YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
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Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. (Galatians 6:7-8)

Perhaps you’ve been following the news about the battle between rival groups with their religious and antireligious monuments in the small town of Starke, Florida. It all began last year when a local Baptist group called the Community Men’s Fellowship sponsored the creation of a granite monument of the 10 Commandments. It weighs six-thousand pounds and cost $22,000. Taking a page from the playbook of Alabama Chief Justice, Roy Moore, who a decade ago was suspended for erecting a similar monument inside of his courthouse, the Florida group decided that the yard in front of Starke’s own Bradford County Courthouse would be just the place to etch in stone that God is not to be mocked.

When the Community Men’s Fellowship announced the plans for the new monument, various atheist groups predictably protested, claiming that a monument to private faith on public property violated the separation of church and state. Both sides threatened to sue the county. Nevertheless, the law stood behind the placement of the monument on public property; as long as the government wasn’t paying for it, the Baptists would be allowed to build it. The area was declared “a free-speech zone.” So a monument to the 10 Commandments is what they built.

None of the controversy ever would have risen to the level of national interest had the atheists not decided to fight fire with fire – or granite with granite, if you like. The American Atheists from out of state took up the cause, and realized that since the area was a free-speech zone, they could have their own monument too. So a monument to the separation of church and state is what they built. It is a granite bench weighing 1,500 pounds, and it includes anti-establishment quotes from various founding fathers, as well as an atheist rallying cry from Madelyn Murray O’Hair, which reads in part: An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church … that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. So it seems that the Christian group has reaped what it sowed, and roused into being a counter-reaction they might not have imagined. They have stirred up a hornets nest. The atheists are now planning similar monuments around the country wherever they find the 10 Commandments on government property. Believers who think that God is being mocked will have the Community Men’s Fellowship of Starke, Florida to thank.

How do you tend to lean in these controversies regarding church and state? The question is of some relevance today as we gather in church and sing semi-patriotic hymns that blur the line between God and country. What is more, I could easily dive into the fray and challenge the atheist quote by asking who has actually built more hospitals – Christians or atheists? Have the atheists built any? But increasing the rancor isn’t my goal. In fact, concerning the recent Florida case, I find myself siding with those who would prefer no privately sponsored monuments at all on government property, be they religious or antireligious. Skip the monuments and use the granite to build more churches and more hospitals.

The monument of the Ten Commandments does not belong in front of a courthouse. Now, why would I, a priest of the church, take such a position? I do so for a number of reasons – three at least. For one thing, I don’t want to entrust the teaching of faith to the state, because I don’t trust the type of religion the state may teach. True, the dominant religious expression in the public
arena today seems to be a watered-down version of the “Judeo-Christian” ethic. But who is to say what tomorrow’s consensus will be? Christians may be in the majority today, but I’m told the fastest growing religions in America are Islam and Mormonism, two belief systems that are as far from Christianity as they could possibly be. I support a strict separation of church and state because I fear what a state-sanctioned religion in this country would look like fifty years from now. It could easily be a “wink-wink” to all things Muslim and Mormon, rather than Christian and Jewish. What will they do in Starke, Florida, for example, when the local Muslim population wants to erect a monument to Sharia Law next to the 10 Commandments? A door is now open that I think should have remained closed.

Mind you now, I have no delusions that anyone will stop the presses after I’ve weighed in on whose monument should and shouldn’t go where. But a second reason I take the position I do is based on today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. While the situation for the Christians in Galatia was quite different from the church-state battles of today, it’s possible to detect similar dynamics at work then and now. After Paul had founded the congregation at Galatia, he moved on in his missionary work, trusting that the Galatians would continue in their new life in Christ. At length, however, rival missionaries arrived in Galatia with a different gospel, a different take on how to belong to Jesus. These rival missionaries were probably conservative Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, and what they advocated was a strict keeping of the Commandments. Paul, they claimed, was too light on the Law of Moses, so their goal was to drop a heavy monument to the Commandments into the fellowship of the new Christians. If the new Christians, most of whom were Gentiles, wanted to be considered part of the people of God, they would need to submit entirely to the Law, specifically, circumcision.

As you know, circumcision is the religious rite observed by the Jews to mark the males as God’s people. According to the Jews it is an indispensable requirement of God’s Law. And so, a rather cringe-worthy argument began to dominate the Galatian congregation: Is baptism enough to be a Christian, or must we adult men be circumcised too? When Paul received word of the controversy he wrote his famous Letter to the Galatians, a portion of which we heard today, including the following: For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! His implication was that they were all off the mark. Skip the argument, he might have said. If you want to honor God and not mock God, use the energy to live and model the new creation. The new creation is everything.

A third reason why I would side with the no-monument group in Florida is based on what I hear in today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke (10:1-20). What St. Paul called the new creation, Jesus called the kingdom of God. For Paul, the gospel was not about religion; neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything. The new creation was everything. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was everything. The kingdom of God was the centerpiece of his preaching, and it is what he sent his messengers out to proclaim. We’ve heard today how at one point in his ministry Jesus commissioned seventy people who followed him and sent them out two-by-two into the surrounding towns and villages to proclaim the kingdom of God. In so doing, he challenged them to travel lightly: carry no purse, no bag, and no sandals. He also counseled them to keep their heads down, maintain a low profile, and attract no undue attention to themselves: greet no one on the road.

Jesus apparently thought that his messengers would encounter resistance enough without needing to invite more of it on themselves. Behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves is what Jesus had to say. It seems to me that the more you poke a wolf in the eye, the angrier it is going to get until it eventually comes after you. You reap what you sow. If you live by the sword you’ll die by the sword. If you stir up a hornets nest, you are going to get stung. I take the relatively recent rise of the new atheists in America to be a photographic negative of aggressive religious fundamentalists. They are counter creation of the religious right, often roused into being by
deliberately provocative actions such as building religious monuments on government property. Instead, Jesus sent his followers out not to poke people in the eye, but with a message of peace: *Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person.*

Frequently, we Christians fail miserably when it comes to promoting the gospel with the message of peace. The parish I served as a curate after seminary is a great gothic structure in Michigan with a devoted team of docents who lead tours. Along one wall are numerous carved oak pinnacles, and I distinctly remember one day when a happy, unsuspecting tourist asked if they had any special significance. Without missing a beat, the docent explained how she’d always understood the pointed pinnacles to represent the spears that Palestinian fishermen would use to impale the fish. “They remind us to be evangelists. You know we are supposed to be fishers of men,” said that sweet Episcopal lady. I don’t know whether the tourist was a believer or not, but the suggestion that our aim was to spear people into the kingdom on the pointy end of a gothic pinnacle was decidedly unattractive, even cringe-worthy. It did not spell peace. It’s no wonder that people shy away from the church. Their fear is that we mean to undermine their individuality, and destabilize their ability to think.

What a shame, because the new creation for which all of us yearn on some level is none of this. What then is it, and where to do we find it? Some people project their yearning for the new creation onto Jerusalem or some other sacred site. Some like to think that America is God’s last, best hope to establish the kingdom on earth. Others mistake the church for the new creation. Some try to bring it into being by way of a theocracy, others think it only happens through evolution. All of these miss the mark. Instead, the new creation is what God has brought into being and gives to us in and through Jesus. In his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote: *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.* In other words, no religion, no ethnicity, no country, no building, no monument, no law code is worth comparing to what God did for us through Jesus. The new creation is neither a place nor a theocracy. It is a relationship with Jesus, who by the power of his Spirit is always available for us and accessible to us. Hear that again: the new creation is your relationship with Christ. Through his life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Spirit, we find the promise that nothing in all of creation is able to separate us from the love of God: neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision. These are nothing. The new creation is everything. As the Psalmist declared, *He holds our souls in life, and will not allow our feet to slip.*

I read recently the story of a 19th century missionary in Africa who became hopelessly lost in a dense jungle. He had a map in his hands that he was trying to read; he had an overgrown path under his feet that he was trying to follow. But he could find no way out of the forest. Finally he came across a native who agreed to lead him back to the village. The native paid no heed to the map and followed no path as he hacked his way through the tangle of growth. The missionary kept pace behind him but at length protested, “Are you sure this is the way? What about the map?” The native responded, *“In this jungle, I am the map.”* The missionary took the whole incident as a profound parable of the Christian life. Lost as we are in this jungle, it is ultimately not a map or a path that we follow. It is a living Savior who leads us home.

St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: *For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!* The new creation is your relationship with God through Jesus. It is kingdom of God. It is the peace that passes all understanding. It comes near today. It is worth everything. *Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.*