

April 1, Maundy Thursday (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

As he washes Peter's feet, Jesus is thinking about Judas.

by [Wes D. Avram](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue

Lots of preachers will remember times when it felt like they were preaching to one person in the congregation, with others overhearing. Someone hurting, who you know needs a word even if they might have a hard time hearing it. The person who's been through hell, for whom you have a word of comfort. A holdout on a decision that others see clearly. A fierce opponent who is against you for no reason, and for whom you dream of crafting a message that will change their mind. That one board member who needs it. The one whose emotional needs overwhelm reason, and so the one who twists truth for their own purpose.

They're your imaginary audience. You know where they sit. You craft a message with them in mind, even if you don't mean to. And sometimes, after all that effort, they don't even show up. But sometimes they do, and occasionally they even hear. Often they don't, but you speak to them anyway.

This all goes with having a story to tell and gospel to share. Others can overhear, and maybe a few of them think you're speaking to them. It's good if they do, but you know you were speaking to that other one.

Our Lord's whole ministry, even his whole person, was his message: words and acts of love, challenge, truth telling, and world imagining. His actions and his words were of a piece. That union sometimes leads us to think his audience is united too—that everything he says is for everyone. Sometimes it is. But maybe sometimes he was speaking to just one, with the rest left to overhear. Maybe the story of humility, love, and service—acted out in the washing of his followers' feet and the dialogue with Peter—is one of those moments.

The story begins with a comment from the Gospel writer. John frames the whole thing as part of Jesus' long-suffering love. He knew his hour had come, and "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." *Through it all. Against all odds.* This "to the end" is too dramatic a phrase to just be tossed in. We're meant to hear that the whole story, from beginning to end, is about the persistence of Jesus' love.

He demonstrates this by sharing himself in the Passover meal. But there's more to say. He adds an even more dramatic gesture of humility, taking the position of a servant to wash his followers' feet. And Jesus, of course, knows right where Judas is sitting.

Peter takes center stage in this story, and Judas doesn't say a thing. So why focus on Judas? The clue is in Jesus' conversation with Peter. Peter is that disciple who is first to raise his hand, who wants his opinion and his questions and his troubles to set the tone. Judas is just watching. Peter speaks, questioning what Jesus is doing, insisting that *they* should be washing *his* feet. And our Lord's response says it all: "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." John provides the key: "For he knew who was to betray him."

Judas is on Jesus' mind, and he might even be his primary audience. Jesus wants Judas to get the point of his persistent, undying, unconditional love—even to the end, even in light of what he knows Judas wants to do. We see it now, after the fact. We see his love of an enemy, in this case an enemy of the most painful kind—a betraying friend, whose love turned to hatred and sabotage for no reason of Jesus' doing.

Others are cleansed already by grace, and so don't need to be washed—but this one. This one. He's the one on the mind of our Lord, the one Jesus wants to get it. He's not so worried about Peter, for Peter is worried enough about himself. Peter steals the oxygen and craves reassurance, and he gets what he needs. But Judas is silent. He hears it, and he sees it, but he doesn't get it. Or at least, he can't receive it. As Jesus watches Judas leave, he quietly mourns Judas's inability to receive the love he so dearly wants him to know.

So what difference does it make if we shift attention from Peter to Judas as we read this story?

We see again what is so often true of how God works in scripture, to teach we who need to hear it that the Spirit is not always focused on center stage. The gospel isn't always firstly for those who get first in line for it. It is sometimes spoken first to those who are over in the corner, resisting with everything they can yet needing it so.

We are nudged to turn our heads in new directions, to see the faces of others and wonder how they're responding, how they're hiding what they need, how they're speaking without saying a thing. We are reminded again to pray for folks who seem impervious to prayer, stubborn in ignorance, even enemies of the gospel. Jesus is praying for them, so we should too. Jesus is showing acts of love to them, so we should too. Jesus is waiting patiently for them, through all things, so we should too.

God will not let go, even to the end.