

“Accept the Difficult Truth!”

[The video, “Victory Easter” was shown after the Scripture Reading and before the Sermon.]

As that video reminded us, Jesus embodied God’s Agape Love for us through great suffering and sacrifice – for he was tortured and executed in an extremely painful and excruciating manner! Matthew revealed the way Jesus explained how he would go through all of that to his disciples saying in **verse 21b-c**, ***“I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. I will be put to death, but three days later I will be raised to life.”*** It would be incorrect to say Jesus did not try to warn his disciples about what to expect with reference to his impending suffering and death!

Amazingly, the original disciples not only refused to trust what Jesus told them about his suffering and death but Peter, the eldest disciple – the one, who had only recently declared Jesus to be the Messiah, actually, rebuked Jesus and tried to control him! Of course, Peter’s reaction was a great disappointment to Jesus. Our Savior could not allow Peter’s insubordination and challenge to go without a strong and powerful response! The Gospel of Mark, from which Matthew copied a portion of his report, made it clear Jesus took note that the rest of the disciples had witnessed Peter rebuking him. Both Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts reported Jesus’ brutal condemnation of the eldest disciple. Interestingly, enough, Luke did not even reveal Peter’s challenge, so he did not include Jesus’ repudiation of the offending disciple in his version. Clearly, Luke did not want to include such an embarrassing moment for Peter in his account.

Although attacking Peter and his behavior is very tempting in this message, I suggest we focus on the broader issue, which Jesus explained to the disciples and the rest of his followers – both those present then and those into future, including us, about his New Way of Life – the Life dedicated to the Divine Parent and God’s Agape Love – making the crucial decision and commitment to live out the Difficult Truth. At the time of the incident reported in our Reading, the original disciples refused to consider and, finally, to accept, the Difficult Truth that our New Life in Christ – New Faith Relationship with God and all others comes with significant personal sacrifice and suffering, especially from the vantage point of persons, who are still prisoners of the selfish life of this world! Jesus put this Difficult Truth forward very succinctly to his disciples in **verse 24**, ***“If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me.”*** Our Society, Culture, and World are so self-centered and selfish that it is extremely difficult to accept Jesus’ call for us to “forget” ourselves! Since people today are not executed by being hung on a cross, as was practiced during the time of Jesus’ public ministry, his comment about carrying our own cross is not understood, as it was by the general populace during those days, so we are tempted to not pay attention to Jesus’ talk about taking up our crosses.

James W. Moore revealed a story he came across, which he said, “absolutely amazed me ... and yet it’s a story that may well represent the ‘cater-culture-give-’em-what-they-want world’ in which we now live.” Moore explained, “A church wanted to improve attendance at their major

worship services, so they hired a powerful advertising agency to come in, study their situation, and make recommendations.

The ad agency did their research ... and then suggested to the church that they should get rid of all the crosses in the church ... because the crosses might send a negative message to prospective young worshippers!”

Moore continued, “Now, I’m sure that in its history, that advertising agency has come up with some brilliant ideas ... but, in my opinion, that was not one of them!” Moore emphasized, “We can’t get rid of the cross! We don’t want to get rid of the cross. The cross is the dramatic symbol of our faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. The cross is the powerful reminder of God’s sacrificial and redemptive love for us.” He concluded, “And the cross is the constant signal to us of how God wants us to live and love today ... as sacrificial servants. We are not called to be prima donnas ... We are called to be servants. We are called to take up the mission of Christ ... and to emulate the servant spirit of our Lord.” (James W. Moore, *Choosing the Way to the Cross*)

Following Jesus means we accept the Difficult Truth he epitomized! **Yes, Jesus was and is the Suffering Servant of God – not to benefit himself but to free us and all people to live in the New Faith Relationship with God and one another, so we live the New Life in Christ – manifest God’s Agape – Sacrificial and Suffering Love.** Now, the potential difficulties and pain from living suffering and sacrificial agape love may come across as very ominous! However, we need to remember in this New Faith Relationship with God – this New Life in Christ – we are never alone! The following video is a powerful reminder of that fact. [The video, “I Am With You Always” was shown.]

Jesus also told his disciples, including us, that even if we or our loved ones or friends experience the ultimate sacrifice – the loss of this earthly life – physical death – the cost is not a waste! Jesus said in **verse 25**, ***“For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.”*** Losing one’s life for Jesus’ sake includes dying or experiencing critical suffering for the welfare of another person. The Houston police officer, Sgt. Steve Perez, who died because he was going in to work during the flooding of Harvey, put his life on the line for the sake of the safety of others. Emphasizing the high value of such a sacrifice, the Gospel of John reported that during the night Jesus was about to be betrayed and taken prisoner he told his disciples in **John 15:12-13**, ***“My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them.”***

The question for us today is will you and I accept and live the Difficult Truth – found in Jesus’ call when he said in **verse 24**, ***“you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me”?*** Let us trust Jesus and God will always be with us and enabling of us as we live the New Life in Christ – the life of agape love – suffering and sacrificial love toward all people. Let us respond to our call from Jesus to forget ourselves, carry our crosses, and follow him by boldly accepting and living the Difficult Truth! Amen.