

“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’” These were men who had left everything to follow Jesus. That certainly must require some degree of faith. So why, now, are they asking for more?

The answer probably lies in the passage right before this morning’s reading. Jesus had been teaching how they were to be as community. He said that if someone in the group sinned against them, they were to confront that person directly. Of course this is what everyone says we should do, but you have to admit it is often easier to recommend than to carry out.

But harder still is the insistence that if the sinner then repented, one must forgive. If that happened seven times a day, one must forgive seven times a day – and probably on all the days thereafter. Now that is really difficult. The disciples felt that they were going to need more faith to do this, and so they requested of their teacher that he top up their tank to meet the task.

I would guess that many of us here have felt as though we, too, need greater faith to be who we ought to be as Christians. Surely there must be another inspirational book to read, another technique of prayer and meditation to help us really feel connected to God. But Jesus says that we already have enough faith. In fact, his answer suggests that faith isn’t measured in quantity. It just is.

There is a word used a lot in the Hebrew Scriptures – the word ‘*halak*’. It means to walk, often in the ordinary sense of physical movement. But it also means metaphorically the path one follows in life. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says to the people, “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways...” In the Book of II Kings, the bad rulers of Israel are repeatedly described as ‘not walking in the way of the Lord.’

So what if faith is precisely walking in the way of God, day after day – in our life at work; in the times we listen to those who need to be heard; in cooking a meal for a family struggling with loss; in all the things that may seem small to us, but keep the

world going? In other words, faith is not something we acquire or improve, but something we live.

But it is not something for which God is handing out Merit Badges to recognize special achievement. This is where we tend to have trouble with the second half of today's lesson.

Jesus tells a parable about a slave who works all day plowing and keeping the sheep. When he comes back to the home farm, he is not met with a cold beer and an invitation to relax. Instead he is told to cook and serve dinner. And there will not be any pat on the back for all this. "So 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!'"

We struggle with the concept of being worthless, but probably more with the idea of being slaves who are commanded to the service of others. This goes against our rather individualistic grain. Perhaps we need to remember that Jesus came into this world as a humble servant to our needs.

Think about the scripture we read every Thursday of Holy Week, of Jesus getting on his knees with a basin of water and a towel, washing the travel stained feet of his followers. This was a task usually carried out by the lowliest slave in a household. But it was Jesus, incarnate God, on his knees before us.

When Ivy and I lived in Pennsylvania, during several summers we went with a group of teens and adults from our church for a week in Appalachia, repairing dilapidated homes. It was a two-day drive to get to there, and the first evening out we slept on the floor of some church along the way.

Every year on that evening we would sit in a circle and hear the reading of the foot washing scripture. And then we would wash each others' feet, one at a time around that circle. No sermon for commentary. Just the act of washing; and the next day we finished the drive to the work center.

The center was usually the local high school, where we had our meals and slept on the floor of the gym. Every day we would drive out to the homes where we were working. It was broiling hot most years, and we drank gallons of water so no one would get heat stroke. We worked hard to repair a roof, or glaze windows, or frame new walls in rooms where no two sides met at a right angle. The days were exhausting. When we got back to the school, all any of us wanted was a shower, while there might still be some warm water, and then to relax on our air-mattresses until dinner.

But at the end of the first day, we returned to the school to be met by the site director. "Two big flat-bed trucks just got here with lumber and concrete block. They have to be unloaded right now." We just stood there for a minute, feeling our aching muscles, until one of the kids said, "Come on. Let's wash feet."

And that's what we did, hoisting and carrying until the job was finished. For which, as I noted above, there was no Merit Badge. But it became our motto for all the tough tasks we faced that week: 'Let's wash feet'. And maybe that's what faith actually is: following after Jesus, washing feet as our Lord did for us.

Faith doesn't mean that we will feel a certain way or have profound spiritual experiences. To paraphrase John Wesley's advice to one of his pastors: "Live the faith until you have the faith; and then when you have it, live it all the more." Called as servants of each other and of God, we continue on the road, becoming the walk which we walk.