We take great satisfaction in winning the battle. Do you remember the feeling of triumph you had when your candidate won the election? Whoopee! The feeling of victory lasts about as long as it takes for the confetti to fall back to the ground. When it comes to the important things there is only one way to win: together.

We will only get there together. That is the vision of the Revelation of John. In the vision there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God.

When it comes to the really important things we will only win the final goal together; as part of a great multitude, so large that no one could count it, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

When it comes to the really important things we will only get there together. According to a United Nations report, issued this past Monday, more than one million species of plants and animals will become extinct in the coming years due to human changes to the earth’s environment, and most especially due to the changes we are making to the earth’s climate. Climate change is the largest threat to life on earth.

We will only solve the challenge of climate change by working together. In order to address the threat of climate change people in the United States will have to work with people in China and people in the Philippines and people in Africa. In order to address the threat of climate change people in New York will have to work with people in West Virginia. People in California will have to work with people in Wyoming.

That’s not going to be easy. I know. I lived and worked with people in Wyoming and many of them did not want to talk with me about climate change, let alone do anything about it. But when it comes to the important things, like climate change, the victories we win by working with people from our own group will be very small victories. We will only win the real victory by working together.

There was a great multitude, so large that no one could count them, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white. In my vision the tribe includes people of all nations and all faiths, gathered together. All of the world’s great religions are based on teachings of peace and compassion, yet religiously-related violence and oppression has increased substantially during the past forty years. Individuals and governments are using the words of sacred scriptures to justify violence and oppression against people of other faiths.

All of the great religions have to deal with the misuse of their scriptures. Christians, Jews and Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs have all watched in horror as others used their scriptures to justify violence against other religious groups. We cannot solve this problem by only talking with members of our own religious group. We will only find a solution together.
Each of the great world religions contains within itself an essential truth that will be necessary to solve the problem of religious violence. As Christians the truth we bring is the one that has been most often abused: the cross. We follow the way of Christ. Christ made the greatest sacrifice for the sake of the world: that is the meaning of the cross. This is the truth we can bring to the conversation: we will have to make a sacrifice in order to achieve any sort of real triumph.

The great mistake of the Christian church in the 20th century could be described with one word: triumphalism. It was the idea that our group was winning some sort of victory, and that this little victory we had won was somehow important. The triumphalism of the Christian church in the 20th century might not have been as ugly as the religious violence we have seen in the past twenty years, but it is based in the same idea: it is the idea that we can win the victory by working only with people from our little group. It is the idea that Christians can win by triumphing over other groups of people. We can never win any real victory by working against other people.

We can only win the real victory by working together. The cross teaches us that the only victories that make any difference at all come when people make sacrifices. To bring it closer to home, the triumph of the cross means that we will only come to some sort of victory when we make sacrifices.

The uncomfortable truth is that this is the reality for us not just in dealing with the huge, enormous problems, like climate change and religious violence. It is also the reality for us as we deal with the immediate, personal challenges of our lives and our church.

We will only get there together. We will only achieve some sort of meaningful victory together. And the victory will only come through sacrifice, that is it will only come through us giving up something that is actually important to us. This is the truth of the cross. This is the uncomfortable truth of the cross.

It’s an uncomfortable truth that is the most relevant idea in our families and friendships. Unless and until we give up something that is important to us, or was important to us, we will never achieve any sort of real victory.

It’s an uncomfortable truth that is the most relevant idea in our workplaces and in our church. Unless and until we give up something that is important to us, or was important to us, we will never achieve any sort of victory.

It is a great and beautiful vision, but when we look carefully we can see that everyone had to give up something that was important to them. There was a great multitude, so large that no one could count them, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages and religions. They were all gathered together, around the one that some of them called God and that all of them described as holy or sacred. And the one who had created them wiped away the tears from their eyes, for each and every one of them had to sacrifice something that was dear to them.

So the question for me is, “What will I have to give up?” Will I have to give up a dream that I had? Certainly. Will I have to give up some of my security? Of course. Will I have to give up my pride? That was the first thing to go.

We give up all of these things for the sake of true hope, which is to listen to each other. We do this all for the sake of true progress, which is to work together. We do this all for the sake of true peace, which is to be reconciled with one another. We do this all for the sake of the true victory, which is to stand side by side, together before the one who created us in the image of God.