

17:5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

7 "Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? 8 Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? 9 Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" [New International Version].

Stephanie loved to visit her grandparents. Everything was always so special whenever she went there. The house always smelled good from cookies and pies that were baked. And her grandparents always seemed to have all the time in the world to do things with her.

One of the "special" things about going to her grandparents was the game that they played. This game – that didn't have a name – was played in several different ways. In this game, Stephanie would be invited to do certain things – and if she did them, then she would get a special treat.

For example, if she would help Grandpa rake up the leaves, then she would get to pick out a special treat when they went to the store.

If she would help Grandma dry the dishes after each meal, she would also get a special treat.

If she would go to Sunday School and Church with Grandma and Grandpa, she would also get a special treat.

These were all things that she enjoyed doing with Grandma and Grandpa, but she got a special treat for doing them anyway.

As she got older, Grandma and Grandpa kept playing these games with her. But they made the treats different, so Stephanie still enjoyed playing the game. The treats were now long distance telephone cards and gift certificates for the mall, where she could buy whatever clothes she wanted – and they never told her which ones she could or could not get.

The tasks changed over time as well, except that going to Sunday School and Church always remained constant. And Stephanie always went – at least whenever she was visiting her grandparents.

When she was home with her parents, it didn't seem like such a high priority, and she didn't go to Sunday School and Church quite as often.

Then – as these things happen in the cycle of life – Grandma and Grandpa went away – went to live with Jesus, and Stephanie could not visit them anymore. She was just starting college when

Grandpa died, and was just finishing when Grandma died.

Stephanie kept on going to church. For awhile. And then something happened in her life. She had been dating the same boyfriend for over two years. They were planning their wedding, when he was killed in an automobile accident, by a drunk driver.

Stephanie was hurt and confused. When she turned to God and asked for help, it seemed to her like she didn't have a very good connection with God. Her faith didn't seem to do her much good.

What Stephanie didn't realize was that it wasn't HER faith. It was Grandma and Grandpa's faith that she had carried around with her all this time. It was more of a "lucky charm" – a "rabbit's foot" – something that she did to get treats from Grandma and Grandpa. But it never really had developed into a faith of her own.

And so – because she didn't get what she thought she ought to get from God – on demand, when she wanted it – Stephanie decided that this faith wasn't worth much. And she quit going to Church altogether.

Here, at Saint Marks, we are using an incentive program with the 9:45 Sunday School opening exercise here in the chapel. There will be different incentives to encourage the children –to encourage them to be there and to invite others to come along with them.

We call this different things. Psychologists call it behavior modification. Ethicists call it the developmental stage of virtue ethics. It does help to build good habits.

Dr. John Crossin, one of my seminary teachers said that DUTY is an important concept in the development of a Christian. But – only at a certain stage. And then we need to move on – past the need for treats – past the need to be under compulsion of duty.

Eventually our Christian walk needs to get to the point where we can understand that **REAL FAITH IS ITS OWN REWARD. WE DON'T HAVE TO DO CERTAIN THINGS – BUT WE OUGHT TO WANT TO.**

One night, when I was volunteering as an on-call pastoral caregiver at St. Mary's Hospital, I was called to be with a family, whose loved one died. It was on the oncology floor. After I had ministered to the family, and they left, I asked nurse how they are able to do what they do what they do on the oncology wing & with such a level of compassion.

She said that almost anyone can be trained to do the mechanics of what they do. But she believes that God has gifted & called each one of them who work on that wing; & that they always get so much more back than what they give. And then-sometimes when the load gets to almost more than they can bear, God gives them a miraculous cure.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells His disciples that there are certain things that being a

Christian means you do. As children in the faith, these things are rewarded when they are done. As youngsters in the faith, the concept of Duty may be used. But there comes a time when we need to mature in the faith, where we do certain things, not because we are waiting for someone to give us a reward, or someone to give us a pat on the back. There comes a time in our faith journey where we do what we are supposed to do, not because we have to but because we want to.

And so may it be for thee and me. And so may it be.