

*5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. 7"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"*

He had been in Afghanistan for quite some time – he had seen others fall around him but he had faith that he would be all right. But then one day the bullet struck not the guy next to him but he, himself. Wounded, he was evacuated, sent to a hospital stateside, and then after a full recovery from his wound, he was sent back to Afghanistan. In the interview I heard he talked about the difference in being there this time. He no longer had faith that it could not happen to him. He knew it could. He needed a different sort of faith altogether.

“Increase our faith,” the disciples asked Jesus. Do you wonder what sort of faith they were asking for? Were they asking for the walk on water sort of faith – the “if you believe enough you can do anything” sort of faith? They did not say but this is the answer Jesus gave. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

What a silly answer! Did Jesus have a twinkle in his eye as he spoke it? Was he joking with the disciples about the foolishness of a miracle making kind of faith – a “the bullet will never find me” kind of faith? Mulberry trees planted in the sea –what would you do with one out there? I cannot think of a single reason why anyone would want a mulberry tree floating offshore.

Yet that soldier had been proud of the faith that left him unafraid – proud of a faith that he later learned was ignorance. I am guessing that until he was wounded that faith was useful – made him more courageous, fearless, kept him sleeping well at night. But I wonder what he thought about his wounded comrades – did he look down on them? Pity them? Wonder why they were not as special as he was? Did he just avoid thinking about them altogether? From his words it is clear that his faith was that he was different from them - until he joined them in the hospital ward.

My grandpa Schlessman had this sort of faith – other people got sick, he boasted that he never missed a day of work in his life. But in his eighties his working days ended when his health began to fail. He fell into despair. All I remember of my conversations with him those last years of his life was his dismay that he was now the wounded one. There were so many better things we could have talked about but he was stuck there.

Maybe Jesus did not have a twinkle in his eye when he talked about mulberry trees in the sea that day. Maybe there was a tear in his eye.

It is a dangerous thing to have a faith that we think will keep us walking on water. When gravity takes effect and we are sinking down, faith will have failed us. Faith in faith is a dangerous thing.

What that soldier needed and the disciples needed too is faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is not a performing miracles kind of faith, not a snake handling, “poison drinking and you will never be harmed” kind of faith. Faith in Jesus is confidence that he has power to bring you through. He does. He will. Whatever the battle, whatever the outcome, you are his. He will supply you with all you need. He will not fail you even if you should die. He will not fail you.

Sometimes though, it is not just faith people get confused about but also works. You or I might think that we are more special to God than someone else – more deserving of God’s favor or God’s gratitude. We shrink God down to the size of our tribe and say that God’s love is for us – maybe feeling that God’s love is not quite the same for them.

Jesus used this example: Who among you would say to your slave who had just come in from the field, “Come, here at once and take your place at the table?” Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done everything that you were ordered to do say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.’”

Can you and I do something that would put God in our debt? Jesus is saying, “No.” No more than a child’s obedience earns the love and care of a parent. What is given as gift can never be earned.

God has given you everything - life, abilities, family, shelter, hope, faith, the promise of salvation. God does this not so that you and I can look down on them whoever they are but because God loves us. Yes, we are only worthless servants –to use the words of Jesus’ example – but in love Jesus has given his own life for you and promises to walk with you through every trial. Love him, thank him, trust him.

A pastor named Milton Gutierrez was asked what is the reward of a life of faith? He answered, “The reward for a life of faith is a life of faith.”

May God grant each of us that very reward. Amen.