

November 5, 2017

“Growing in Sainthood”

Matthew 5:1-12

I suppose all of us ate more candy this past week than usual, thanks to Halloween or woe to Halloween. Correct? What is your favorite Halloween candy?

My favorite used to be “Rice Crispy” and “Kix.” This year was different, however. I would like to tell you my “candy” story.

When I came to the United States for the first time, I came as a student to Luther College in a small town called Decorah, Iowa. See, I have a Lutheran background. There were only two people I could speak Japanese to on campus. One was Mary Beth Gilbertson and the other was Dave (I forgot his last name). Both were missionary kids. Their families were once missionaries in Japan. Mary Beth’s father, Gilbertson sensei, whom I had known in Japan, was sent there from the American Lutheran Church and Dave’s father was a missionary from the Congregational Church.

During one school break, Mary Beth took me to her parents’ home in Minneapolis. Gilbertson sensei had retired by then. As we waited for her parents to come to pick us up at a bus depot, Mary Beth felt hungry and went to a snack machine there. She inserted coins in the machine and got a pack of two candies. She took one and handed me the other and said, “It’s junk food, but tastes good.” I ate it and to my Japanese tongue at that time, it was salty and sweet - an interesting taste. The candy had a chocolate cup outside and inside was salty peanut butter. Now you know what candy it was, right?

This Halloween, somehow, Reeses tasted best. I ate more Reeses than any other candy.

When I was in Japan, Gilbertson sensei told us one time how he ended up as a missionary to Japan. During the Second World War, one day he found himself floating in the ocean. I don’t know or remember if he was in the Navy or in the air force. The Japanese hit the American warship or hit the airplane Gilbertson sensei was on, and he was in the water fighting for his own life. He prayed to God, “O God, If you save my life, I will go to my enemy country to preach your Good News to the people there.” God saved his life and he became a missionary to the Japanese people whose armed forces had tried to kill his life.

Gilbertson sensei was not so sociable. He was a more intellectual type and looked aloof when he was with people. I do not know how many years he served as a missionary in Japan. Maybe he gave up on the stubborn Japanese who didn't open their hearts to the Gospel message or simply because he felt God's new call, he and his family left Japan for Pupa New Guinea to serve there as missionaries.

To me, Gilbertson sensei is a saint, who served the people, who almost took his life. He did as Jesus commanded. "... *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*" (Mt. 5:44) He is a saint, who kept his promise to God, "If you save my life, I will serve the people of my enemy country." According to an online dictionary, a saint is "a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or **likeness** or closeness to God."

We may not have the "exceptional degree," but we all carry the "likeness or closeness to God." Why? It's because we are created in the "Image of God."

"So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God was the human being created; male and female God created them."
(Genesis 1:27)

In a way, we all carry sainthood in us and we know that God desires us to grow in sainthood.

The footsteps of sainthood can be found in today's Gospel lesson: the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peace makers—all of these help bring good news to others. The meek are not the weak. The biblical understanding of meekness often has to do with the strong choosing to comport themselves with humility and gentleness as they seek to succor those who really are weak. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not in a state of lacking so much as they are driven by a deep spiritual yearning that compels them to strive for justice.

The meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers -all are committed to nurturing compassion and wholeness in the world. They are not, however, necessarily welcome in this world, even though they seem to do good in the world. Sometimes they are harassed, insulted, with all kinds of bad and false things spoken about them **because** they work and serve for God's reign on earth. The story doesn't end there, however. Jesus

says, “*Blessed are they. Blessed are they. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven.*”

Saints are, in a way, those who can see beyond what they see in this world, who can see what is to come or needs to come and work and serve for it selflessly, not for his or her gain.

The Bible states we have that sainthood in us because we are created in the image of God.

We cannot grow in sainthood with our own power because it is impossible for us to be selfless with our own power, correct? It’s a parody, isn’t it, if I say, “I became selfless with my own power.” Only when we offer ourselves to God, or only when we surrender ourselves to God, only when we rely on the power beyond us, the Higher Power, God grows sainthood in us, and that’s what God desires for us.

There is a good hymn that tells what God’s power can do to us.

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill Me and use me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

Let’s sing this hymn together as our prayer, asking God to continue to mold us in the image of God.