

My artist friend had been painting on the walls surrounding her town and other nearby towns for many years. It always interested me to see what she had accomplished lately, but I also enjoyed looking at some of her earliest work.

One time, when I came in view of the artist's home town, I could see that the mural by the main gate was being "erased." I asked the men who were painting over it why they were doing this, and they explained that the town elders had decided that the town needed an image that represented its central essence. They told me that they felt bad about it and tried to explain that it wasn't their idea at all.

As I walked through the town to find my friend, I talked to various people to discover what was going on. I found that some of the leaders had changed, and there was a new agenda being emphasized. The artist had been asked to paint something new, but also something that would make the town more like others. It reminded me of the time the nation had wanted a king like everyone else¹. The town had been known for its mural, but it was not in the new agenda to have a unique personality.

I reflected on the three generations that have been affected by the artist. As I talked to some of the townspeople, I found that they were saddened about the change being made. The children, especially, had been amazed at the wildlife scenes – their imaginations had been triggered by seeing the animals in their environment. It was so much better than a plain grey wall that made the town look more like some kind of institution.

One woman that I talked to spoke of how she used to bring her children to the wall for comfort when they were upset. When her children saw the repainted wall and asked her what had happened to the animals, she could only think to tell them that they had gone home. But each still felt a sense of emptiness and loss as they looked at the new image on the mostly blank wall. Other people regretted the loss of particular parts of the images that related to them personally, for the artist had included the people of the town whenever she could.

So she painted the sign that the town elders asked of her. She reproduced their design very accurately, but it had no "heart". The new look put me in mind of the pattern that was used in the building of the tabernacle². Everything was done strictly according to the pattern presented to Moses by God. But the people of Israel did not pay much attention to that pattern in the long run. They never embraced its rigid structure.

In the New Kingdom, Jesus spoke of a different way to worship God. It was not expressly on a certain mountain or with a certain pattern. He claimed that we must worship "in spirit and in truth³." The word "truth" points to the fact that there is indeed an absolute foundation to the fundamentals of God's Word. But the word "spirit" shows me that there must be a balance between them such that we have a certain level of creativity in our worship and service to God. God wants us to have true feelings and express them in our lives.

It should be noted that even with the pattern of the tabernacle there was room for creativity, as Bezalel⁴ was chosen to create the various components that would make the tabernacle a special place. But the idea of Grace was not understood in that age as it is by us now. God is not pleased with worship that takes on a certain form and does not come from the heart⁵.

When I finally found the artist, I asked her about the loss that she and her community had sustained. But she claimed that it did not bother her so much, as there were other walls and other cities. She was philosophical about it all, for she knew how easy it is for our work of many years to be covered up. It is simply too hard to redo, though, and we just have to move on.

She knew that although none of her murals were permanent, the imprint on the hearts of the people would at least last a lifetime. I agreed with her, and told her how I believed that our character is not affected by the destruction of our work⁶. As we sat near the entrance to the gate, we watched with amusement as a small child came up and painted with her fingers a little image in one corner of the new mural. In my view, the artist was the "craftsman at God's side⁷", and she inspired so many of those around her to come alongside as well.

1. see 1 Samuel 8:19-20

2. Exodus 25:9 and Exodus 25:40

4. Exodus 31:1-11
3. John 4:24
5. Isaiah 29:13; see also Isaiah 58
6. 1 Corinthians 3:10
7. Proverbs 8:30

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