

John 13:1-35

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For all of us there comes a last time, actually a whole bunch of last times. The last time you see your friend, the last time you sit with your mother, the last time you visit your hometown, the last time you see your dog, go camping, drive a car, make love, sip a cup of coffee. One of the great mercies of God is that we usually don't know it's our last time. In 2019, Erin and I took some time to travel to Texas to visit with her sister and my father. My dad was about to turn 89 and his health wasn't great, but mentally he was very with it and so we took some time to talk with him about things he remembered about growing up on the farm in Michigan, about his time in the army in the 1950s, and about his career as a scientist. Fortunately, as I was asking Dad questions, Erin was taking notes about the stories he told. But we left there thinking that we would take some time on our next visit, probably in the spring of 2020 to take down some more memories. But then the spring of 2020 rolled around and as you all know, we didn't really travel anywhere. And then on the 3rd of February of 2021, Dad passed away. That visit with him was the last one. Do I wish we knew it was going to be the last? I'm not sure about that . . .

When Jesus gathers with his disciples in the upper room, he warns them that this will be the last time, but what are they thinking? Are they going to say goodbye? Or are they thinking that maybe not, maybe there will be a miracle, maybe something will happen and God will save him and this won't be the last time that we are all together. If they had known, would they have done things differently? Would they have washed his feet instead? Would they have said something, done something, just to let him know that they loved him, instead of waiting to be reassured of his love for them? Would they have tried harder to stay awake with him in the garden, even for just one hour?

When my dad died, of course our thoughts went back to the last time we had seen him. What did we say? How did we leave things with him? We didn't know he was going to die this soon, so there weren't any parting words or hugs—at least I don't remember any. God, in his infinite mercy, doesn't let us know that it will be the last time. It would be too hard on us. So the disciples try to think about something else that night in the upper room and later in the garden. It can't really be the last time, right? But Jesus knows that it is.

He knows that the miracle that is about to happen is that there will be no miracle. He will die in the morning. That's what's supposed to happen. So he knows that this is the last time—the last time he will share a meal, a laugh, the last time he has to teach them. And so he tells them to love one another. Years later, when he was an old, old man, and all the others of the Apostles were gone, the disciples of John the Apostle would question him about what Jesus said to him, what Jesus taught them all during his years with Jesus. And John would say “Love one another.” Always that. “Love one another.” So many times that his disciples questioned John, saying, “Of all the things that Jesus must have said, must have done, must have taught you, you always say that one thing. Why is that?” And John answered, “Because if you do only that one thing, if you love one another, it is enough.” It's what he wants to leave them with. It's the last thing.

There's one other person who knows that this will be the last time. He knows because he's the one who is going to betray Jesus, and no matter what happens, he will have no place among Jesus' followers anymore. This is his last time with these people, his last time with Jesus. We don't really know much about Judas, and we certainly don't know why he did what he did, and maybe it doesn't matter. What does matter is that this is almost the last time these friends will see each other. This meal that they share. The intimate washing of the feet. Jesus surprises them all by washing their feet, including Judas. If he knows who is going to betray him, he doesn't give it

away and maybe it's important that he washes his feet as well. But then he hands Judas a piece of bread and tells him to go and do quickly what he must. And so Judas goes out, the last time he will be part of that group, but not the last time he will see Jesus, not quite. A few hours later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas comes back, soldiers at his side, ready to give them the signal to arrest the one he indicates. Ready to betray Jesus with a kiss. We don't really know what was in either of their minds, but now we do know it is the last time. Jesus stands and feels his friend's lips grace his cheek for an instant. On this last evening of his life he has eaten his last meal, and this is the last time that he will ever feel the touch of another human being except in torment. So what is this embrace like? Is it the Son of God and his betrayer who meet here? Or two old friends embracing in a garden knowing that they will never see each other again. Maybe. Yes, Judas betrays Jesus, but he is only the first in a long procession of betrayers two thousand years long. But maybe Jesus has it in his heart to forgive Judas, and I hope that's true. Because if that is true then I have hope that he can forgive me for all the times that I've betrayed him, disappointed him, saddened him, left him alone to pursue what I wanted.

According to one tradition, Judas regrets what he has done almost immediately, gives the money back and then goes out and hangs himself. In the Orthodox tradition, he does that because he despairs of ever being able to be forgiven. Yet there is also tradition in the early church that his suicide was based not on despair but on hope. If God was just, then he knew there was no question where he would be heading as soon as he'd breathed his last. Furthermore, if God was also merciful, he knew there was no question either that in a last-ditch effort to save the souls of the damned, as God's son, Jesus would be down there too after he had died. Thus, the way that Judas figured it, Hell might be the last chance he'd have of making it to heaven, so to get there as soon as possible, he tied the noose around his own neck. Who knows? In any case it is a scent to

think about. Once again, they met in the shadows, the two old friends, both of them a little worse for wear after all that had happened, only this time it was Jesus who was the one to give the kiss, and this time it wasn't the kiss of death that was given.¹

So maybe it wasn't the last time. Maybe in God's mercy and by God's grace, there aren't any last times. Maybe the taste of this feast and the fellowship we share is only the beginning.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures*.