

What would you do if you knew it was your last night on earth? Would you try to check something big off your bucket list? Would you want to spend it alone, or surrounded by friends and family? Would you think about all that you had done in your life, or all that you had failed to do?

I wonder what would happen if, on your last night on earth, someone showed up at your door who you didn't want to see. Maybe it's a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon missionary. Maybe it's someone from your neighbor's pest control company trying to convince you to sell you service. Maybe it's the person who wronged you in the 7th grade. Maybe it's the person with whom your spouse had an affair. What would you do? Would you turn them away? Invite them in? Would you bury the hatchet, or would you let them have it?

St. John says that Jesus knew this was his last night, that "his hour had come to depart this world and go to the Father." What do you suppose might have been going through his head? What do you suppose his friends noticed about him that evening? Did he seem cheerful? Somber? Manic? Calm? Do you think they had any inkling that something was up, that he knew something they didn't?

Because he does, doesn't he? He knows what comes next: the arrest, the trial, the execution. He knows that one of his closest friends, gathered with him that night, will betray him to the people who want to kill him. And what does Jesus do with this information? "Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God and was going to God, [Jesus] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

In the end, it is not the abandonment of his friends, not the denial of Peter, not even the betrayal of Judas that determines what he does next. Although he feels it, he does not let the heartbreak, the disappointment, and even the evil he is about to face set his course. Instead he washes the feet of James and John, of Andrew and Nathaniel, Thaddeus and Bartholomew. But not just their feet: he also washes the feet of Peter. And the feet of Judas.

I can guess as to what was going through the disciple's heads. Peter seems to be very uncomfortable about this whole thing. "Lord, you will never wash my feet!" Why do you suppose he says that? I would imagine we all have some idea why he's so resistant. Few of us ever participate in the Maundy Thursday foot washing. Is it because we think feet are disgusting? Does it have to do with making ourselves vulnerable, allowing someone to see and touch—and smell—a part of our bodies that we normally keep hidden away? Is it the thought of letting one or our neighbors do something so menial for us?

I wonder if that might be why Jesus chose this as a sign of love. I wonder if he enjoyed the task, or if he was as repulsed as they were. Do you think he was moved to tears by the beauty of the moment? Was he grateful for the chance to show them how much he loved them? Was he resentful that none of them would really understand what he was doing, or did he pity them for it?

What do you suppose he felt when he came to Judas' feet? Anger? Sorrow? Disappointment? Fear? Did he rush through the task a little bit quicker with Judas, or did he linger? Did he hope that, just maybe, his overt and embarrassing act of love might sway Judas' determination? The story doesn't tell us any of those things, but we can guess, because we are human, like Jesus, and I think that this key to understanding this story. We are all capable of feeling and imagining everything that each of those people felt that night, even Jesus.

What might seem alien to us is Jesus' choice to show such love in the face of all that was about to happen. He chooses to wash his disciples' feet even though he knew they would desert him. He chooses to wash Peter's feet, and Judas' feet, not to "heap burning coals on their heads," as St. Paul suggests, but to show them that, no matter what they did or didn't do, this love would always bind them together; that it was their part or share in one another. They would forever belong to him, and he to them. "Having loved his own who were in the world," John tells us, "[Jesus] loved them to the end." To the end of what? To the end of his life? To the end of his strength and ability? To the end of his being? To the end of the world?

Why does he choose to do this? Why, in this moment, when his hour has come to depart, does he choose to show extravagant kindness to those who do not deserve it? Why, at the end, does he choose to act in love rather than anger or fear or sorrow or any of the other things he might be feeling?

Here is St. John's answer: Jesus chooses love because he knows that he had come from God, and that he was going to God. In other words, he knows who he is, and he knows who God is. He knows God is love, and that he is also love—God's Love made flesh.

Here's the thing though: when St. John says that Jesus is God's Word—God's Love—made flesh, I don't think he means that Jesus is some mystical divine attribute somehow magically transformed into a human person. I think he means that Jesus is a human person who knows the truth of who he is: that God, in love, formed and shaped him and breathed life into him. He knows that this Love gives him life, and the life it has given him is about to return to that Love. He knows that in returning to that Love, life is renewed, given new form, because Love is endless.

When Jesus puts his robe back on and sits at the table, he asks, "Do you know what I have done to you?" Do *you*? I don't; not really. What I *do* know is that in the washing of feet and the giving of his body and blood, Jesus has not only shown himself to be the Love of God made flesh, he's shown us that so are we: we are also God's Love made flesh. We are also God's body and blood—God's life—given for the life of the world.

We are—each of us—daughters and sons and children of God, in the very same way as our brother Jesus. He shows us with his whole life that to be loved fully and to love fully is to be truly human; and to be truly human is to be divine, because humanity—created in and by and for God's love—is created in God's image.

The only difference between him and us is that he believed that and entrusted his life to that belief. Very often, we don't—or can't—believe such a thing. We have a different image of humanity: one in which people must be deserving of love; one in which life is finite and fragile; one in which rather than sharing our selves with one another, we hoard and protect them. And so, we abandon God's Way, we deny God's Truth, we betray God's Life; and the lie we believe instead becomes our way, our truth, our life.

When Jesus issues his “commandment” to love one another, I don’t think he’s ordering us to have affection for one another, or to deny the feelings of anger or sorrow we sometimes cause one another or ignore the harm we do to ourselves or one another. In fact, I wonder if one thing this story shows us is that there might be room within love for all these things: for fear, gratitude, pity, sorrow, disappointment, even anger.

I wonder if, with his commandment, he’s inviting us *in the midst of all those things* to choose love, because love—God’s Love—is who we really are. I wonder if he is inviting us to experience for ourselves how this Love—this complex, messy, self-sharing, divine Love—is the truest definition of humanity, rather than the lie we’ve come to believe instead.

My friends, if you hear but one thing this night, hear this: this love is for you. It is given for you, shed for you; it is constantly broken and killed and raised to new life for you, so that you may know that this is the Love from which you have come, and to which you are returning—day after day after day, always returning. This Love is for you because it is who you are; it is the image in which you were created, the form and purpose you bear.

Remembering this, if you knew this was your last night on earth, if you knew you were about to return to the Love from which you came, what would you want to be the last thing you did?

Trusting that this is not your last night on earth, I wonder what might be stopping you?