

In our Gospel lesson today, the disciples come to Jesus and ask, "Lord, increase our faith." It's a seemingly innocent request. 'We'd like to have more faith.'

It's like the line from *Oliver*: "Please sir, may I have some more?"

"More?" The disciples aren't ready for Jesus' answer. Jesus slams 'em. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed," Jesus says, "you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Uproot yourself and go jump into the sea,' and it would obey you."

That's pretty impressive. Mustard seeds are tiny. Mulberry trees are big. Mulberry trees have an extensive root system. It's a tough enough job just to dig up a mulberry tree, let alone to tell it to dig itself up. And yet, Jesus says, if your faith is the size of an itty-bitty mustard seed, you can do just that.

And Jesus' implication is, 'I don't see any mulberry trees heading down to the beach. Therefore, you disciples must not have even a teeny-tiny little eensy-weensy bit of faith.' Youch!

The poor disciples. I don't think that they even saw it coming. They probably were expecting something like, 'Increase your faith? What good little disciples you are. That's so nice and holy and pious. Pat, pat, pat on your little heads.'

Instead they get, 'Increase your faith? You don't even have a mustard seed's worth.'

Aw, those poor little disciples. You can just see the little pouts on their little faces. You can just see their little chins drooping and their little shoulders sagging.

And my 21st century mentality wants to say, "Uh, excuse me, Jesus. That's no way to motivate people. That's not very good for your disciples' self-esteem. You didn't give them any positive strokes. You didn't affirm them where they are. You didn't give them gold stars and brownie points for the things they were already doing. You need to enhance and nurture their self-images."

But I don't think it was their self-esteem Jesus was going after. I think it was their sense of pride. At this point in Luke, the disciples have been getting a little bit cocky. They also seem to have been rather complacent. Hey, we're pretty good guys. Hey, we're doing a pretty good job at things. Things are running pretty smoothly. We'd just like a little bit of a spiritual tune up. Jesus, when it comes to our faith, we'd just like you to top off our tanks.

But Jesus knows them better than they know themselves. He knows their tanks are empty. He knows that the need not a tune up but a complete overhaul. If the disciples think they have faith, they're just fooling themselves. And their own actions later bear this out.

Faith means trust. Faith means reliance. Faith means loyalty. And the disciples will prove that their tanks are nearly on empty. They're running on fumes. Because when they need to stand up and be counted, when the time comes to stand by their Lord, when the time

comes for loyalty, they all turn tail and run, leaving Jesus to suffer and die alone. Much later, many years later, the apostles will show their faithfulness and their loyalty by being willing to die for sake of Jesus. They will eventually have faith and it will be far larger than mustard seeds. But at this point, their needles on their faith gauges are hovering right around 'E.'

The scary part is, I'm afraid we're often like those disciples. I often get lulled into a sense of prideful complacency. It's so easy to be smug and self-satisfied. "Hey, I'm a pretty good guy. OK, I may not be perfect, but I'm pretty decent. God, I try to love you... at least some of the time. I try to love other people... at least some of the time."

And the unwritten assumption of this kind of attitude is, "God, I want you to notice what I'm doing well whenever I do it. I want you to give me gold stars and brownie points. I'd like a participation trophy. I'd like a little positive reinforcement here and there for the things I'm doing well. And God, I'd like you to reward me for doing good, I want you to thank me whenever I make even a little attempt at doing things right."

In other words, I want my spiritual life to be like one of those ski-ball games at the arcade. I want to keep rolling my balls up the ramp through the hoops, and I want God to keep spitting little prize tickets out while I'm doing it.

But that's not the way the Christian life works. And that's the point of Jesus' subsequent little parable of the master and the slave or servant. He says, 'When your servant¹ comes in from working hard all day, would you say, "Sit down with me and eat?' The answer of course is, "No." It was the servant's job to take care of the master first, and then take care of their own needs second.

And that makes a certain amount of sense. Imagine going into a restaurant. The wait-staff may have had a long day. But do you enter a restaurant and invite your server to sit down with you at your table? Do you get them a menu? No, you expect them to wait on you. You expect them to fill your water glass. You expect them to bring you food. They are waiting on you. That's their job.

That's probably about as close as I can come to a 21st century parallel what Jesus is trying to tell us. Servers wait on customers. That's their job.

But the big difference is that restaurant servers are doing it for salary and tips. In Jesus' day, those who waited on others did so because it was expected. It was their duty.

Duty. That's one of those words that makes us go, "Yuck."

Duty!?! What an old-fashioned concept. Owing something to someone else? How archaic. I'm an American. I don't owe 'nobody nuthin.' I have rights. I'm entitled. I don't have duties. I don't owe anything, except maybe my mortgage payment that goes to the bank.

¹ *Doulos* is a complicated word that can mean various degrees of servitude, from voluntary to involuntary. Also, "slave" is a loaded translation for us culturally, especially since Greco-Roman slavery was largely much more benign than slavery in the American ante-bellum south.

But Jesus is telling us something different in this parable. The servant waits tables because it's an expected duty, not because the servant is trying to get something out of it.

"So you also," Jesus says, "when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

The word worthless is better translated as "without need," or "owed nothing." We are servants of God who are owed nothing. When we do what we are supposed to do (d-o), we are not due (d-u-e) anything from God. It is simply our duty as Christians.

We have duties in our relationship to God. We owe God everything. And the relationship is not reciprocal. God does not owe anything to us. God is not in my debt. All of us, instead, are infinitely in debt to God, and there's no way to earn our way out of debt. No matter what we do in the service of God, it will never be more than what we ought to do.

Even if somehow, I was able to do everything that God expects me to do, even if I were somehow able to love God totally, even if I were able to love my neighbor as myself, it's still no ground for boasting. It's no reason to be smug and self-assured. When we have done our very, very best to do what God asks, we have only done our duty. We have only done what is expected of a Christian, of a servant of God.

God has already blessed us with infinitely more than we're ever able to repay. I can't pay God back, even if I give God 10% of what I have, or 50%, or even 100%.

We have been recipients of God's grace, God's wonderful love, which has been given to us freely. We are called to respond with faith. We are called to respond with loyalty. We are called to give up our entitlement mentality in order to give thanks.

Giving thanks. We have all been blessed in so many ways. But do we have an attitude of gratitude? Are we thankful for the gifts we've been given?

Do we come at God with arrogance and a sense of entitlement? Or do we come before God, being truly thankful for all he has done for us, thankful for all he's given to us?

Giving thanks can be difficult at times. But there's a wonderful resource, a prayer in the Prayer Book on p. 101 to help us along. I'd invite you to pick up a Prayer book and look at it. p.101.

The General Thanksgiving is a prayer that's designed to be prayed every day. It's a prayer that helps me keep my relationship to God in perspective. It's a good attitude adjustment. It goes right along with the Gospel. We are unworthy servants. Yet God has done so much for us.

Praying this prayer is a reminder of all the things God has done for me. And it asks me to be thankful.

And since what we pray helps shape what we believe, this is a wonderful prayer to nurture in us an attitude of gratitude. Will you join me?

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks
for all your goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all whom you have made.
We bless you for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies,
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,
by giving up our selves to your service,
and by walking before you
in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.