

The Ultimate Meaning of Life

Malachi 3:1-12

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The refiner's fire.

Well, I haven't been to a refinery lately, or maybe ever, but in September I was at the Crystal Forge in the Hot Shops with a handful of other church members as we watched our new baptismal bowl being made. I am fascinated that this vessel of water that will most often touch the brows of babies was born in fire. 2,500 degrees, I believe.

At one point the bowl was a glowing orb, before the top was opened up. Watching that orb rotate in the forge with its blue and green colors, it looked like the planet Earth seen from outer space, radiating with life and beauty.

As the artist Ed Fennell shaped our bowl sometimes flames would burst forth from the friction of the shaping tools applied to the hot glass. "Wow!," I thought, "flames shooting from our baptismal bowl." The image gave new meaning to the words of John the Baptist that he was baptizing with water but one would come, meaning Jesus, who would baptize with fire and the Spirit.

There is fire in this bowl. This lovely bowl was born of heat and flame and will carry that legacy into its life as a sacred implement of worship. In some small, symbolic way, every child we baptize will be touched by the flame. There will be a little bit of that refining, purifying fire in the waters of baptism.

Then a few weeks ago we returned to the Hot Shops, this time to the studio of potter Tim Barry. Tim began his demonstration by grabbing large hunks of indistinct light brown clay from a big mound of it in the corner of his shop. "Every day we come in here and try to figure out what to do with this lump of clay," Tim said.

I thought, "Every day we're also trying to figure out what to do with this [pointing to myself] lump of clay.

And I also thought, "Our communion pieces will begin their life as this—a formless hunk of clay." The words of Genesis chapter 1 leapt to mind—"In the beginning was when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void."

Then, Tim mentioned how clay is the most ordinary of materials. "It can be found anywhere in the world, if you first remove the topsoil. Clay is underneath all our ground." Then I thought of the medieval thinker Meister Eckhart and his "mysticism of the ground." Eckhart wrote, "God's ground and my ground is the same ground." And "Go into your ground and there act, and the works that you do there will all be living." Ground, for Eckhart, has many reach meanings. Ground is the essence, the inmost, hidden part of any being. Ground is also pure possibility. Ground is the activity of being in relation with everything else. And ground, common clay, will hold the food and the drink that nourishes our souls, our communion, our

connection with God.

Then, as he worked at the potter's wheel (itself a rich biblical metaphor deeply connected to, among other things, the poems and prophecies of Jeremiah), the artist Tim Barry said, "The material takes on the spirit of the maker." Wow! What a profoundly rich spiritual concept. That we, as the creations of God, take on part of God's Spirit as we are shaped and molded.

Tim went on to add that he teaches his apprentices and students that they must be in a good place in order to create, that if they are in a bad mood then their negativity will appear in and mar the work they are molding. What life lessons there!

Later, Tim was showing us some of his finished work and one of our church members asked about the variations in color and texture. "It matters where the piece was in the kiln. How close it was to the fire. How much of the salt it got. Also, the trees pull up the minerals from the ground and as the wood is burned, the minerals are released into the smoke where they settle upon the pottery and so some of this color is from the minerals as they leave their mark."

Both of these experiences—being at the glass forge and the potter's wheel—were deeply worshipful, theological, spiritual experiences. Now I want more opportunities like this. More opportunities to watch artists and makers and gardeners at their work in order to experience the concrete, physical aspects of our Christian teaching.

The prophet Malachi is full of questions. He poses 22 questions in only 55 verses. Pope Francis also poses a number of questions including "What is the purpose of our life in this world?" Now, that's a big question. What exactly is the meaning of life?

I think fondly of Billy Crystal in the film *City Slickers* asking Curly, the old cowboy played by George Palance, that question. You remember Curly's answer. He holds up one finger and Billy Crystal says, "The meaning of life if your finger?" Curly says, "It's one thing." But then he doesn't give much more guidance. You've got to figure that one thing out for yourself.

Does Pope Francis answer his question? Indirectly he does. Our human dignity is tied up with intergenerational solidarity. What we do for our children and coming generations is essential to determining the meaning and purpose of our own lives. So, the good life for us is a life lived in solidarity with future generations. A life that looks out for their good. Therefore environmental and economic exploitation, the ruin of human society and the earth, violate our own dignity precisely because they harm future generations. A meaningful life, then, is a life that looks out for those who come after us.

Francis doesn't use the word stewardship, but that's the idea. And stewardship is explicitly discussed by the prophet Malachi. We are stewards of the blessings that God gave us. We aren't supposed to use them only for ourselves but steward them for the needy and for those who come after us.

Malachi thinks we've been bad stewards of God's blessings, harming the creation and human society. We've oppressed workers, indulged in sin and depravity, excluded the widows and orphans, and been inhospitable toward the immigrant. And God's passing judgment.

But not just judgment, God is also reaching out to heal and reconcile us. In fact, that's the kind of judgment God passes. God's judgment is a fire, but a purifying and refining fire that

restores us.

In order to prepare the way, the prophet proclaims that God will send a messenger. We might say that God is continually sending messengers to warn us—John Muir, Rachel Carson, Wendell Berry, to name a few from America in the last century.

The prophet's message is that we have gone astray, wandering from the road of God's intention, and that we must return. As we repent, God is there to embrace us, to heal us, to restore us.

We need a little bit of that refining fire to purify us and restore us. The great reformer John Calvin wrote about this passage from Malachi, "The power of the fire . . . is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross."

Every day is a day of the Lord. Every day is an opportunity for true repentance on our part and salvation on God's part. So, let us heed the warnings of the prophets. Let humanity return to the right road and live a life of meaning and purpose, a life lived in solidarity with future generations, looking out for their good. That's a life that will bear fruit. A life that lives into the fullness and blessing of God our creator.

Every day let's consider what God can make from this lump of clay. In what ways can we take on the Spirit of our maker? Connect with our ground. Be touched by the fire?

I hope every Sunday you'll see this beautiful new baptismal font and consider those very questions. What is the ultimate meaning of your life?