

My friends in Christ, we come now to the conclusion of the Bread of Life Discourse, which has been our Gospel focus for the Sunday Mass this entire month of August. We come now *also* to the conclusion of my summer homily series “Unleash the Gospel.” And so it is that our reflections today are three-fold and flow from one to another: first, an exploration of *why* the Lord gave us the Eucharist in the first place – of *all* of the *many* possibilities of what *could* have been the Sacrament of our salvation; second, a demonstration of how Christ *Himself* goes about the great and holy mission of unleashing the Gospel, as put on full display right here in the Bread of Life Discourse; and third, a proposal of what we can do now as a parish and as parishioners, of where we can go from here in faith formation for ourselves and in discipleship formation for *others* as *well* as for ourselves.

First: *why* the Eucharist? Because if the blessed truth of the Eucharist has ever seemed as a rather strange notion to you...*that* is because it *should*! Because, for example, this all seems to be, on the one hand, just a manic and irresponsible glorification of eating *bread...or*, on the other hand, it is cannibalism. There are, indeed, *many* reasons why the Eucharist *should* seem strange to us – let alone strange to *non*-believers.

But then, we are mindful of what Saint Paul famously said: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” And the Eucharist is the enduring testament to the reality of the Crucifixion of God-Incarnate, the Word-Made-Flesh. And so it is in very truth rather fitting that the Eucharist should be its own stumbling block for some, its own foolishness to others – that mere bread and wine (tasteless bread wafers and cheap wine at that!) could be turned into the Sacred Body, the Precious Blood, the Soul, and the Divinity of Jesus Christ.

But the question still remains: why the Eucharist? Why did God ordain *this* as the Source and Summit of our Christian faith, the Sacrament of Sacraments to which we must ascend – again and again – on our pilgrim’s journey of faith toward the halls of Heaven? Why *this*? Why *food*?

This fundamental question gains even greater force when we consider the other Sacraments in our Catholic Christian arsenal. In Baptism, for example, we see the analogy between the *physical* washing of our *bodies* and the *baptismal* cleansing from our *sins*. In marriage, the joining together of man and woman is a metaphor for the union of humanity and God; “this is a great mystery,” Saint

Paul teaches in today's text from his letter to the Ephesians – a mystery “in reference to Christ and the Church.”

But *food*? The implications here are less obvious. Yes, we require daily bread for our *physical* nourishment, but why do we need it for our *spiritual* sustenance? Saint Gregory of Nyssa looks back to the Garden of Eden for an answer: sin was introduced to us through the act of eating (Adam and Eve having eaten the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) and therefore it was fitting and necessary that the antidote to the poison of sin also be had through the very act of eating. And whereas the forbidden fruit dissolved our human nature of original holiness (separating soul from body in death; disrupting our relationships with one another; and severing our union with God), the Eucharist resolves that dissolution – uniting us with Jesus, Who is God-Incarnate, and in doing so restoring life for body and soul while also reconciling us with one another. Therefore, we find *many* reasons – matters of eternal consequence – for *why* God gave us the Eucharist.

Following these reasons why, we observe how Christ Himself goes about the great and holy mission of unleashing the Gospel. We notice, first of all, that our Gospel text begins with many of His disciples “murmuring about this.” They are grumbling about what Jesus is trying to teach with regard to Himself, the Bread of Life. And they complain, “This saying [about the Bread of Life] is hard; who can accept it?” These people are *very* close – *dangerously* close – to leaving Him. And, in fact, they *do* end up leaving Him: “As a result of this [teaching], many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him.” And Jesus...*lets them go*. We *have* to be *very* clear about what Jesus does here in this scene – and what He does *not* do. He *does* let them go; He does *not* try to stop them by clarifying the issue as if they had simply misunderstood Him, as if He had screwed up and made His teaching *way* more confusing than it needed to be. His disciples are grumbling, shocked and scandalized at His words. And yet, does He back down in what He is trying to say? Does He tone down His rhetoric in order to clarify? Does He make *any* effort at all to correct their thinking as if they were coming to the wrong conclusion? Does He laugh or make fun like He was only joking with them and say, “I was only  *kidding*, everybody! I only meant all of that in a *spiritual* sense! Calm down now!”

No. He does *not* do that. He does *not* back down from this very difficult teaching. In fact, He *doubles-down*. He says *several* times that *He* is the Bread of Life, and that unless they “eat of the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, [they] do not have life” in them. He says that once, and then He actually says it *again* for emphasis! Elsewhere in this Gospel account of Saint John, in instances where His teaching gets to be a bit too confusing for His audience, He backs up a bit and clarifies what He is trying to say. In John Chapter Three, in His conversation with Nicodemus, He talks about the need to be born again. But Nicodemus asks Him, “How can a person, once grown old, be born again? Surely he cannot re-enter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” We can imagine Jesus rolling His eyes and sighing as He clarifies what He is trying to say: “That is *not* what I mean, you silly person! I am talking about *Baptism!*” When what He is saying starts getting tough to understand, He backs up a bit and clarifies. Later on, in John Chapter Eleven, Lazarus is dying, and Jesus is determined to go to him. But He is too late, and Lazarus has died, and He says then that “Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” And His disciples are confused; they wonder at this and say to Him, “Master, if he is [merely] asleep, he will be saved.” Once again, we can imagine Jesus rolling His eyes and sighing as He says, “Morons! I am surrounded by complete morons! Lazarus has *died.*”

Two Gospel instances, then, when what Jesus says gets to be a bit too confusing, and He is forced to pause, back it up, and clarify.

And yet *here*, in *this* Gospel instance, the Bread of Life Discourse, what He says gets to be a bit too confusing, a bit too shocking and scandalous in fact...but He does *not* back it up and clarify as if it were just a spiritual way of speaking about reality. No; indeed, in *this* Gospel instance, Jesus actually *means* it when He *says* it: “My Flesh *is* true food, and My Blood *is* true drink.” And “many of [them] returned to their former way of life” and left Him...and, again, He *lets them go*.

And not only does Jesus let all of *them* go, He even turns to His faithful Twelve and He even invites *them* to go, too! He asks: “Do you *also* want to leave?” Thus, He *clearly* was *more* than willing to risk losing *everyone* – *even* His very best friends – for the sake of Truth; He would much rather give up absolutely *everything* for which He had toiled for three years of grueling ministry and mission, and

then face the awful prospect of having to start all over again.... He would rather do even *that*...than compromise on Truth in even the *slightest* measure.

And *that* is a lesson for *us* in *our* holy striving to evangelize, in *our* holy mission of unleashing the Gospel and thus inflaming the world entire. We cannot and we must not fear to proclaim Truth, no matter how controversial, no matter how inconvenient, and no matter how discriminated against, how persecuted we might become and be made to suffer.... We cannot fear to proclaim the truth of God – even if it means that we risk losing numbers. After all, *Christ* clearly did not fear this, and He *did* lose numbers! And so, therefore, *we* cannot fear this; we *must* proclaim the truth, and Jesus *is* the Truth, and so we proclaim Him.

But “this saying *is* hard.” This Gospel teaching about the Eucharist, the Bread of Life – it is, indeed, a *very* hard teaching. And so, how can *we* accept it lest *we* fall away and no longer accompany Jesus? For our *own* faith formation, what we can do is continue our study of these matters. We can talk about them. We can pray about them with the help of Sacred Scripture – and *also* with the help of one another. This is why the parish places great emphasis on things like Family Faith Formation, Bible Study groups, sacramental preparation, youth ministry, and so on. This is why we have things like spiritual direction available. We strive to foster these and other such occasions for communion and faith formation so that we can offer each other mutual support, encouragement, and growth in holiness. And then, for the discipleship formation of *others* as well as for *ourselves*, we have the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, and we open up *that* opportunity to *everyone*.

These things help *each* of us to grow and thrive in our faith and discipleship of Jesus Christ, and they help our parish (*and* our diocese, *and* the Church universal) to grow and thrive.

May it be, then, that Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, would remain with us always in our *every* holy endeavor. And as we come forward at Holy Communion so as to receive Him, humbly, in the Eucharist, worthily and well, we will *joyfully* proclaim in our hearts and in our souls what Saint Peter himself proclaimed: “You,” O Lord, “have the words of eternal life.” Because for the salvation of souls and for the greater glory of God, we too have come to believe and are convinced that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Holy One of God.