trouble.

Jesus came along rather suddenly, without pedigree or recommendation, teaching and proclaiming bold and subversive lessons, stirring up the masses and causing all kinds of grief for the puppet Pharisees who promised the Romans they could keep the lid on their people. In exchange, the Romans had so far let them practice their religion and pray to their God, that is, as long as they understood that the one true god was Caesar.

Jesus troubled the waters and put the Jewish leaders into jeopardy. They tried to get him to go along with them by trapping him into recognizing the authority of Caesar. Jesus sidestepped their trap however, by deflecting their question.

“Give to Caesar what is his, and give to God what is God’s”, he said to them. The Pharisees didn’t quite know what to do with Jesus, so they labeled him “evil” and set out to throw him off the end of the earth. What they miscalculated was their belief that life would return to pre-Jesus normal if they but rid themselves of the coke bottle, the menace from Nazareth. They did not live in peace and harmony in the first place, so merely disposing of Jesus was not going to bring them the solace they wished for.

The coke bottle had already been introduced into their midst, and the collective memory of the people would always tell the stories of Jesus and how he shook things up in their religious and cultural life.

Perhaps the tribal family from the film’s parable would be changed, too. The evil thing had been taken out of their lives, but the memories—the bad feelings, the jealousy, the fighting and the physical injuries would linger on. The movie ends, but the story does not. The bushman has seen a world outside his own and his own children have encountered a whole range of emotions they had not previously known.

There have arguably been other “coke bottles” in the historical records of the Christian tradition, people who have changed the face of the religion and forced a mirror to be held up to the practice of it, exposing its pockmarks, scars, and shortcomings.

Paul was a coke bottle. Without Paul, Christianity never would have spread. It might have died out before ever leaving Jerusalem. Martin Luther was another coke bottle. He forced Christianity to take a look at itself and he offered a new vision for what the practice of Christianity could look like. It was Martin Luther who brought God into direct relationship with the people of the Reformation, giving them an alternate to Catholicism for the practice of the religion.

Love him or hate him, Donald Trump is a coke bottle dropped down into the middle of America. He is not a religious figure, though some worship him and others demonize him. No matter, the fact is that Donald Trump held a mirror up to the American face and forced it to look deeply at itself. That the election has not gone smoothly is consistent with the story of America since he came on the national scene.

Would Americans of African descent have revolted against systemic racism 50 years after Selma without the concurrent rise in white nationalism? Would the argument about government control vs. individual freedom been brought into the public square without a President who largely shunned the protections of face masks, physical distancing, and business shut-downs? Would the elected representatives of the country been so unable to collaborate or reach consensus in the best interests of the people had the two major parties not been so polarized during the past four years?

It's not a political study as much as it is sociological. When the coke bottle is dropped into the middle of a family system, the family system *will* be affected. When the coke bottle is made of heavy glass, it will be used as a tool or a weapon. It will bring out the most creative and ingenious aspects of the family's members,

but it will also bring out base instincts that have been previously suppressed or lain dormant.

I have dreaded trying to write a sermon for the first Sunday after this election. We are a purple church and we have designated this space as Sabbath Space where we can get away from politics. Frankly, I want to wake up tomorrow as my dog! Though he senses our stress and anxiety, Kona knows or cares nothing about any coke bottle, unless it has kibbles stored inside it just for him or it means extra walks to burn off stress and extra hugs just because we need them. One day is like the next for him. He's like the family in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, peaceful, routine, well-adjusted, and happy.

In this election season, everyone of note has been labeled "evil" by the other side. I don't care which side you are talking about. Maybe there are multiple coke bottles, or maybe there are just multiple mirrors. I, for one, want a return to peace, but I realize that can't happen without wholesale changes in the way American life is lived. We can no longer ignore racial inequity, economic disparities, immigration policies, the pandemic and how resources are going to be apportioned to meet its challenges, and how our government leaders appear incapable of working together for the public good. These are just some issues facing us as a nation-I'm sure you can think of others. These may or may not be questions for the church to tackle, but they are broad and urgent questions for all of us living in this community we call the United States of America.

We move forward. We recognize the coke bottles for what they are and not what our wild imaginations make them out to be. We can't successfully throw them back to the gods or off the face of the earth, but we can throw them in the

recycle bin and pledge to drink more water, the water of life. It will take all of us to restore harmony to the tribe where all can live together in peace.

Ok, whew, my post-election sermon is over.

May It Be So

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