

I hold in my hands a gift I received from the fine folks at the Coca Cola Company. It was a free gift from the fine folks at the Coca Cola Company. And all that I had to do to receive this free gift was to buy a \$16 ticket after buying a \$6 MARTA ticket to ride the train and arrive at the entrance to the World of Coke.

Yes, James and I visited the World of Coke while we were in Atlanta for the past couple of days. But like I usually do I try to view experiences through the discerning eyes of a Christian pastor trying to critique society and what society is trying to communicate to me. I try to read culture through biblical eyes.

When James and I arrived at the World of Coke, we were ushered into a giant room with lots and lots of Coke memorabilia. We heard the young adult story teller share stories with us about the ways that Coke has been an innovator and a leader in cultural transformation. We looked at the old posters and were told that Coke was the first company to use African-Americans to advertise their product.

We looked at posters with people from Asia and Latin America and India and were welcomed into a world where this product brought diverse people together for a common purpose. We heard that Coke is welcome in every country in the world except two. Anyone want to take a guess what two countries do not welcome Coke into their country? James you cannot answer. (North Korea and Cuba).

And then we were invited to watch a movie. And what struck me about the movie is how there was no mention of Coke in the movie. The movie includes six real stories if I remember it correctly. One story is a group of white Junior High School boys and girls who are innocently flirting with one another at a state fair. The girl gives a subtle look at the boy and then the boy's friends encourage the boy to buy a cookie for the girl. The girl responds by giving the boy a cute little peck on the cheek and both sets of friends are super excited by the exchange.

The second scene is a family in India and they are going through some type of coming of age ceremony for their daughter. Like some type of debutant ball or confirmation service. There is great joy and happiness in the family as they watch fire works together.

The third scene is an African-American family coming together to plan and celebrate a surprise birthday party for their grandparents. Another family sharing joy and happiness with one another.

The fourth scene is a young man and woman going up together in a hot air balloon. We are allowed to peek in as the young man bends down on one knee and proposes to his girlfriend.

There is a scene with a young woman sharing news with her parents that she is pregnant and another very moving scene of a family walking into a sporting event and seeing their military son giving them greetings on the jumbotron. The next scene is the son appearing next to them in the arena and tears of joy surround this family.

So in this movie there are a couple of places of product placement of a Coke bottle. But never is Coke mentioned and never is Coke a main prop in the stories. So how is Coke trying to convince me to buy their product? It is clear that Coke is not trying to sell me on the actual contents of their product. After all, their product is really just sugar water that is not healthy for me.

The people at Coca Cola are not trying to sell me a set of beliefs. What the people at Coke are trying to get me to do is to connect Coke with a positive experience. The smart people at Coca-Cola are trying to get me to connect Coke with feelings of happiness. They are trying to sell me an experience.

In the Scripture we read from First Peter, I think Peter would have really appreciated what the people at Coke were trying to do. Because in the section we read today, Peter is not trying to sell his readers on a set of beliefs. He doesn't say that following Christ is about following a set of rigid beliefs. He doesn't say that they need to accept Christ as the Son of God and then they will go to heaven and that this is what Christianity is all about. Instead, what Peter says is that following Christ is about adopting a lifestyle.

Peter writes this letter to people who are slaves. Unfortunately, throughout our Christian history this text from Peter and texts like it have been horribly misused in order to keep people in bondage. We can just imagine a former pastor at Allison Creek standing in this area and preaching to the slaves from African descent standing up in that balcony that they were to follow Peter's words for slaves to accept the authority of their masters with no debate. We can just imagine a sermon about how these slaves were to follow the authority of their masters whether they were gentle masters or harsh masters.

But those types of sermons preached from pulpits like Allison Creek 160 years ago missed the mark. They missed the mark because Peter is writing these words to people who were slaves who had become Christian. And rather than telling the slaves to be submissive in order for the masters to gain economic prosperity off their backs, Peter tells them that as they take on punishment they are to take on these beatings because as they do that they are taking on the lifestyle of Christ. That taking punishment and not lashing back is being like Christ.

I am afraid that too much of what we Christians preach and teach and seek these days is that we are to believe the right things. We tell one another that we need to believe the right things about what the Bible means. We tell one another that we are to believe the right things about what the Bible teaches. We tell one another that we are to believe the right things about who Jesus is.

We tell one another we are to believe the right things about what the Bible teaches about who should get married and about who should get divorced and lots of other topics that our society chooses to focus our attention on.

But rather than focusing here about the right set of beliefs, Peter focuses these words on living a lifestyle that is a reflection of the kind of lifestyle that Jesus lived. And what kind of lifestyle is that? It is a lifestyle that says that if someone speaks harshly of you or abuses you or seeks to tear you down through slander or gossip you do not retaliate.

It is a lifestyle that says that if you feel as though you are being treated like you are a slave by your employer or spouse or friend that you do not try to use underhanded ways to bring that person or company down. Instead, Peter says, we are challenged to model a lifestyle where if we suffer abuse we do not return abuse. Where if we feel threatened, we do not threaten.

Where if we feel judged by another we do not, therefore, judge another. Peter says that Christ himself bore our sins on his body on the cross so that we might live a right kind of life. He says that Christ lived this kind of lifestyle in order to return us to the good shepherd who is the guardian of our souls.

Instead of being so focused on believing the right things about Christ, Peter directs us to live the kind of life that Jesus lived. And obviously that is hard. If someone is tearing you down it is very easy to want to tear them down. If someone speaks harshly of you it is very easy to want to speak harshly of them. If someone physically threatens you it is very easy to want to physically threaten them. And it goes on and on and on.

But Peter says that if we live a life of retaliation then we are not living the kind of lifestyle that Christ lived. Christ did not tear his enemies down. Jesus Christ gave up his life for his enemies.

The Coca-Cola Company did not try to sell me a set of beliefs. They sold me an experience and a lifestyle.

Peter challenges us to seek to live our life in a way that is a reflection of the kind of life that Christ lived. A kind of life that did not seek retaliation and retribution.

But a lifestyle that meant enduring suffering for a greater witness. AMEN.

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-Text: I Peter 2:11-25

-Given: May 18, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)