

In my house, growing up in *Watervliet*,

We had an enclosed back *porch*.

And in *thinking* about *Matthew's* account of Jesus' *passion*,

A surprising *image* popped into my mind –

Welling up from the *heart*.

I remember a *Norman Rockwell* print hanging on that porch.

A father and *son* were seated on the *tailgate* of their old *pickup truck*.

It was parked on their *farm* –

But it was *packed* – and ready to make a *journey*.

But there were very different *feelings* about that journey,

In the *body* language of the father, versus the *son*.

The *son's* eyes were *bright* –

Filled with *hope* for the *future* –

He was sitting on the edge of the tailgate as if ready to make a great *leap!*

A leap into a *new life!*

The *father* – however – was rather more *downcast*.

He looked *tired*, and a little hunched *over* on that tailgate.

Because he can't *keep* his son in the *past* –

At *home* on the farm.

Yet it's the *father* –

*Despite* his *already* suffering the *absence* of his son –

It's the *loving* father who *carries* his son into that new future.

My friends,

*God* is our Father who *loves* us no matter *where* we go on the journey of life.

Our ancient *ancestors* in *faith* in our God –

The ancestors of Jesus *Himself* –

*Throughout* the Old Testament Scripture –

Would *describe* God's love as a *suffering* love.

He is *faithful* – yet He *suffers* when we are *not*.

And when *we* are hurting – *He* is hurting *too*.

*God's* heart will go to *any* pain –

Even the pain of the *Cross* –

That we may truly *live*.

Matthew talks a lot about *blood* –

Referring to the blood of the *Lamb of God* –

By which *our* sins are *forgiven* –

And our *bondage* to the pains of our mortality are set *free*.

*Anyone* who loves, knows *some* form of suffering –

Whether it's helping your child to *leave* home and go *off* to college –

Allowing them to *live* their *own* life –

Or when we *know* what's *best* for them –

But we can't *control* them from learning the *hard* way.

There is suffering in making all kinds of *sacrifices* –

Sacrifices we'd *happily* make all *over* again –

Like *Letting go* of our *self*-indulgences –

So we can put *others'* needs *first*.

And of course, there's the *terrible* suffering

When we *see* a child in some kind of trouble or illness, or *worse*.

The *loving* parent would prefer that *they* should take their child's suffering

Upon *themselves* – and *spare* the child from danger.

*Our God* is this *perfect* lover of His children,

And so, He *lowers* Himself into our suffering on earth –

He lowers Himself in the person of Jesus Christ –

The sacrificial lamb of God –

Come to *free* us of sin and death.

Today we celebrate the Lord's *Passion*.

*Passion* is often taken as strong feelings of intimate *romantic* love –

Or a *zeal* for some *cause* or *career*.

And so it *is*.

But *today*, we remember the *heart* of this word – *passion* –

Which *is suffering*.

*Not* as a *victim* of bad *luck* or bad *people* –

But suffering *because* we love –

As *God* loves –

Ready to *empty* His heart, that *ours* may be *filled*.

*Matthew* – more than the *other* Gospels –

Stressed Jesus' *sacrifice* – His *passion* –

As the way *back* to the heart of the Father –

A way we could *not reach* –

If it weren't for His *forgiveness* of our sins –

He *forgives* – even from the *Cross* –

And so, He *lifts* our burdens from us so we can stand a little *taller* –

With eyes a little *brighter*.

Because the journey of a *lifetime* is in *front* of us.

*Not* just when our lives look like a scene out of a Norman *Rockwell* painting,

But even from *rougher terrain* –

As with the Christians in *Lebanon* right now –

Who *acclaim* hopeful perseverance in their *faith* in God's deliverance –

Even when caught in the *crossfire* of warring factions –

Or in the *Holy Land* – whose *outdoor Holy Week* celebrations were *anceled* –

Because of a violence that only *adds* to the suffering heart of Christ.

*Trust* that the Lord *does suffer* our missteps –

Out of the *purest* love –

A love that transforms *suffering* into a *steppingstone* to *joy* –

And transforms even death *itself* – into the way to eternal *life*.

So let us *let go* of our *accusations* against others

And *practice forgiveness* of sins.

Let us *let go* of *self-absorption* –

To put the need of *another* before our *own*.

And let us *trust* in the way to *greatness* –

*Is* through *humbling* our hearts –

*Touching* the wounded hearts of our fellow travelers –

Holding *onto hope* –

*Persevering* in the God who will stop at *nothing* to lift us *up*.