**Jubilee Homily – *Saturday Oct. 8, 2022 – 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C***

**First, a disclaimer – A 50th Jubilee of priestly ordination does not mean a 50-minute homily. On the contrary, since Pope Francis suggested recently that homilies should be no longer than 15-minutes, I have partnered with my iPhoneto honor that wisdom. Fifty years ago, I would have never spoken these words: *Hey Siri! Set a timer for 15 minutes.***

**The number “4” is significant for my 50th Jubilee event. Four radical conversion events; four Damascus moments similar to my namesake, Paul of Tarsus, four interior upheavals that rerouted me from old to new paths of spiritual renewal. This Jubilee homily is the four movements of the symphony of my priestly life.**

**The first movement lasted seven years, 1972 to 1979. Prior to ordination, I was schooled in a model of priestly formation that promoted a “workaholic” model of ordained ministry. Be busy was the underlying theme. So, for seven years, “work” was my drug of choice. I returned every phone call, said YES to every request for a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, a counselling session, an emergency. For seven years, the word NO was not in my vocabulary. I was so busy that I had didn’t have time for spiritual direction, for retreats, for days off. Those seven years of very little self-care and wellness ended on Wed. Feb. 14, 1979. At 9 pm I collapsed from exhaustion in the rectory of Our Lady of Fatima. The paramedics worked feverishly to restore my blood pressure to a level of relief while I was driven in an ambulance, to St. Francis Hospital in a howling snowstorm. It was a five-day unplanned retreat. Up until that day, I had blindly and foolishly allowed an evil spirit to trick me into believing that I was invincible. My life, in park for five days, was similar to an agony not in a garden.**

**On the second day, Dr. John Maguire entered my hospital room. A soft-spoken, humble G.P. he ordered a battery of tests to determine the cause of the syncope that triggered a breakdown of my bodily systems. Three days later, I asked about a diagnosis. His words were blunt but spiritually piercing, *Fr. Mast, there is a Messiah and it’s not you.*  In those eight words he surmised my suffering from a Messiah complex with the precision of a skilled surgeon. Those eight words awakened me to a denial of something I had kept hidden, namely, I was in the initial stage of spiritual leprosy. I was playing “happy” on the outside while hiding a “sadness” inside. That conflict fueled an inner ugliness about myself that stole energy for staying healthy. These were my Naaman years, hiding emotional leprosy until God brought me to my knees. On the seventh day of the hospital retreat, I was discharged. Dr. Maguire then became a medical healer and spiritual director of my wounded soul. With his guidance, I began to practice wellness, I learned how to say “No” in a way that was self-caring, I became a competitive tennis player, and I still have the Schwinn LaTour racing bike that is now worth far more than what I originally paid for it. This first movement of my priestly life ended with a new door opening: graduate studies in religious education at Fordham University in NYC.**

**Jubilee Homily – page 2**

**The second movement of the symphony of my priestly life spanned nine years. It began in August 1979 on the Rose Hill campus of Fordham in The Bronx and ended with the completion of a second Master’s degree at The Catholic University of America in D.C. in 1988. Two exciting academic doors opened and closed in those nine years. But it was an unexpected and profound religious conversion at a government outpost north of Nairobi, Kenya that pivoted my life in the direction of a new priestly ministry.**

**One of my classmates in Washington was a religious Sister, Virginia Millane. Her community in Ireland staffed a state-run boarding school for girls in Chavuna, Zambia. Before she returned there to teach, she convinced me to visit western Africa. So, in the summer of 1988, I arrived in Nairobi at 4 am. Virginia had arranged for one of her sisters to pick me up at the airport and bring me to their house. The next day, another sister asked if I wanted to ride with her to the northern city of Meru. She was a social affairs consultant for the Kenyan government. She was visiting an outpost to take an inventory of necessary things people would need during the winter months. After we arrived, she met with officials to conduct her business. I walked around the out-post and quickly concluded it was an enclosed compound for people with contagious diseases. My dominant emotion of “interest” in the compound turned to “fear” of the population. The voice that grabbed my heart was, “Touch no one!” Before we left the sister introduced me to a middle-aged man suffering with leprosy. I was so stunned by his wretched physical features that I missed his name “Emmanuel” when she spoke it.**

**She said it was a custom in that colony for someone to welcome visitors with a song. The leper’s hands had been surgically removed. They were covered with white tennis socks and secured with rubber bands. But, in a rich baritone voice, he raised his arms and sang:**

***God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, oh so good to me.***

**My heart began to melt as I wondered where that song came from inside him. I concluded he had an inner view on suffering different from mine. My song would have been:**

***Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows my trials.***

**He had a bronze cross and chain around his neck. The sister said he wanted me to have it as a gift. It was probably the most precious thing in his life. I froze knowing I would have to lift it from him since he had no hands. In my hesitation, the sister whispered in my ear: *Fr. Paul, his name is Emmanuel, God-is-with-us, don’t miss God here.* Those words awakened me from my new leprosy: FEAR. As I lifted the cross & chain, I embraced him in a hug. My tears were evidence of a heart softened by the gospel truth that all pain is redemptive.**

**When I returned home, I began a twelve-year ministry of preaching retreats, wearing this cross and telling that story of conversion in every 105 parishes and retreat houses in which I sowed seeds as a retreat preacher. The second movement of my priestly life ended with my becoming a missionary, like my namesake, sowing seeds of hope and healing when we find God hiding in our daily life experiences.**

**Jubilee Homily – page 3**

**That religious sister of the Sacred Heart became a second spiritual director. Her words about the name *Emmanuel* were like receiving a spiritual heart transplant. From that day on it has beat more slowly in rhythm with a divine caring heart.**

**The third movement of the symphony of my priestly life began in a dark place in the summer of 2002. Just when I was on a spiritual high as a retreat preacher, the disturbing news about the hierarchy covering-up child sexual abuse by clergy affected my soul like a spiritual paralysis. Anger became a new form of spiritual leprosy. The next ten months was my own version of the “Dark Night of the Soul.” This 16th century canticle of the Spanish mystic *St. John of the Cross* was being downloaded into my 21st century wounded soul.**

**Two divine interventions rescued me from desolation. First, four victims of abuse sought my help as a spiritual director. I put my pity parties on hold to help them find God in the turmoil of their anger and resentment toward the bishops who uprooted their faith lives by turning them into victims. With the help of my spiritual director of 22 years, Sr. Mary Carboy, I helped them embrace a new relationship with Jesus as victim and to seek their healing in his story of agony, innocent suffering, crucifixion, entombment, and resurrection. His story of redemption by surrendering to a higher power became their story.**

**Second, in the spring of 2003, I resigned my position in the Chancery Office and sought peace and nurture with the Benedictine Sisters in the rural Eastern Shore of our diocese. For nine years I learned from them a new rhythm for praying and rebooting life with a new purpose. This third movement began with the fear it was turning into a Requiem. But it ended with a new ministry of spiritual direction with people desiring to break out of a mold of a love affair with a sinful institution, for the new adventure of a love affair with Jesus Christ.**

**The spiritual leprosy of that year with its struggles to wear a healing face against the backdrop of the institutional ugliness of covering up the sex abuse of innocent children, gradually lifted when I invited Jesus the healer to be in my inner darkness. Seeking and finding him there turned me away from the face of despair and kept focused on the face of the healer of every ill. This was the segway into the final movement of my life symphony.**

**It happened on Thursday March 23, 2017. I was driving to visit and anoint Amelia Wicks at the Hospice Center in Milford. Less than five minutes from my destination, I witnessed a 29-year-old man on a motorcycle collide with an 18-wheeler at the entrance to the Irwin Burton car dealership. He was killed upon impact. At 71-years of age, I thought I had seen everything. But this experience of emotional trauma paralyzed my soul for weeks.**

**The breakthrough from shock to sadness to consolation came when a new life question emerged: *knowing you will die soon, Paul, how will you live?* Witnessing the horrific death of 29-year-old David Thompson, Jr. reframed the spiritual thread woven into the four movements of my life: *when I accepted the power of the four conversion moments as dying & rising experiences, I was set free to truly live.***

**Jubilee Homily – page 4**

**This fourth conversion moment shocked me into pondering “last stage” questions: What have I done with my life? What do I love? What do I place at the center of my life? Which people shall I invite as my companions, and which will I allow to fall away, in my remaining time? How will I live in the final days of this fourth movement?**

**Money seems useless for daily needs, and greed seems silly. Un-nurturing relationships are let go. As life gets shorter, and death closer, everything I do and say in my remaining days is precious.**

**Every conversation, every action, every choice is pregnant with meaning and value. It is a grace to accept the truth that we’re not all at the same place on the spiritual path. But, while it is true for me that I did not live the same every day for 77 years, at this stage, nothing is taken for granted, nothing wasted.**

**Having faced a lifetime of pride, there is more of Naaman in me than in my younger years. I have grown interiorly free to allow nurturing voices to nurture more life in me, as he allowed the wisdom of courage from his servants to change his heart.**

**There is now more of the Samaritan in me. As he made a U-turn away from the synagogue to return to his healer, I celebrate 50 years of turning away from the temptation to spiral into a Pharisee. What that foreigner, that dreaded enemy of the Hebrews continues to teach me is that Jesus is the healer of my ills and not the physical places I gather for worship.**

**Having nurtured a love affair with Jesus, the divine healer, I welcome every chance to shout, “Have pity on me,” because the reply I have heard, “Your faith has saved you,” is his final word upholding my life conversions as authentic.**

**It is not my religion linked with an institution that saves me, but my faith in a kind, affirming, healing savior that has saved me. Jesus has brought me to this day with you, family & friends, fellow lepers, loved beyond our fears and ailments to a new state of life and hope. This Jubilee Eucharist is our way of saying “Thanks.”**

**Jesus, the healer of every ill, has become a major song I sing since I first heard it 35 years ago:**

***Healer of our Every Ill***