

Preached on Aug 1 & 2 2015
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Did you ever wonder why God chose the little, backwater town of Bethlehem as the birthplace of His Son? ...Well, consider this. Bethlehem is a Hebrew word that means “house of bread.” And in today’s and the next three weeks’ Gospels, Jesus refers to Himself as the “bread of life.” ...So it makes sense that Jesus, the Bread of Life, would be born in the “house of bread.”...Now I’m not comparing myself to Jesus, but I can kind of say that I was born in a house of bread too. In fact, every Italian kid growing up in East Utica back then could say that, because the main part of every meal in our houses was a large loaf of hard-crust Italian bread – not that spongy stuff Wegman’s calls Italian bread - but bread with a crust so hard you had to cut it with a saw. I can’t tell you how many times I got my hand slapped for dipping a piece of that wonderful bread into the pot of pasta sauce simmering on the stove...“But, Madonna mia, it was worth all the pain.

Why all this talk about bread? Because our Gospel theme for the month of August is *Jesus, the Bread of Life, Jesus, the Living Bread*...In today’s Gospel passage,...a large crowd had followed Jesus to Capernaum...They were part of the thousands that Jesus had miraculously fed from 5 barley loaves and a few little fish...They had come looking for Jesus, hoping He would do something even greater like Moses’ miracle of manna in the desert. Then, they would believe in Him...Jesus explained to them that it was God the Father – not Moses - who had sent manna from heaven to feed their ancestors, and the Father had now sent the true bread from heaven - Jesus Himself - to give life to the world... But they didn’t get it. ...The people wanted food for their bellies and Jesus offered them food for their souls...Soul food...*I’ll bet you thought soul food originated in the southern US...Nope, Jesus was the original soul food*...

What Jesus was saying to that short-sighted crowd of Galileans,...and what He’s also saying to us is, “Hey folks, I’m not talking about ordinary bread that you eat to satisfy your physical hunger, but it doesn’t last –you’ll be hungry again...I’m talking about the living bread the Father has sent to satisfy your spiritual hunger....I am that living bread standing right here in front of you,...and whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.” ...You see, Jesus knows that we have spiritual hungers that can’t be satisfied with ordinary food... hunger for peace,... hunger for purpose and meaning, hunger for love, hunger for strength, hunger for forgiveness,... hungers that only He can satisfy. ...Pope Francis –in a recent homily- said that today “Some people nourish themselves with money,...others with success and vanity,...others with power and pride.”...He said that such things appear “more satisfying,” ...but those tempted by these things find out that they do not last. ...They are the perishable food that Jesus speaks of in our Gospel.

But the food Jesus offers us – Himself, the Bread of Life, the Living Bread - will not perish...It is the eternal food that will feed our heart, soul and spirit if we come to His table in faith and partake of His Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist. ..Each of us must ask ourselves: Where do I want to eat?... Where do I want to get nourishment? ...At the Lord’s table?...Or do I want what the world offers, the false bread that cannot feed the deepest hungers of my heart, soul and spirit?...I’m guessing that since we are here, most of us have chosen to eat at the Lord’s table... But how do we come to His table?...

Jesus said, “I am the living bread come down from heaven.”...*Living bread!*...My friends, the Eucharist is alive!... The host we receive is not a thing...It is not bread...It is a *person*, and He’s alive!...If a visitor who knew nothing about the Eucharist were to watch the way we come to Communion, would she be able to tell that we believe we are taking into our bodies the *living*

person of Jesus Christ?...Would she be able to tell that we truly believe that what Jesus said to His disciples at the Last Supper, He also says to us from the altar at every Mass: "This is my body given up for you...This is my blood shed for you"?...Would she see our hands held out in awe and gratitude that Jesus loves us so much as to actually give Himself to us in this incredibly intimate way...to strengthen us,...heal us,...change us?

Or would the visitor instead simply see a bunch of people get up from their pews, wait in line, receive a piece of bread, & then go back to their seats...without any real awareness of a deeper union with Christ, ..without any awareness of His life now within us,...without any awareness of a change taking place in us?...I have to confess there are times when I'm at Mass when I let my mind be filled with distractions,...thinking about bills that have to be paid,...or the big football game,...or where to go for breakfast after Mass,...so much so that I come to Communion, & just go through the motions...with little, if any, grasp of the incredibility of the gift of Jesus Himself that I am about to be given...It's like I'm saying, " Thanks, Jesus, but I don't really need you right now.." ...And that is so, so wrong...I DO need Him...We ALL need Him...None of us are doing so well in our Christian journey that we should ever take this gift for granted.

When I find myself doing that, I often think of a patient at RGH who's been there for almost 5 yrs. ...Ann is a faithful Roman Catholic who is unable to receive Communion because she can't swallow...She's fed through a tube...So when I visit her I hold the host up to her and I say the words "Body of Christ"...And since she can't speak, Ann mouths a silent AMEN...Then as I touch the host to her lips, she tenderly kisses Jesus as tears roll down her cheeks,...tears of gratitude that the living Jesus has come to her, yet tears of sadness that she cannot take His broken body into hers... She deeply longs for what you and I too often take for granted...We should come to the Eucharist as thankful and as appreciative as Ann does.

But you know, being thankful for the Eucharist – for the graces and blessings, for the forgiveness and the strength this intimate union with the living Jesus offers us – being thankful for the Eucharist means nothing unless it shapes who we are and what we do...Bishop Matano in his pastoral letter on the Eucharist said, "All that we do as Catholics stems from our attachment to the Eucharist"...How we live,..the decisions we make,...how we set our priorities,...our moral code,...how we treat others...after we walk out that door... has to reflect the reality that we have become bearers of Christ...We carry Christ within us as we go back into the world...Having Jesus within us has to make a difference out there.

Have you ever wondered why our Eucharistic celebration is called a "Mass" ? Some of you probably know that "Mass" is an English rendering of the Latin word "missa." From the Latin word "missa" comes the English word "dismissal."... So "Mass" means "dismissal."...Our Eucharistic celebration gets its name from the dismissal, the sending forth of God's people at the end of every Mass.

One of the last words Jesus said to His disciples as He ascended into heaven was "Go!"...Go and take my Gospel into the whole world...That was their mission...At the end of every Mass, Jesus gives us the same command, "Go!"... With His Body and Blood He empowers and strengthens us to GO and live His Gospel in our little part of the world, so that others may come to know Him...That's OUR mission.

I will end with the story of a young boy who had just received His 1st Communion...He went up to the priest after Mass and asked, "Father, you told us that after we receive Communion we are carrying Jesus inside us,...and that if we really believe that, it should change us to be more like Him. Right?"...The priest answered, "Yes, that's right."..."Well, Father, how will I be able to see

that I've become more like Jesus?"...The wise old priest looked the boy in the eye and said, "It's not so important that YOU be able to see it...What's more important is that OTHERS can see it."
AMEN!