

Front Door Refinements

Written by Vivian Bikulege

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I am not in my element. Or, maybe I am. For the next six weeks, I host a small group of women studying the signs and wonders of Jesus' ministry on earth. Keep reading please. This isn't a column on conversion. Or maybe it is. Mine.

I am one of the very last people walking on good Beaufort ground that would have believed I would be sitting in a room with others talking about the Bible. On many levels, it isn't me, or who I think I am, or who I was. Maybe that's what happens when one retires. We get surprised. Frankly, I am amazed. Not only about Bible study, but by the stories behind the neighborhood doors of each woman in the room.

My revelation from last night's small group? No one goes unscathed. No one. If you are a human being, suffering, surprise, happiness, sadness, wonder, or desperation have knocked on your front door. Recently, I met a man sitting in the lobby of the Renaissance Charlotte Southpark Hotel who told me, quite out of the blue, that a person is either walking into the fire or out of it every single day of their lives. And he was right in a weird sort of way. The interesting thing is that the amount of time we spend in or out of our hells on earth is not in our control. Of course, none of us wants to be in the fire for very long. The real story is about who we are when we are there, and what we are when we step out.

I have a friend who has been encouraging me for a very long time to write an essay about Malachi 3:3, the refiner's fire. I haven't been inspired to write about it. Nothing has come to me on the topic until this morning. (Guess that is how the Spirit works.) The story goes that a refiner knows when silver is pure when he or she can see their image in the metal, a sort of mirror. Related to Scripture, the idea is that God is the refiner and we are the metal, and we are

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“done” when the image of God can be seen in us, when we are a reflection of all things good and holy. It’s a big concept.

Toward the end of the Monday night small group, each person shares what is on their heart, at home, and behind their front doors. During those moments, we realize that everyone is carrying something, hoping for something, or in need of something to get them through the next day, the next hour, or the next minute. Oftentimes, a person is alone with the weight of a burden and they cannot or do not reach out. It’s hard to sit in the fire. It’s hard to ask for help.

On this particular morning, waking from a night of sharing, I am in awe of what the women disclosed - illness, fear, delight in new possibilities, prayer for one another, and just the hint of needs that cannot be spoken. You just don’t know what is behind someone’s eyes, locked in their thoughts, and buried in their soul. If the guy in the hotel lobby was right, the person next to you is walking in or out of fire, heating up or cooling off from some experience of refinement, being changed and revised. I don’t know if I’ll ever mirror God, but I like the idea of being a bit shinier. I don’t like the idea of passing through fire to get there.

Our life stories are full and complex. They are never devoid of pain, nor are they without their beautiful seasons of joy. I may not be in my element as a hostess, but I am comprised of a litany of elements from the periodic table - oxygen, hydrogen, carbon - and just a teeny bit of silver? Evidently, there are traces of silver and gold in the human body. We aren’t walking Superfund sites, but precious metals are present even if they are just “passing through.”

I can’t sit in your fire. You can’t sit in mine. I can be a witness to your changes. I may be able to absorb some of the heat you are giving off, share your difficulties, and tend to your wounds. I walk my path to some ending to include the surprising rest stops of small group sharing. I am on a journey to reach the destination of refinement, of transformation. When I am invited to enter someone’s front door, I may say, “No, thank you.” I may hesitate. I might charge through in a desperate attempt to rescue someone from scarring burns. Wherever I am going, I am either entering a fire or walking out of it.

Later, in Malachi, God says, “I, the Lord, do not change.” He doesn’t have too. He’s God for god’s sake. That leaves you, and me. I’m up for the challenge, hopeful that I recognize the times a neighbor or someone in small group is opening their front door and inviting me in. Chances are it’s hot inside, but I’m just passing through, anticipating a day when the silversmith will see his reflection in me.

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