

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

No one can deny that we are living in tough times, even perilous times. Our government is not functioning, or at least, must be seen as dysfunctional. We still have young people fighting and dying in a war in Afghanistan. The drums of war can be heard from there to Syria to the Sudan. Many of our families and friends are experiencing unemployment or under-employment. Our elders are feeling insecure in their retirement and our youth are finding that their education isn't necessarily leading to meaningful employment. No, there is no doubt! These are tough times. And these tough times call for tough stuff.

The disciples of Jesus were also going through tough times and they found that Jesus was calling them to do the impossible: He was telling them to love their enemies and do good to those who hurt them. He's telling them to forgive again and again and again—even seven times seventy times. He's telling them to feed the hungry and to work for justice in an unjust world.

Is it any wonder that we hear them pleading with Him, as we plead with Him in these tough times, "Increase our faith!" They want, they need—we want, we need—tough stuff for tough times.

And Jesus tells them that Faith is the tough stuff they need for the tough times they're in. He tells them they only need a little bit—the size of a mustard seed—and they can say to a mulberry tree "be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it obey them. In other words, with faith the size of a mustard seed, they can achieve anything.

What does Jesus mean by Faith? Is it an attitude? Is it the same thing as positive thinking?

While it's true that our attitudes can change our perception of reality and they can help us deal with reality in a more effective way. By changing our attitude, we can change our level of confidence, which can help steady us when we're facing difficult challenges. In fact, it's been proven that a positive attitude has helped many people face the challenges of cancer treatments.

But Jesus is talking about something much more powerful than a changed attitude...though having a changed attitude is an important part of authentic faith. He is talking about that which makes positive attitudes sustainable. He is talking about the realization that we serve a Mighty God, an Awesome God, who is rich in mercy and full of compassion.

How do we come to that realization? I believe there are four small steps that lead to the kind of Faith that Jesus is telling us about. The first is so simple. It is to acknowledge that I am a sinner.

When Pope Francis was asked in his inaugural interview (You're all aware that he gave an interview that was published last week in America magazine last week, aren't you? Has anyone read the interview? The whole interview? If not, read it! Google it! Pull it up on America's website! It's powerful!) In any event, when asked, "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" the Holy Father replied, "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner..."I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon."

That, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is the beginning of Faith. To acknowledge that I am a weak, broken, failed individual who is totally dependent on the mercy and forgiveness of the One who is greater than me to give meaning and substance to my life is the first step toward the Faith of which Jesus speaks.

The second step is to be forgiving as I have been forgiven. It is to recognize that those who have hurt me, disappointed me, deceived me, and, even disgraced me are as weak and broken and failed as I am. It is to trust that the mercy and forgiveness of God that now lives in me, might also live in them. It is to become like Jesus crying from the Cross, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

Now, that kind of forgiveness is not mere lip-service. The kind of forgiveness that says in your heart, "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget." No, it has to be the forgiveness with which you have been forgiven by the God who says, "I remember your sins no more".

The third step is real simple. Jesus doesn't ask us to have mountains worth of faith, just a seed's worth. This can best be illustrated by the story of a young boy named James who wanted to be the most famous manufacturing and salesman of cheese in the world. He began by selling his cheese from a little buggy, pulled by a pony named Paddy. He would load his wagon with his cheese and drive his wagon up and down the streets of Chicago selling his cheese. After months of long hours and hard work, he wasn't making any money and was ready to give up.

So, one day he pulled his pony to a stop and began to talk to him. He said, "Paddy, there's something wrong. We're not doing it right. My priorities aren't where they ought to be. Maybe we ought to serve God and place Him first in our lives." The boy drove home and made a promise that for the rest of his life he would first serve God and then would work as God directed.

Many years later, the young boy, now a man, stood up in his Church and said, "I would rather be a member of this Church than to head the greatest corporation in America. My first job is serving Jesus."

So, every time you take a bite of Philadelphia Cream Cheese, a sip of Maxwell House, mix a quart of Kool-Aid, slice up a DiGiorno Pizza, cook a pot of macaroni and cheese, spread some Grey Poupon, stir a bowl of Cream of Wheat, slurp down some Jell-O, eat the cream out of the middle of an Oreo cookie, or serve some Stove Top, remember a boy, his pony Paddy, and the promise little James L. Kraft made to serve God first and work as He directed.

You see we have it all wrong when we say, “Well, I don’t have that much faith.” All it takes is a little boy’s faith. Jesus isn’t interested in the quantity of our faith, just the quality of it. It only takes a mustard seed’s worth if it is genuine.

The final step to having the Faith that Jesus speaks of is recognizing that serving God is a duty. Let me be blunt! God owes us nothing. It is only the disgusting attitude of the self-righteous who believe that God owes them blessings and grace because they are so good. It is this loathsome attitude of religious people that give religion a bad name.

That’s why Jesus ends this teaching with the parable, “Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here immediately and take your place at table” Would he not rather say to him, ”Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished? Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.”

Jesus is asking us to imagine ourselves as a master with servants or a farmer with fieldhands or an employer with employees. The master or the farmer or the employer is certainly not expected to thank the person working for simply doing his job.

He is telling us that Faith calls us to recognize that it is our duty as creatures to serve the Creator; it is our privilege as the Redeemed to serve our Redeemer; it is the glory of our very being to serve a Mighty and Awesome God, who is rich in mercy and full of compassion.

The Faith that Jesus calls us to, the tough stuff for tough times, is, then, our duty. Your duty! My duty! Recognize that I am a forgiven sinner, called to forgive, believe just a little, and work at serving my God.